

# Upton is new breed of coach

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PADDY Upton is an unassuming man. Quiet and soft-spoken, his first impression belies his impact on the players he has inspired to defy expectations and surpass what even they considered to be their potential.

As a coach first of India and South Africa with Gary Kirsten, and then of the Indian Premier League's Rajasthan Royals, he has overseen campaigns that have delivered a World Cup, two No 1 Test cricket rankings, third place in the IPL and second in cricket's Champions League.

The latter were achieved with the smallest budget, spent on a ragtag group of players who some would charitably have called "misfits" to begin with. No more. Upton's approach to coaching transformed the team. It also asks some challenging questions of the traditional coaching and management style, including the role of data analysis in sporting performance.

Upton turns the classic coach-player relationship on its head. That classic approach places the all-knowing, all-seeing coaching staff at the head of a team. An army



FORMIDABLE TEAM: Gary Kirsten and Paddy Upton propelled the Proteas to the No 1 Test cricket spot. Upton's success with India and the Rajasthan Royals has made him a household name in international cricket coaching  
Picture: DUIF DU TOIT/GALLO IMAGES

become convinced that their value is the collection, crunching and processing of data that will unlock opposition tactics and weaknesses.

The danger is that an over-reliance on those analytics causes a type of "data-blindness" — a non-thinking, unresponsive system, ironically undermining intelligence in the pursuit of it.

Part of the problem is that, in sport, there are so many moving parts, so many strings to pull, that knowing exactly which one produces the right result is almost impossible, and the consequence is that coaches [and science] invest time and energy in pursuits that lead only to cul-de-sacs and tiny gains. Those tiny gains often make the difference — the average difference between first and fourth at the Olympic Games is 0.5%, so you can understand the pursuit.

The problem is that it can compromise focus on the truly valuable investments, and is often driven by insecurity and to feed the human desire to micro-manage as many aspects of performance as possible. It's as if simply doing something becomes confused with doing the right things, and doing them well.

Speaking for sports science, I believe the result is "junk science" which undermines sports science and helps nobody. There are, of course, many ways to win — history provides extremes of coaching that range from autocratic to meditative. But in Upton (and Kirsten), SA may have a new breed, whose principles are worthy of attention.

of specialist assistants and analysts provides data and information, which flows up the hierarchy, from where decisions, tactics and instructions flow back down.

Upton's method, however, is to empower the players, allow them to drive their own technical, and, more importantly, personal development through exploration, failure and guidance from their peers.

Information flows sideways, peer-to-peer, with the coach facilitating a journey of discovery. The appeal of this approach is clear

when you consider that 20 players who have played the sport for about 15 years each have, between them, 300 years of cricket experience.

That's five lifetimes for a single coach, and so if the collective wisdom of the squad can be harnessed [easier said than done — it takes a special person with extraordinary emotional intelligence to achieve this], it will trump the single perspective of a coach sitting above the team.

So, when Upton led the Royals, he did so with no batting coach. No

bowling coach. No fielding coach. No strength and conditioning coach. Leadership was provided by senior players. Practices were optional, and the only obligation on the players was to make sure that they were healthy and fit enough to play to their potential.

Upton's approach is anathema to modern competitive sport, where time, money and energy are invested in the search for the tiny differences that separate winners from losers. Science forms part of that search, and many scientists

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