

# What is the Hidden Force that Creates the World's Greatest Teams? Exploring Leadership in Sports | Sam Walker

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My ego demands – for myself – the success of my team.  
– Bill Russell

## INTRODUCTION

**What's up everybody?** Welcome to this week's episode of Hidden Forces with me, Demetri Kofinas. Today, I speak with Sam Walker, the Wall Street Journal's deputy editor for enterprise, the unit that directs the paper's in-depth page-one features and investigative reporting projects. A former reporter, sports columnist, and sports editor, Walker founded the Journal's prizewinning daily sports coverage in 2009. Sam is also the author of "The Captain Class: The Hidden Force That Creates the World's Greatest Teams." In addition to The Captain Class, he is the author of Fantasyland, a bestselling account of his attempt to win America's top fantasy baseball expert competition (of which he is a two-time champion). Sam, welcome to Hidden Forces...

## WHY DO I CARE?

Human beings gravitate naturally towards sports. We love to compete. But our love-affair with athletic performance is not just about rivalry or competition. It's about so much more. As our lives becomes increasingly intermediated by computer interfaces, spectator sports provide one of the few remaining ways to experience the elegance and power of the human body. In a world that is constantly changing, sports are a window into the old. They offer us a glimpse at millions of years of evolution – the impulses, characteristics, and behavioral urges of our ancestors. In this sense, what interests me most about Sam's book is that it provides insight about how human beings organize successfully into groups and the unique (and Sam would argue crucial) role of leadership and stewardship in those groups. This is, in some sense, a search for the DNA of greatness.



## QUOTES

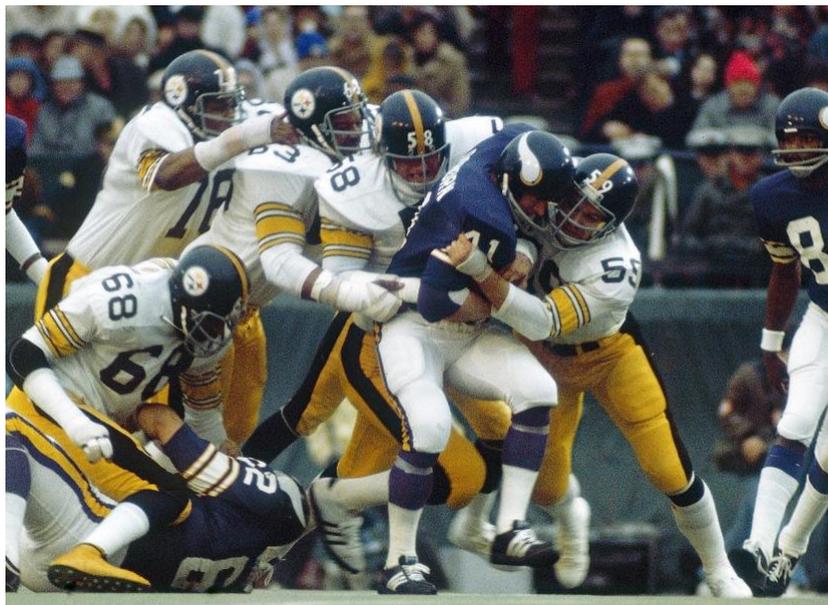
“Every time I watched some group of euphoric athletes collecting its trophy, I had an intense personal reaction that surprised me. I felt jealous.” – Sam Walker

“The most crucial ingredient in a team that achieves and sustains historic greatness is the character of the player who leads it.” – Sam Walker

“To build a proper list, I realized, I would have to ignore all the others, put on blinders to block my own assumptions, and start fresh.” – Sam Walker

## QUESTIONS

1. **Why Sports?** – Why do we love sports so much? Why does athletic competition inspire so much emotion? What are the qualities of athletic competition that so many people find so attractive? For those of us who have given up athletic competition or who do not work with our hands or with our bodies, do you believe that sports are even more important?
2. **The Journey** – How did this journey begin for you? You write about your experience covering the 2004 Boston Red Sox team, where Jason Varitek punched Alex Rodriguez in the face, initiating a dugout clearing brawl that you believe led to one of the greatest post-season turnarounds in MLB history (The Sox broke “the curse” in 2004). What were some of the most important experiences, moments, or realizations over the course of your life and career that lead you to want to write this book?
3. **The Process** – How did you go about setting a criterion from which to judge teams? How many teams did you look at and over what time frame? What were the qualifying/disqualifying factors? How did you go about choosing to break these down into Tier 1 and Tier 2? Why did you choose 122 teams total, and why 16 in Tier 1?
4. **The Team** – What qualifies as a team? How did you go about deciding this? Why did you decide on the number five as the minimum number of players? What does it mean that the members have to “interact with the opponent?” Where don’t players do that? What does it mean that members have to “work together.” How did you decide what constituted a “major” sport, that the team “played against the world’s top competition,” and that its “dominance stretched over many years?” You write that the team had to qualify as “freakish.” What does it mean to qualify “freakish?” How did you decide if the team had “sufficient opportunity to prove itself,” and what do you mean when you say that its record had to “stand alone?” Where were you able to rely mostly on quantitative measures (statistics) vs. qualitative measures (your opinion/gut)? Were there some sports that presented bigger challenges than others? (soccer with its national leagues, basketball with its minimum threshold team size, obscure sports that you didn’t normally follow, etc.) Did you feel pressure to be “inclusive” by region, sport, or gender? How did you manage to minimize your bias? What teams did you regret leaving out?



## **THE WORLD'S MOST ELITE TEAMS**

**The Collingwood Magpies, Australian rules football (1927–30):** Known as the Machine, this Aussie rules team from Melbourne won a record four consecutive Grand Finals in the Victorian Football League, the predecessor of the Australian Football League. Renowned for their grinding defense, the Magpies won 88 percent of their matches, outscored opponents by an average of thirty-three points per game, and went 18–0 in 1929.

**The New York Yankees, Major League Baseball (1949–53):** Several other Yankees teams (in the 1920s, late 1930s, and late 1990s) were significantly more celebrated and star-studded, but this group is the only one in baseball history to win five consecutive World Series titles.

**Hungary, International men's soccer (1950–55):** Starting in May 1950, the Hungarian “Golden Team,” also known as the Mighty Magyars, lost only twice in fifty-three matches. During this span, Hungary outscored its opponents 222–59 with an average of 4.2 goals per game. The team's 1954 Elo rating was the highest ever recorded for sixty years until Germany topped it in 2014.

**The Montreal Canadiens, National Hockey League (1955–60):** The only team in the history of the NHL to claim five straight Stanley Cups, the Canadiens won or drew 74 percent of their games and exceeded the league scoring average by more than 400 goals.

**The Boston Celtics, National Basketball Association (1956–69):** The Celtics won an unparalleled eleven NBA championships in thirteen seasons, including one stretch of eight in a row, dwarfing the achievements of every other NBA dynasty.

**Brazil, International men's soccer (1958–62):** Winners of two consecutive World Cups, Brazil went undefeated in three of five seasons and outscored opponents nearly three to one over fifty-six games, achieving the number-three all-time Elo rating for an international soccer team. Five of its six losses came in minor competitions when it fielded a B-level squad.

**The Pittsburgh Steelers, National Football League (1974–80):** This team made the playoffs six times in a row and won an unrivaled four Super Bowls in six seasons. It compiled an 80–22–1 record through the 1980 Super Bowl and notched the second-highest Elo rating in NFL history.

**The Soviet Union, International men's ice hockey (1980–84):** After a humiliating upset loss to the United States in the 1980 Winter Olympics, the Red Army team came back stronger than ever, going 94–4–9 in international competitions against top opponents over four years. It won three straight World Championships and a gold medal at the 1984 Winter Olympics, where it outscored opponents 58–6.

**The New Zealand All Blacks, International rugby union (1986–90):** This All Blacks unit, the first of two in Tier One, went undefeated in forty-nine straight international rugby union matches over three years, including twenty-three straight international tests—during which they won by an average of twenty-seven points. The All Blacks made a mockery of the field at the 1987 World Cup, scoring 298 points and conceding just fifty-two.

**Cuba, International women's volleyball (1991–2000):** The Espectaculares Morenas del Caribe won every major women's international volleyball tournament for ten straight years, capturing three Olympic gold medals, four World Cups, and back-to-back World Championships. They went 18–3 in Olympic play and 31–1 at the World Cup, and never lost a match at the World Championships.

**Australia, International women's field hockey (1993–2000):** The Hockeyroos won two Olympic gold medals, plus four consecutive Champions Trophy competitions, and back-to-back World Cups. They lost only 11 percent of their matches during this span, scoring 785 goals while allowing just 220.

**The United States, International women's soccer (1996–99):** The “99ers” dominated at a level unmatched in history, winning the Olympics and the World Cup while posting a record of 84–6–6, compiling a thirty-one-match unbeaten streak, outscoring their opponents roughly five to one, and losing only once in a major competition.

**The San Antonio Spurs, National Basketball Association (1997–2016):** This team's five NBA titles (including three in five seasons) weren't the most in history. But by reaching the playoffs in nineteen straight seasons, posting the NBA's highest-ever long-term win rate (71 percent), and never finishing worse than second in its division, it set an astonishing record for consistency.

**Barcelona, Professional soccer (2008–13):** Over these five seasons, Barcelona won a total of fifteen trophies: four Spanish titles, two Champions Leagues (while reaching the semifinals for five consecutive seasons), two FIFA Club World Cup titles, two UEFA Super Cups, two Copa del Rey titles, and three Spanish Supercopas. It won or drew 92 percent of its league matches—one of history's best marks—and outscored opponents by 3.5 goals to one. Its 2011 Elo rating is the highest ever recorded for a club team.

**France, International men's handball (2008–15):** Les Experts won three of four world handball championships and two European titles and became the first team in the sport to win back-to-back Olympic gold medals. During its peak, from 2008 to 2011, France lost only once in forty-two matches against elite competition and became the first men's team to hold all three of the sport's top titles simultaneously.

**The New Zealand All Blacks, International rugby union (2011–15):** This second All Blacks unit became the first rugby team to win consecutive World Cups. From 2011 to the end of the 2015 World Cup, it outscored its opponents by an average of nineteen points and amassed a 55–3–2 record that included unbeaten streaks of twenty and twenty-two international tests—just shy of the 1986–90 team's record of twenty-three. Its record was 8–1–1 against Australia in the Bledisloe Cup and it won the Rugby Championship (also known as the Tri-Nations) three times out of four.

Syd Coventry, **Collingwood Magpies**

Yogi Berra, **New York Yankees**

Ferenc Puskás, **Hungary**

Maurice Richard, **Montreal Canadiens**

Bill Russell, **Boston Celtics**

Hilderaldo Bellini, **Brazil**

Jack Lambert, **Pittsburgh Steelers**

Valeri Vasiliev, **Soviet Union**

Wayne Shelford, **New Zealand All Blacks**

Mireya Luis, **Cuba**

Rechelle Hawkes, **Australia**

Carla Overbeck, **United States**

Tim Duncan, **San Antonio Spurs**

Carles Puyol, **Barcelona**

Jérôme Fernandez, **France**

Richie McCaw, **New Zealand All Blacks**

Every winning streak is bounded by two moments of transformation, the one where it begins and the one where it ends. For the most dominant teams in sports history, these moments had an uncanny correlation to one player's arrival or departure—or both. This person not only displayed a fanatical commitment to winning, they also happened to be the captain.

Most of us have developed a model of what leaders of superior teams ought to be. We believe they should possess some combination of skills and personality traits that are universally considered to be superior. We don't believe they should be difficult to spot in a crowd. We expect their leadership ability to be obvious. The leaders of the sixteen teams in Tier One did not match the profile.

## **NOT FITTING THE PROFILE**

### **They lacked superstar talent.**

Most of the Tier One captains were not the best players on their teams, or even major stars. They often arrived with skill deficiencies and had been described by coaches as average players. Some had been forced to fight hard just to make it to the elite ranks and were at some point overlooked, benched, or put on waivers. When lined up next to glamorous, charismatic, and supremely talented leadership icons like Michael Jordan, they looked about as formidable as a mariachi band.

**Q. Out of the Tier 1 and Tier 2 teams, what percentage of captains had the skills of a Tim Duncan or Bill Russell?**

### **They weren't fond of the spotlight.**

The men and women in Tier One didn't enjoy the trappings of fame and rarely sought attention. When it did find them, it seemed to make them uncomfortable. Off the field, they were often quiet, even introverted—and, in a couple of cases, famously inarticulate. As a group, they hated interviews, spoke in bland monotones, and treated reporters indifferently. They opted out of award ceremonies and media events and often turned down endorsement deals.

### **They didn't "lead" in the traditional sense.**

I had always believed that, on a team, the mark of a leader was the ability to take over the game in critical moments. But most Tier One captains played subservient roles on their teams, deferred to star players, and relied heavily on the talent around them to carry the scoring burden. If these captains weren't the kinds of athletes who took the big shot, I could not understand how they led, or how they could possibly qualify as elite leaders.

### **They were not angels.**

Time and again, these captains played to the edge of the rules, did unsportsmanlike things, or generally behaved in a way that seemed to threaten their teams' chances of winning. This included bowling over rival players for no apparent reason and berating (in two cases even assaulting) officials, coaches, or team executives. They were tough on opponents, too—tripping them, tossing them to the ground, pinning them to the turf, whaling on them, or calling them unprintable names.

**Q. Is this a measure of tenacity and "will to win?"**

### **They did potentially divisive things.**

If you tried to imagine what a team leader would do to sabotage a team, the odds are that these Tier One captains had attempted it. On various occasions they had disregarded the orders of coaches, defied team rules and strategies, and given candid interviews in which they'd spoken out against everyone from fans, teammates, and coaches to the overlords of the sport.

**Q. Is this an indication of having the courage to break with the group, but with a sense of loyalty to that same group?**

### **They weren't the usual suspects.**

The most striking thing about my list of Tier One captains was who wasn't on it. Some of the most glaring absences include Jordan, the co-captain of the Tier Two Chicago Bulls, who is widely considered the greatest basketball player in history; Roy Keane, the captain of a Manchester United team that also landed in Tier Two and who from 1998 to 2001 piloted his team through the most impressive three-season stretch in English football history; and Derek Jeter, the wildly popular twelve-year captain who led the New York Yankees to nine playoff appearances and a World Series title from 2003 to 2014.

### **Nobody had ever mentioned this theory.**

During my travels as a sportswriter, I'd grilled a hodgepodge of celebrated athletes, coaches, and executives about what made their teams successful. Whether it was Isiah Thomas of the Detroit Pistons, Reggie Jackson of the New York Yankees, the general manager Ron Wolf of the Green Bay Packers, the college football coach Bobby Bowden, or the Brazilian soccer legend Arthur Antunes Coimbra, better known as Zico, none of them had ever singled out the captain as a team's driving force.

### **The captain isn't the primary leader.**

On most teams, the highest position in the pecking order belongs to the coach or manager. After all, the coach usually appoints the captain. There's another powerful stratum of management above the coach, too—a team's owners and front-office executives. Surely their contributions, and their willingness to spend money, played a significant role.

**Q. Does this speak to the fact that human beings have a unique need for peer-leadership?**

5. **Hungary** – You open the book with a story about one of the 16 teams that made your Tier 1 list. It was

the 1953 Hungarian national soccer team. They were playing in London against a more experience, stronger, and by any contemporary measure, better club. London bookmakers gave the team **500-1 odds** against a English national team that, in the eighty-one years since they had begun hosting teams from outside the British Isles, had never lost at home. **Tell us about this game and about why you chose to start the book with this Hungarian team? What made you choose to include them in your Tier 1 group? What criterion did it meet?** (“As I examined Hungary’s six-year winning streak, however, it was such an outlier among its peer group, such a freak, that it inhabited a category of its own.”)

\*\*\*Between June 1950 and February 1956 the Hungarian national team played a total of fifty-three matches, including international friendlies, and lost only twice.

6. **The Coleman Play** – Another iconic moment that you choose to focus on early in the book is the famous, **come-from-behind block of Jack Coleman by Bill Russell** in the waning seconds of the 1957 NBA Finals between the Boston Celtics and the St. Louis Hawks. Boston was up by one point, and the Coleman layup would have one the game for the Celtics. This was Russell’s rookie season. **Could you tell me what the significance of this moment was, and what it said about the type of career and the type of captain that you feel Bill Russell was (or became?) throughout his career? Are great leaders made or born? How much is nature, and how much is nurture?**
7. **Relentlessness** – You tell a great story in your book about Carles Puyol and specifically, his defensive effort against the then recently departed Luís Figo in the teams’ first encounter since Figo left to play for Real Madrid in 2000. Why did you choose to spend so much time on this story? **How did Puyol’s actions in that game and his performance relate to the larger narrative that Barcelonians have about their identity and their relationship to Spain? How did Puyol’s actions in this game change the trajectory of his career and what role did he play on the 2008-13 Barcelona squad? What characteristics of captainship and leadership did Carles Puyol have most in abundance?**
8. **Bending and Breaking** – Another great anecdote from your book is the story of **Mireya Luis** – the captain of the **Cuban women’s volleyball team** – and her semi-final match against the Brazilian women’s volleyball team in the **1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta**. Tell me the story of what happened here. **What did Mireya’s performance and her actions show us about the qualities of great leadership? What did this say about the value and importance of aggression?** I love this story. I think it captures the willingness of

champions to confront the prospect of defeat with any legitimate means, even if those “legitimate” means can come dangerously close to crossing (and in some cases actually overstepping) the lines of good sportsmanship.

9. **Aggression in Captains** – In 1961, Arnold Buss, a psychologist at the University of Pittsburgh, published one of the first comprehensive books about human aggression. He concluded, based in part on laboratory experiments, that people exhibit two distinct flavors of aggression: “**hostile**” and



“instrumental” Buss believed that these instrumental acts—which were task-specific, didn’t blatantly violate the rules, and were not intended to do harm—might not really be aggressive at all. They might be better described as assertive. “You have to distinguish between assertiveness and aggression,” Buss said. “There is a low correlation between them.” In a 2007 book, *Aggression and Adaptation: The Bright Side to Bad Behavior*, a team of American psychologists noted that nearly all of the most highly ambitious, powerful, and successful people in business display at least some level of hostility and aggressive self-expression. “Aggressive behavior offers avenues for personal growth, goal attainment and positive peer regard,” they wrote. How important is aggression in the list of characteristics that make a great leader? Can you be a great captain without this type of edge?

10. **Regulating Emotion** – I love the story of Jérôme Fernandez and France’s national handball team. He learned that his father was on his deathbed only days before the world championship game and yet, decided to play through it. After confiding in his coach, Jerome made a leadership decision. He said “I want to play for my father.” What did this moment mean for you? How many people do you believe would be able to play through something like this? Is this a character trait that we can only see “when the going gets tough?” Can you give us examples of how/where team members or supposed captains lost their tempers or allowed their emotions to get the better of them and what impact that had?
11. **Courage & Maturity** – The story of Valeri Vasiliev (USSR Hockey) is a good example of having the “courage to stand apart.” Tell us the story of his team’s flight back to Moscow from the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid where the team lost to the United States in the famous “Miracle on Ice,” game. Vasiliev attacked his coach for verbally singling out teammates Valeri Kharlamov and Boris Mikhailov. Vasiliev overheard coach Viktor Tikhonov saying: “Why did we bring them? We lost because of them.” Vasiliev responded by barreling through the cockpit door, grabbing Tikhonov by the back of the neck, shaking him, saying, “We agreed that we lost as a team!...I will throw you out of this airplane right now!” Why did you include this scene? What does this tell us about the courage to stand alone? What does this tell us also about the importance of conflict? How important is it for leaders to be willing to confront their teammates, coaches, etc., in service of some higher ideal (i.e. the team)?
12. **Communication** – There is a great story in the book about the importance of communication exhibited by great leaders. The story is about Maurice “Rocket” Richard, of the Montreal Canadiens. “Inside the dressing room in the final minutes before the game, Richard would swivel his head methodically from one side of the room to the other, stopping to stare at each of his teammates until they met his eyes.” There was a sense in which he was downloading his courage and lending his focus to his teammates. I really related to that. FOCUS. It can make ALL the difference, and it can come and go in an instant. How important is communication in the types of leaders we are speaking about today? How important is non-verbal communication? Who are some of the greatest captains in this category, and what made them so

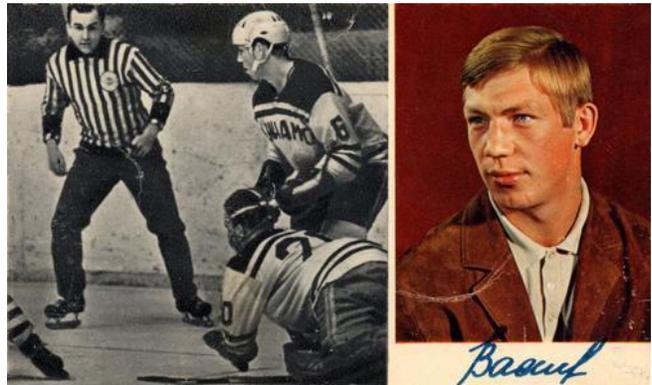


great? \*\*\*Tim Duncan and Yogi Berra's communication styles.

13. **Leading from the Back** – I'm not sure if I fully appreciate what you are saying with this one. Tell me where you saw this characteristic displayed most prominently. Was it Carla Overbeck or the Brazilian national team's Hideraldo Bellini? Is there something fathering and mothering about this role? Something about taking the responsibility of making sure all the hatches are locked down and the doors closed?

### THE SEVEN TRAITS OF ELITE CAPTAINS

1. Extreme doggedness and focus in competition.
2. Aggressive play that tests the limits of the rules.
3. A willingness to do thankless jobs in the shadows.
4. A low-key, practical, and democratic communication style.
5. Motivates others with passionate nonverbal displays.
6. Strong convictions and the courage to stand apart.
7. Ironclad emotional control.



### ALTERNATIVE THEORIES: TALENT, MONEY, CLUSTER, CULTURE, AND COACHING

- Theory 1: It takes a GOAT.
- Theory 2: It's a matter of overall talent.
- Theory 3: It's the money, stupid.
- Theory 4: It's a question of management.
- Theory 5: It's the coach.

