

# Driven Benevolence

Leadership lessons from serial-winning Olympic coaches.

**S**ergio Lara-Bercial is a Senior Research Fellow in Sport Coaching at Leeds Beckett University and a former Team

GB basketball coach. He recently co-lead a research project with his colleague at the University of Queensland, Cliff Mallett, called The Serial Winning Coaches. Thanks to the Innovation Group of Lead Agencies of the ICCE (International Council for Coaching Excellence), Serial Winning Coaches was able to closely study 17 coaches with experience of winning multiple golds across multiple Olympics or World Championships spanning decades. The project also gave them access to 23 of their athletes in a study that covered ten sports across ten different nations.

Lara-Bercial, swayed by his experiences as a fan and pundit, expected to encounter “a cross between Dracula and the Wicked Witch of the West”, such is the mythical and mystical admiration serial winners can generate. Yet it was not the ill-temperers, egos, immoral or even selfish tendencies that he

and Mallett occasionally encountered that defined serial winning coaches (SWC), but their place on a leadership continuum that they termed ‘driven benevolence’. In this exclusive feature for *Performance*, Lara-Bercial delves into driven benevolence and gives us a glimpse of the personalities and motives that drive SWC.

**Let's start with the definition of driven benevolence:**

*The relentless pursuit of excellence balanced with a genuine desire to compassionately support athletes and oneself.*

The SWC have a passion for excellence and work relentlessly to achieve it, but this is compensated by an overwhelming desire to do good by others and a compassionate attitude towards their athletes and, perhaps more importantly, towards themselves. There were no lone wolves or maladjusted individuals; all but one were married with children. Athletes who spoke very fondly

of their coaches often thought of them as mentors and, in some cases, surrogate parents. We found coaches that were as comfortable pushing athletes beyond the boundaries of what is humanly possible day in day out and holding them accountable for their performance and behaviour, as they were sitting down with a cup of coffee to discuss their athletes' love relationships, job prospects, family feuds and finances. SWC sit halfway between the authentic desire to make their athletes happy and the stern belief that the happier the athlete, the better the performance, and the higher the chance of a successful outcome.

**The coach's philosophy as the starting point**

Speaking to coaches and athletes, we realised that the behaviours of the SWC were firmly anchored by a philosophy of life that is typically humanistic, a set of strong values and beliefs which guided and informed every decision made by the coach, and some kind of internal GPS system that keeps the coach grounded. As part of this philosophy, three elements stood out:

**The athlete as compass:** all decisions are taken to benefit the athlete and considering what the athlete needs.

**A high moral stance:** athletes stressed the very high ethical standards the SWC operated to and highlighted the key values they endorsed – respect, honesty, loyalty, trust and a very strong work ethic. Knowing coaches built their practice on such robust foundations appeared like a safety net for the athletes.

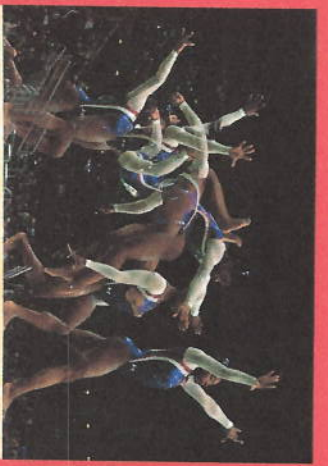
**DRIVEN BENEVOLENCE:  
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**Relative work-life balance:** perhaps one of the biggest surprises of the study, SWC paid attention to at least trying to maintain a relative work-life balance and made sure that their physical and mental health and their personal relationships were kept in good shape.

**Drive: where there is a will, there is a way**

What of the driven-ness of SWCs? They want to win and nothing else will do. We found five traits that typically represent this no compromise attitude to coaching:

**1. Unwavering high standards:** SWC create a 'lived high performing culture' and the key to this environment, according to athletes, is a coach that leads by example: first to arrive last to leave, always thorough and prepared. A zero complacency zone where coaches continually raise the bar once a certain height has been reached. What can be perfect should be perfect. Genuine mistakes are okay, but careless blunders are off limits



**2. Elevated sense of purpose and duty:** SWC express the notion that what they do is bigger than themselves. It is not just national pride but the sense of responsibility they felt for their athletes' hopes and dreams.

**3. Pathological desire to win:** "I don't quite know why, but I need to win, and I need to win today, not yesterday or last year," said one of the most successful Canadian coaches of the last 15 years. The compulsive need to win is present in all SWC yet only a few, for a variety of reasons, tasted genuine success on the highest stage as athletes. Their way to cope with their raw sense of underachievement and lurking bitterness was to make amends as a coach. We were also surprised to find successful coaches displaying 'serial insecurity'. As another Canadian coach put it: "my whole career has been a fight trying to prove myself, I have been driven by my constant insecurity."

**4. All-in commitment:** SWC do not deal in half-measures; they are all in. And this means they will indulge in calculated risk that may from the outside seem like 'outrageous craziness'. For instance, right at the beginning of his career, one Dutch winter sport coach thought that the best way to become a better coach was to take a job

in a smaller nation. He justified it, saying: "I couldn't coach properly yet, I needed to go somewhere with low expectations where I could make lots of mistakes I wouldn't get crucified for."

**5. Vision 20/20:** SWC work backwards from dates and goals, although this is often easier said than done. They are able to look into the future and see what needs to happen to give themselves and their athletes a fighting chance to succeed again. But this is not a simple process. Elite sport is laden with complexity and uncertainty. Simplifying this complexity to try and understand what pieces are more important to get right whilst maximising existing resources is probably the hardest job of the performance coach.

**Benevolence: No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care**

SWC may be driven, but they succeed by breaking away from the notions of military-like discipline and complete athlete submission. There are three components to the benevolent approach:

**1. People first:** in general, SWC operate from a position of full respect for the athlete as a person. Athletes speak of the importance



of feeling cared for and respected by their coach as well as the security and motivation provided by knowing that their coach is protecting and serving their individual needs. SWC will crack the whip when necessary but they know the limits; they are ruthless, not heartless.

**2. If you want to be understood, first seek to understand:** the imperative need to know your athletes was strongly emphasised by SWC. What drives them? What worries them? What makes them happy? The basic principle here is the requirement to understand the person you will be asking incredible things of; the people driving their bodies through incomprehensible pain and suffering.

**3. The sun will rise again:** SWC have an almost superhuman ability to overcome obstacles and setbacks, take big falls and dust themselves off to have another good crack at it. They have a thick skin, an elastic heart, and can keep an emotionally flat tone through both good and bad times. There will be defeats and arguments along the way but the sun always rises again.

**The advantages of driven benevolence: cognitive and emotional flexibility**  
Life as a coach can be demanding, uncertain

and stressful. For this reason, a driven benevolence type of leadership style has many advantages. From our research, we identified two major areas: cognitive and emotional flexibility.

**Cognitive flexibility**

Being able to seamlessly move along the continuum between driven-ness and benevolence affords coaches a flexibility of behaviours that turn them into true chameleons, changing colour to fit the needs of the athlete, the context and the situation on a minute by minute basis. Not an easy thing to do. SWC showed enhanced awareness of their surroundings, their athletes' needs and their own behaviours. Self-awareness and self-control are therefore very important attributes to have in the performance arena. These can be learned and improved in all of us if we pull our minds to it. It is worth trying, since we know that increased self-knowledge also leads to more and faster learning. As an Australian coach said, "A great coach is a predator of opportunity."

**Emotional flexibility**

The other side of the flexibility coin is the emotional component. Driven Benevolence helps SWC survive in this unforgiving world

where success and failure, happiness and despair co-exist with surprising familiarity. The drive provides the much needed 'humph' to get up every day and voluntarily expose oneself to the rollercoaster nature of the coaching job. Failure is not an option for these coaches, it may happen, but they believe that with the necessary work and time, the elusive fragrance of success will come.

On the other hand, benevolence brings into play the required empathy and love towards both ourselves and our athletes to buffer the impact of defeat on our self-esteem. It protects us from entering a downwards spiral of negative thinking and emotions that will not only affect performance, but the personal wellbeing of the coach, and by association, the athletes.

Therefore, cognitive and emotional flexibility allows us to reach a fragile, yet optimal equilibrium needed to navigate the rough waters of elite sport, the uncertainty, the extreme joy and the lowest depths of disappointment. It keeps us stable so we can focus on the task at hand and continue to support our athletes to the best of our ability.

### So, who are these serial winning coaches deep down?

SWC comes in all sizes, colour and shapes, although we can paint a composite picture of their personal narratives.

Quite a few coaches resemble what we call 'the righteous adventurer'. These are Indiana Jones-types that are on a personal crusade for redemption, righting the wrongs of their

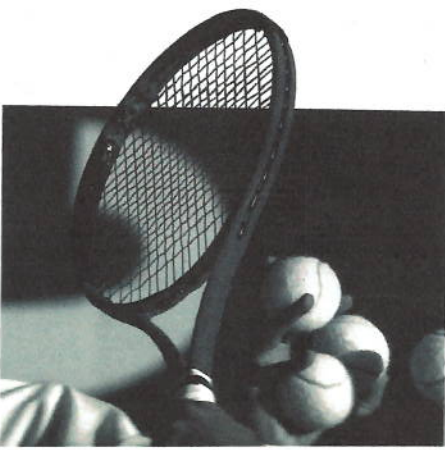
past, be it their shortcomings as athletes or critical life events. They enjoy the thrill of an adventure and will take inevitable risks when the opportunity arises.

In contrast, we call some of these SWC 'the higher purpose altruists'. They told a story more akin to Ghandi and tended to believe that their actions were a mission aimed at fulfilling the needs of others, powered by a higher purpose and the greater good. They understand that personal suffering, loss and pain are part of the journey in pursuit of higher objectives. It is part of the game and so they exhibit a certain ruthlessness and steely determination that is, for the most part, non-violent and altruistic. They use their high levels of emotional intelligence and self-awareness to convince and persuade others to follow them. Where possible they leave no casualties behind.

Whether SWC lean more towards Indiana or Ghandi, most of them also have a side that we called 'the grounded realist' or the coaches' 'inner Homer Simpson': an element of their story and personality that protects them from the inherent stresses of the profession. They maintain a sense of perspective and normality that helps them to achieve a relatively positive work-life balance, which in turn enables them to retain their sanity and achieve coaching longevity.

In the end, although all SWC have a preferred 'action mode' what really distinguishes them from the rest is their chameleonic ability to match the needs of the environment. Flexibility is the new strength. ■

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