

The key that puts a team on top

Look past the coach to the role of captain. Author **SAM WALKER** talks to Brunswick's **KEVIN HELLIKER**

THERE'S A LIMITATION INHERENT TO THE literary genre wherein sports coaches dispense tomes of wisdom to business leaders. Around the globe, executives who follow camel racing, cricket or soccer aren't likely to read a book by a college basketball coach in Kentucky.

There are no such limitations to *The Captain Class*, a book that travels the globe in pursuit of an answer: What distinguishes the best sports teams? From a decade's worth of research on teams from Pakistan and Brazil to Hungary, Japan and Miami, author Sam Walker identified what he calls the greatest male and female teams of all time; his exhaustive analysis finds only one characteristic common to these freakishly brilliant squads.

No, it wasn't the coach.

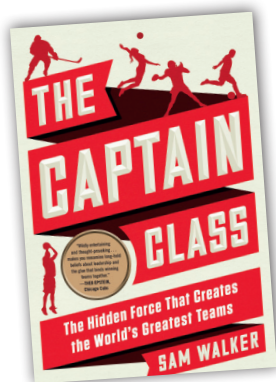
The key, Walker finds, is a particular player further down the bench: the captain. All of these great teams had the same kind of captain. And these captains were not what you might expect.

The founding editor of *The Wall Street Journal's* sports pages, Walker is passionate, funny and convincing in his argument that business-and-life lessons can be drawn from sports, as long as we focus on these important, unsung players. Walker agreed to answer a few questions for the *Review*.

We've all read books on how to lead like a successful coach. You say it's not the coach, but the captain. How did you arrive at that?

I never imagined I'd be saying this, but the evidence was remarkably clear. The coaches of these elite teams were all over the map. Some were successful, inspirational, or tactically brilliant, but others were decidedly not. Most had unremarkable records before (and after) they took over these exceptional teams, or had little to no coaching experience. Several teams even changed coaches.

It's not that coaches are irrelevant – far from it. But even the most revered ones – Vince Lombardi, Alex Ferguson, Bill Belichick and Phil Jackson – achieved their best results in partnership with a captain who didn't always do what he was told.



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KEVIN HELLIKER is Editor-in-Chief of the *Brunswick Review* and a former journalist with *The Wall Street Journal*.

Who are these captains and what are some of their characteristics?

You've probably heard of Bill Russell, Yogi Berra and Tim Duncan, but there were many less-familiar names in the group, such as Brazilian soccer's Hilderaldo Bellini and Carla Overbeck of the US women's national soccer team. And no, Michael Jordan and Derek Jeter didn't make the cut.

They shared a few traits: They were relentless on the field, played to the edge of the rules, displayed extreme emotional control, carried water for their teams and stood up to authority. They didn't give inspirational speeches, but motivated teammates with low-key, task-oriented communication, or with nonverbal displays of emotion.

How did you identify the greatest teams, and how many different sports and countries do they represent?

I looked at every dynasty in sports history, from the NBA to Olympic water polo, and used eight criteria to filter out the also-rans. The 16 teams I ended up with came from 11 sports in 10 countries. They maintained their dominance for at least four years against the world's best competition and achieved a record that was unique to their sport.

What are the lessons for business leaders?

There's a mistaken notion in sports and business that a team's best member should be the leader, or that it's better to adopt a “flat” structure where middle management is thinned out. But these captains are rarely stars. They serve as independent intermediaries between the coaches and the team. In other words, they are middle managers. We need to stop stigmatizing that role.

Another lesson is that we've got leadership all wrong. The best captains aren't obvious. They're not going to wow you in a job interview. All that matters is that a leader is hyper-focused on the team's goals and takes a functional approach to management by rolling up his or her sleeves and doing the grunt work – in every hour of every day.

Are there examples in the business world?

I think Alan Mulally, the former Ford and Boeing executive, is a great example. So is Jim Hackett, the former Steelcase CEO. You might be surprised to hear this, but Steve Jobs had a lot of Captain Class traits. Although he did enjoy the spotlight, he was relentless. He didn't have any trouble challenging authority or pushing the rules of civility to the absolute breaking point, either.