'I want you to Brownlee-fy the opposition into submission': Using figurative language is a motivating tool that works by conveying a vivid image in the mind of the athlete that gives them a sense of comparison of how you want them to behave

Leading sports psychologist Dan Abrahams provides some easy to understand and simple to adopt advice on the use of metaphors and evocative imagery to boost performance. The examples, taken from his chat with Stuart Armstrong on the Talent Equation podcast – and with a few additions of our own – will help empower coaches to motivate their athletes to produce greater levels of effort, focus and achievement.

Men of a certain age will recall that feeling of blockbuster-emboldening bravado that was a side effect of watching the latest Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger film.

Impressionable, testosterone-laden teenage boys growing up in the late 1970s and 80s would emerge from their local Odeon cinemas swaggering in the manner made famous in more recent times by Liam Gallagher.

Spending two hours in such an emotionally-charged environment, where your consciousness is flooded with vivid visuals and an impassioned cinematic narrative, has the effect of fooling your brain into believing that what you have witnessed is real, and therefore achievable.
It is a pleasant form of mind control, and watching the likes of Rocky and Rambo was an intoxicating experience, fuelling – albeit temporarily – the smoldering fire in your belly. You figured you too could emulate the rags to riches tale of Rocky Balboa, as you resolved to locate the nearest abattoir in order to pummel dead cow carcasses into a bloody mess bare-fisted while downing raw eggs by the pint full!

Such feelings of machismo on emerging from a darkened theatre, buzzing with newfound confidence, may seem ridiculous in hindsight, but the nostalgic memories triggered should serve to highlight the enormous power of figurative language and evocative images to manipulate mindsets.

Metaphors and mantras can be used to mimic similar feelings of empowerment as those experienced watching films like Rocky, when viewers were beguiled into adopting the behaviour of their tough-as-they-come all-action heroes.

As a way of provoking an immediate, impassioned, high-energy emotional response from your athletes, bespoke analogies can help focus the mind and stir the soul – providing a range of exciting opportunities for sports coaches to exploit in terms of transforming behaviour and maximising performance potential.

Compulsive listening

Sports psychologist Dan Abrahams is a big fan of using metaphors in coaching.

A former professional golfer and golf coach who is now forging a successful career as a qualified sports psychologist working for the England rugby team and Premier League side AFC Bournemouth, Dan featured in our blog ‘The art of practice: Intentional training a model way of embedding new skills’.

On learning he had become the latest guest to grace Sport England Head of Coaching Stuart Armstrong’s Talent Equation podcast, I was eager to have a listen.

I highly recommend downloading the full podcast, but one of the stand-out sections was a discussion that centred on the psych-social coaching model, and Dan’s belief that this should form the starting point of the coaching process, underpinning the tactical, technical and physical elements of coaching.

‘For me the psych-social model drives the technical, drives the tactical, drives the physical sides of the game,’ began Dan.

‘Make it person first, player second, performance third in that order to get better outcomes, in my opinion.

‘Coaches should sit down when they are doing their session plans and think about the psych-social side… what’s my communication going to be like in this session, where might I be directive and non-directive… and that’s relevant to coaches at elite level right the way through to coaches coaching six, seven, eight, nine, ten year olds.’

Conversation turned to visual metaphors, in which a phrase is applied to the action of something or someone to convey a dramatic and vivid image that gives a sense of comparison of how you want a player to behave.

For example, one professional footballer Dan works with is instructed to ‘Unleash Carragher hell’ before every match.

Take a trip down memory lane

The aim of the psych-social approach then is to help players become more efficient at managing their mood, motivation and mindset, which is a prerequisite to optimal performance.
‘What is really interesting is that those at the very top, guys in their mid-20s who are multi-millionaires, they need it like that as well,’ said Dan. ‘Sport is so complex they just need simple ideas. So I have clients going out on a Saturday and they will be trying to be a “Confident, relentless lion”, which is a great pictorial metaphor.

‘I have got one who will go out and try to “Unleash Carragher hell”. Why? I asked him about his best game – which is one of the greatest questions any coach can ask a player. “Tell me about you at your very best”. Illicit great words from them, great pictures and great memories.

‘He said, “I’ll tell you when it was, it was when I played Liverpool and Jamie Carragher was a defender and halfway through the second half he said, “Will you stop moving!”’ – although he actually used words a bit more explicit than that! We framed that as “Unleash Carragher hell”. Great pictures create great feelings… and help you shape yourself into something or into someone.’

**Show me your game-face**

As a rallying command and a motivational tool, it can be a far more effective way of communicating than using long-winded literal comparisons, directing your defenders to be tough and uncompromising, strong in the tackle and not to let anyone get past you, yada yada yada.

You can personalise the messaging depending on a player’s position or particular role or address the team as a whole. Choose an analogy or descriptive parallel that builds an instant picture in their mind of the way you want them to operate from first whistle to last.

As Dan concluded: ‘Have clear, concise, controllable goals you want them to focus on on the pitch. It could be a weakness you want them to focus on, responsibility within their role, a mental thing, whatever. A task or process goal, probably more than a performance or outcome goal.’

If you want to activate a particular player’s game-face and impel them to show you their commitment to the cause, then engage them one-to-one and enjoy the deliberation process as you create their very own bespoke metaphor.

**Release the wrecking ball**

In general terms, you could instruct a forward in rugby union to ‘Release the Vunipola wrecking ball’ or ‘Vent Vunipola’s wrath’.

The catchier the better, so an image will stick in the players’ minds… ‘Time to play Vunipola skittles’.

Be adventurous. Nothing’s too off the wall. ‘Leave an Itoje trail of destruction’, or, in the case of a triathlon coach, tell your athlete: ‘Brownlee-fy the opposition into submission’, helping to conjure an image of your rivals gasping for breath as they struggle to maintain your relentless pace.

You might want to devise a metaphor based on your team nickname.

There are some fantastic opportunities here, with grass-roots sport comprising an array of tantalising suffixes: Stallions, Phoenix, Colts, Chargers, Broncos, Mustangs, Knights.

To put an extra spring in your players’ step, tell them it is in their blood now to rise like a Phoenix at corners and goal kicks. “You are Phoenix, I want to see you rise like a Phoenix for every header!”

Hopefully, they will become the character you want them to embody on the pitch.

Have fun with it and do please keep us informed of any developments by leaving a comment in the box below.
Next steps

Listen to more podcasts with Stuart Armstrong and special guests on The Talent Equation website.

You can learn more about building Game Faces in Dan’s book Soccer Tough 2.

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