

SIMPLIFY

**A HIGH PERFORMANCE PLAYBOOK TO WIN
THE REAL GAME**

RICHARD YOUNG PHD

INTRODUCTION

THE QUEST BEGINS

The Puzzle

Duff Gibson was a wrestler in high school. He was a far better fighter than me – stronger, with more stamina and better technique.

My sport was cycling, and I worked my way into the Canadian team for the 1988 Olympics. At the first team meeting in Seoul, I was tackled from behind and wrestled to the ground. It was Duff – there, not as a wrestler, but as a future youth Olympian. After a hug, he said, ‘I will get to the Olympics, and I will win.’

Clear and confident, he asked me to coach him in cycling when we got home. I was still racing, so couldn’t do so, but I watched Duff’s name move up the cycling ranks over the next few years.

Then I heard he had moved into rowing and was nationally ranked.

In 1992 I had the opportunity to do a PhD in Calgary, where Duff, now a nationally ranked speedskater, also lived. With

his Olympic dream burning bright, Duff had switched sports again. And, once more, he made the national team.

I have never seen anyone train harder, smarter or with more commitment. His whole essence was pointed to the Olympic performance. Duff didn't just follow a training programme; he created a performance system he could use in any context.

Next, Duff saw an opportunity in bobsleigh and became one of the top drivers in the country. At the same time, the sport of skeleton racing was evolving and added to the Olympics in 2002. Duff moved to skeleton, racing headfirst down steep tracks at speeds of up to 130 kilometres per hour. He applied his performance system to the new sport, winning the world championship in his third year, then taking the Olympic gold medal at Turino in 2006. At the age of 39, Duff was the oldest individual gold medallist in Winter Olympic history.

And then, having proved what he'd told me in Seoul, he retired.

Duff showed me that excellence comes from understanding and being grounded in your personal high performance system. That high performance means layering specialist skills and focusing on what matters. He taught me that knowing what works best for you enables success in new environments and adventures.

Moving between sports, Duff was never starting from zero. Ninety per cent of his effort went into finding and polishing

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his performance system, leaving ten per cent to adapt to a new context.

Inspired by Duff and his clear-sighted ability, I have spent thirty years focused on the performance systems behind people, teams and organisations.

Each of us can develop such a system. The purpose of high performance is not to be a great skeleton athlete, cyclist, sailor, hockey player or rugby captain, but to be a high performer in life. That is the real game.

High performance can feel like a giant complex puzzle that requires years of experimentation with no guarantee of a successful outcome. A win is more likely when the performance system is solved correctly to deliver a performance on precisely the right day. In sport, we call this the peak.

Performance is contextual – for some athletes, it means a medal, while for a coach, it may be the development of a new athlete. A scientist may find success through discovery and a leader through a high-performing team dynamic. Your win will have a deep meaning specific to you. You

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will be busy trying to uncover and optimise your performance system.

My youngest son Leo arrived home from a class gift exchange at primary school with a bag of thousands of puzzle pieces. 'Dad,' he said, 'Can we build this puzzle?' 'Sure, what is the picture?' 'I don't know. There is no box, so let's just start.' We began by laying down the edges and corners, then finding pieces that went together. After several hours, Leo said, 'Wow, now I know why they put the picture on the box!'

For most people, this is exactly how high performance evolves – from a giant bag of puzzle pieces. Some pieces we know well, some we have seen others do, others we have read about, and many come from what we are told is the way to high performance. Our coach may tell us what the edges are (sleep and good nutrition). We may learn that the other teams are using plyometrics, but we don't know where it fits.

At first sight, the options seem overwhelming – and they are. There are so many books on high performance, training, mindset and nutrition that it is impossible to build one picture. And anyway, the pictures conflict. Each new approach, supplement or technique looks like an essential piece to add. We struggle to find the magic missing piece that holds it all together. Most athletes I have raced with, worked with and met are eager to add that crucial piece, but to do so, they must continually experiment to discover which elements work. The unseen picture grows more and more complicated.

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And if that's not enough, we must also attend to the ticking stopwatches on the puzzle. The event is coming on a set day, time and place, and they can't be late. Many sports require a physical body that can handle training and recovery, and most athletes have only four to eight years at the highest level of their game.

Solving the puzzle is me telling my son, 'OK Leo, you need to finish this as fast as you can tonight because you won't be interested by next week.'

In some cases, best practice would be to find the box. While that approach is critical in fields such as engineering and the sciences, in high performance sport, fitting into someone else's picture of success can be too slow and too late. We need to uncover our own performance system first and build it quickly. Once it is clear, we will have our own best practice.

But to solve the unknown, we need best principles to build a performance system. Best principles beat best practice. It's like finding the corners and the edges first, as without them, there is no starting point.

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Performance and expertise are contextual. A violin virtuoso in a sail boat with no training is not an expert sailor. But with the right principles, likely found in their system of music expertise, the violinist can know where to start – or at least know what questions to ask.

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That is where this book points – uncovering the principles of high performance systems to solve your own puzzle and create your own performance system. One that, as Duff discovered, you can carry into any environment. One that will give you the power to win the long game.

Throughout this book, we will explore principles and systems to uncover and simplify your own performance picture.