

Cheer up. We can win in '07

By Simon Hart , Sunday Telegraph

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Like many English sports fans, Humphrey Walters has been watching his television with gritted teeth. Frustrated by a national football team that failed to live up to the hype at this summer's World Cup and appalled by an England rugby union team that has slumped to a record eight defeats in nine games, he set his alarm clock for 5am last Thursday to see if Andrew Flintoff and his team-mates could restore some pride in the fourth cricket Test in Melbourne.

Instead, he witnessed the last throes of a humiliating defeat that leaves England on the brink of a 5-0 Ashes mauling, the first whitewash at the hands of Australia since 1921.

It is hardly the ideal way to begin a new sporting year and, as Mr Walters well knows, the news is unlikely to get any better. Next on the cricket calendar is the World Cup in the Caribbean in March, but England's record in the one-day version of the game is so abject that, of the major cricketing nations, only Bangladesh, Zimbabwe and Kenya are ranked below them.



David Beckham and Andrew Flintoff's faces say it all as England bombed out of the World Cup and the Ashes

On the football front, England faces a difficult task this year in qualifying for the 2008 European Championships, following disappointing results under new manager Steve McClaren.

As for rugby union, no one is expecting England to come close to retaining the World Cup trophy they won in such dramatic style in Sydney in 2003. The tournament opens in Paris in September but England's odds of 20-1 are a measure of how far the once mighty have fallen. And that is where Humphrey comes in.

Mr Walters, a motivational guru who has run a management training and leadership consultancy since 1970, was a key member of Sir Clive Woodward's back-room staff before the World Cup triumph. His time as an adviser at Twickenham, using business principles to help mould a world-conquering team, opened his eyes to the high level of professionalism necessary to reach the top. It has also given him a unique insight into the reasons behind the current crisis in British sport.



"If you sat down and studied what is going wrong with British sport you would find some

we want to do in sport. Do we want to retain the public school mentality of 'play up, play up and play the game' or do we want to win?

"I'm not sure we've got over that hurdle yet and I'm not sure that the people who are running these sports really understand what professionalism is."

Mr Walters, who has also advised several Premiership football clubs, says it is easy to despair at Britain's sporting failures but much harder to find the solution. The biggest sin, however, is not to look for answers. "Winning businesses ask 'why?' all the time," he says.

"That's what happened at Marks and Spencer. Stuart Rose came in and he looked at every aspect of the business and asked: 'Why do we do that?' The problem with sport is that it is such a closed shop that people are suspicious of anybody who is not steeped in their sport."

Mr Walters identifies five core ingredients of a successful team: leadership, structure, mentality, technical expertise and physical skill. He believes Britain is well catered for on the technical and physical sides but has no doubt where the country is most deficient.

"I know where I would start," he says. "Everybody talks about the Aussies, the New Zealanders and the South Africans and their winning mentality. Nobody sits down and figures out just what it is. So what I would do is commission a study to examine whether there is such a different mentality and, if so, what is it?"

"I would ask questions like how is it formed? Does it begin in school? Is it because they have a chip on their shoulder? I've no idea, but it wouldn't be difficult to find out. Then I would ask, what is our mentality?"

His next step would be to examine where British sport is working rather than trying to learn from mistakes, bringing together experts from different sports, especially from British success stories such as rowing, yachting and cycling, to exchange knowledge. Such a cross-fertilisation of ideas is embedded in Australia's sporting system through its much-admired Academy of Sport.

"You should get the best of the best and stick them together and suck out of them all the knowledge they have. There isn't a system where cricket, rugby union, rugby league, athletics and so on can sit down together."

What irks Mr Walters is that much of the wisdom acquired during the Woodward reign at Twickenham is now being ignored. "It's very important to examine success," he says. "There was no proper debrief after winning the rugby World Cup. Reports were written but they didn't ask for the view of some people on the bench, the groundsman, the bag man."

"Everybody looks at things differently and every view is just as important because it's a game of inches. Everybody brings an inch. It's about sticking them together."

Mr Walters cites an example of how knowledge from the Woodward era has been jettisoned. "One of the things we did was to change our kit at half-time. Now it's not happening, or at least some players do and some don't."

"I noticed Pete Sampras changed his shirt on Centre Court, particularly when he was down. It was like saying to his opponent: 'Listen, mate, this game's just started for me.' So, when we ran out for the second half the opposition must have felt: 'Bloody hell, this is a new team.' The players also felt better, and if they'd had a bad first half it was like dumping that in the waste bin."

Such attention to detail was a crucial element in England's World Cup triumph. Sir Clive was dispatched to study training methods with the Denver Broncos, the American football club, while the players learnt about teamwork from the Royal Marines.

But underpinning everything was a sense of mission. "I said to Clive that we could do all this stuff but if we don't have the hearts and minds of the players then it's a waste of time," Mr Walters explains.

"What we had to do was create a cause, because people will fight for a right but they will die for a cause. We came up with the idea that our duty was to inspire the nation. That was our cause and everything sprung from that."

A bit of inspiration would not go amiss as another year of sporting failure beckons, though Mr Walter believes success will not come unless administrators or even the Government grasp the nettle. Leadership is the key.

"Our coaches are as good as anyone else's and we've got the players. We've got all the ingredients, and that is what is so sad. I think the general public are sick and tired of mediocrity but you can't just hope that something will happen. In business, you've got to go out and make things happen."