

## *Why Great Sports Captains Carry The Team's Luggage*

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Tomorrow night, the Houston Astros and Los Angeles Dodgers will continue an extraordinary World Series, while our own undefeated (17-0-1) Drew University Men's Soccer team will simultaneously host the start of its Landmark Conference playoffs. Loaded with talent and superbly coached, all three teams are having remarkable years.

But will any one of these rosters one day be regarded as truly great, part of a multi-year dynasty in its sport? That's a question for Sam Walker, *Wall Street Journal* deputy editor and author of *The Captain Class: The Hidden Force That Creates The World's Greatest Teams*. I met Sam earlier this fall when he spoke to athletic directors and coaches at an event hosted by the New Jersey Association of Independent Schools (NJ AIS).

Having loved sports for more than 50 years, I've followed — and coached — championship teams. Nevertheless, I found his conclusions surprising and applicable to finding and following the right leaders everywhere in society,

His insights have implications for those of us in college admissions work, as I am here at Drew: How do we find and admit the quiet yet indomitable leaders whom Walker identifies as the glue that both binds teams and fires the achievement of excellence? Here are the author's answers, followed by final thoughts on how we in admissions can apply these traits as we nurture the next generation of students:

**Chris Teare:** How did you discover the importance of captains in the success of the greatest teams in 15 different sports?

**Sam Walker:** The Captain Class was an 11-year project that started with a really simple question: What makes great teams great?

As a sports columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, I'd seen dozens of elite teams up close, taken in thousands of little data points, and could have offered a dozen reasons why any particular team was better than all the others.

But I couldn't shake the notion that all of those reasons couldn't be equally important. What if there were three or four qualities that really made the difference, or even just one? I wanted to isolate the essential DNA of an enduringly great team.

Nobody had ever done a comprehensive, objective study of the best teams in sports history, so I had to look at every dynasty in sports history from the National Football League to Olympic water polo. I used eight criteria to filter the list down to 16 "freak" teams whose achievements were unique to their sports.

So what did they have in common? I assumed that outstanding talent or coaching would be the unifying traits. If not, maybe it was money or brilliant tactics. This was the first big surprise. None of those superlatives applied to all 16 teams.

There was only one thing they had in common and it was slap-your-forehead obvious. In every case, the team's dynasty corresponded almost precisely to the arrival and departure of one player. And that player was, or would eventually become, the captain.

It seemed too obvious to be true, so I went back and looked at the teams that barely missed the final cut. The same phenomenon applied to them, too. I'm not making this up. It's a real, tangible fact. Enduring greatness begins with the player who's chosen to lead the team."

**Teare:** What are the traits of those great captains?

**Walker:** This was the second huge surprise. These 16 men and women were not at all what I expected. I had a preconceived notion that great leaders should be easy to spot. They're superstars. Charismatic. Great speechmakers. Human marvels like Michael Jordan who always take the shot with the game on the line.

In reality, none of that mattered.

These 16 captains had seven common traits. They never let up during competition (not for a second), played to the outside edge of the rules (and sometimes broke them), displayed extreme emotional control in the toughest circumstances, did the unglamorous grunt work and carried water for their teammates, and did not hesitate to stand up to authority. They motivated their teammates with low-key, task-oriented communication and in tough moments, through powerful nonverbal displays of emotion.

**Teare:** Which trait or traits surprised you the most?

**Walker:** It's hard to pick one thing. I didn't understand how a leader could be someone who wasn't a charismatic superstar and had no interest in individual accolades. I thought making big speeches was important, too, but it absolutely wasn't.

One trait I never could have imagined is that these captains could be renegades. They often *generated* conflict inside their teams when they didn't like the way things were going. They pushed the rules to the breaking point and might even do unsportsmanlike things if they thought they could get away with it. They would do anything to help the team, no matter how unpopular it made them.

This was the sort of behavior that, to me, might seem to disqualify someone from leadership.

**Teare:** What are the implications for school and college, rather than professional, sports?

**Walker:** It's pretty simple, really. We're picking the wrong leaders.

Most of us, myself included, grow up thinking leadership flows from a person's God-given abilities. The truth is that great, enduring team leadership comes from seven traits, all of which are entirely matters of behavior. Leadership isn't reserved for shiny people. It's about the choices you make in a group setting, every minute of every day.

The good news is that behavior can be copied. People can learn it. That means there are many more potentially elite leaders in our midst than we realize.

I've gotten tremendous feedback from coaches at all levels and also from leaders in business and the military. I think teams are teams, and the qualities that make them effective are universal. If you want to

build a lasting winner, you need to find the right unit leader. So when it's time to pick a captain, my advice would be to start with the least "obvious" candidate, then work your way up the list. You'll get to the right answer more quickly that way.

**Teare:** Why must the great captains carry the team's luggage?

**Walker:** That line comes from the U.S. women's national soccer team, which won the 1999 World Cup. When the team members got to the hotel after a long, exhausting flight, they'd hear a knock at the door. It would be Carla Overbeck, the captain, delivering their luggage.

Overbeck was not an elite athlete. She hated attention and was almost allergic to the spotlight. On the field, she was relentless, but never tried to do anything flashy. She would lay the ball off to a more-talented teammate the first moment she could.

Her former coach explained how this worked. By staying out of the spotlight, serving the team and carrying the bags, Overbeck gained a form of currency. Her teammates knew she had no ego—she cared only about the collective. So when she ripped them on the field for mistakes, they understood that it wasn't personal. They accepted her leadership because they knew it was genuine.

Richard Hackman, a Harvard professor who studied the leaders of great teams that performed under pressure, put it best. All that mattered was that the leader made sure that all of the key tasks of management were being handled. That's it! He called this style of leadership the "functional" approach.

There's nothing more functional than carrying the luggage.

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So, while I'll be rooting for the Drew Rangers tomorrow night, I'll also be checking to see if the Astros can win their first-ever World Series. If they do, I'll be wondering which member of the team is carrying the bags. Not a betting man, I'd want to put my money on Jose Altuve, because I've never seen such a small player rise to such heights.

And whenever the Series and Drew Soccer's great playoff run end, we'll be at work here in admissions, reminded to identify, admit and enroll young people who exemplify Walker's traits of selfless dedication to a larger cause, those who put collective success ahead of personal gain, and inspire everyone to greater achievement as a result.