

THE CONNECTION EDGE

- HOW PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY & BELONGING CAN UNLOCK PERFORMANCE, ENGAGEMENT & PLAYER AVAILABILITY IN FOOTBALL

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Introduction

'Connection'. A term often used by players and managers reflecting on a successful season. But, what exactly is meant by this? As a felt experience, it's tricky to put your finger on what it actually is. Yet when it's alive in an environment, the impacts are real and profound. Connection transforms who we are, how we relate, and how we perform.

Since 2019, I've facilitated connection building programs in elite sporting setups - working across levels from player groups, to medical, backroom and coaching staff. I'm continually amazed by the genuine alchemy that takes place in these spaces. Yet, it surprises me how relatively unexplored this field is in the world of high-performance. In this article, I'll explore the following:

1. Connection building spaces in elite sport.
2. Psychological safety and belonging at the core of connection.
3. How both can impact performance, engagement and player availability.
4. Measure how connected your team environment is.

Connection Building Spaces

'We shape our buildings, therefore they shape us'
Winston Churchill.

Tribes and communities have gathered to connect long before the days of 'high performance'. The Polynesian Navigators had a sacred ritual of gathering before every epic voyage they embarked on. Around a fire the tribe would remind themselves of who they were, where they were going, and what inspired their journey.¹ Na Fianna, a band of Irish 'warrior-hunter-poets' were known to gather around a fire underneath the stars. Here they would tell stories, celebrate their heroism and the bonds they shared.²

Countless cultures and communities across time mirror such rituals. It's like a magnetic pull toward gathering in a circle is hardwired into us as humans. Not merely for the sake of it, but with the intention to nourish, unify and fortify. Similar practices live on in elite sports, packaged in the form of 'connection building' programs.

In the lead up to the 2023 Ryder Cup, Rory McIlroy described an "amazing experience" around a fire pit where they delved into their

backstories, family and why they played golf. Delving deeper into who they were and their motivations unified them into a team unit. "I got to know something different about them," McIlroy said, "and I think that really galvanised us."³

In the lead up to Chicago Bulls Last Dance, Phil Jackson (below, centre) gathered his players. He invited Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen and co to write about what the team meant to them, before reading aloud. 'Everyone had an emotional word to say', Steve Kerr recounted. To finish, Jackson turned out the lights and set fire to their answers in a tin cup. "One of the most powerful things I've ever seen", Kerr said.⁴

Usually, at certain points in a workshop, a deep calm envelopes the room. It feels like the group is breathing in sync. The depth of attunement feels ancient. What is it about a group 'connecting' with purpose that creates such palpable shifts? For me, it boils down to people's core human needs for safety, belonging and purpose being met on a heightened level. With those moments, beliefs about themselves, their place in the group, and the meaning behind their journey transform profoundly.



Core Human Needs

'Invisible threads are the strongest ties'

Friedrich Nietzsche

Believe it or not, footballers are human beings too. Like anyone, they scan their workplace to determine 'am I safe?', and 'do I belong?'

When we feel psychologically safe, we believe we can contribute as ourselves without fear of judgement, repercussions or punishment. The fight, flight or freeze response goes offline, and 'social engagement mode'⁵ comes online. Here we are open to engaging or taking 'interpersonal risks' with the group humans.⁶ Dr. Gabor Mate says, 'safety isn't the absence of threat, but the presence of connection'.

This 'presence of connection' lies at the heart of belonging too. Belonging is characterised by supportive ties with teammates. The environment has a community feel, if not a family feel to it. It feels like we matter, and what we add to the mix is valued - no matter our age, position, culture or personality.

In the next section, I will break down how a combination of psychological safety and belonging can significantly enhance performance both on and off the field. Furthermore, supporting your people to keep well and available for selection.

Connection	
Psychological Safety	Belonging
• People being themselves and using their voices without fear. • Info, innovation and learnings being shared freely. • A willingness to take risks on and off the field. • Feedback and healthy conflict are welcomed. • People owning mistakes.	• People feel seen, heard and valued. • Strong emotional ties between players, coaches and backroom. • Group locked in toward a common purpose. • Energised by shared identity and being a part of 'something bigger'. • Connected to the past, present and future teams 



Image 1: A montage of pictures from various connection sessions.

The Connected Environment

"The strength of the Pack is the Wolf, the strength of the Wolf is the Pack."

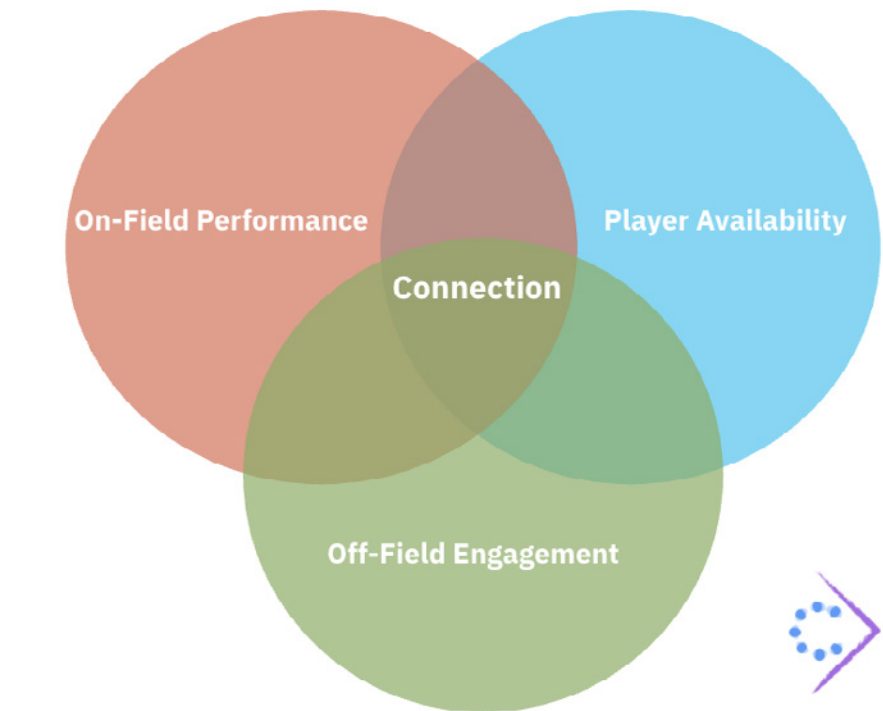
Rudyard Kipling

On-Field Performance

- Strong, healthy relationships between team members are central to **social cohesion**. One study involving 36 football teams found that high levels of cohesion were linked to **positive results** in teams' weekly games.⁷
- **Communication** is key in game time. There's zero space for doubt, hesitation or insecurity. When communication flows freely on the field, teams experience fewer errors, along with greater **coordination, teamwork** and **team resilience**.⁸
- 'Red Head Blue Head' is a concept born out of a World Cup winning All Blacks camp. A Red Head refers to a player being overwhelmed, tight, inhibited or anxious. In contrast, Blue Head is when a player is in a **present, calm, and clear** state.⁹ A regulated nervous system is the foundation for accessing this state, and indeed accessing the elusive **flow state**.

Player Availability

- Poor communication between head coach, manager and medical staff was found to increase both the **likelihood and severity of injury**. Highlighting the importance of forging open, communicative dynamics amongst backroom, doctors and physios.¹⁰
- A change in the makeup of a backroom team typically disrupts established training and recovery protocols. A UEFA study found that such changes are linked with an **increased rate of hamstring injury**. Specifically, when a team doctor or fitness coach changed, it resulted in an 81% and 63% increase in hamstring injury, respectively.¹¹ Underscoring the need for stable, consistent dynamics.
- Safety and belonging are like natural coolants for the nervous system. When we are regulated, we have greater cognitive functioning, better decision-making and motor control. In this state, athletes are found to have **reduced risk of injury**.¹²
- Teams with low communication levels reported 5% less training attendance, and also 4% lower player availability on match-day.¹⁶ A cohesive team tends to have **higher attendance levels, less lateness or absenteeism** from training and games.¹⁷
- When psychological safety is high, athletes are **less likely to experience distress**¹⁸ or **athlete burnout**,¹⁹ and



more capable of dealing with setbacks and uncertainty.²⁰ A footballer who feels supported by teammates and coaches, they'll be better equipped to **handle pressure**²¹ and **sustain performance**.²² Trusting and cooperative ties between athlete and coach have been shown to enhance players psychological well-being and **self-confidence**.²³



Off-Field Engagement

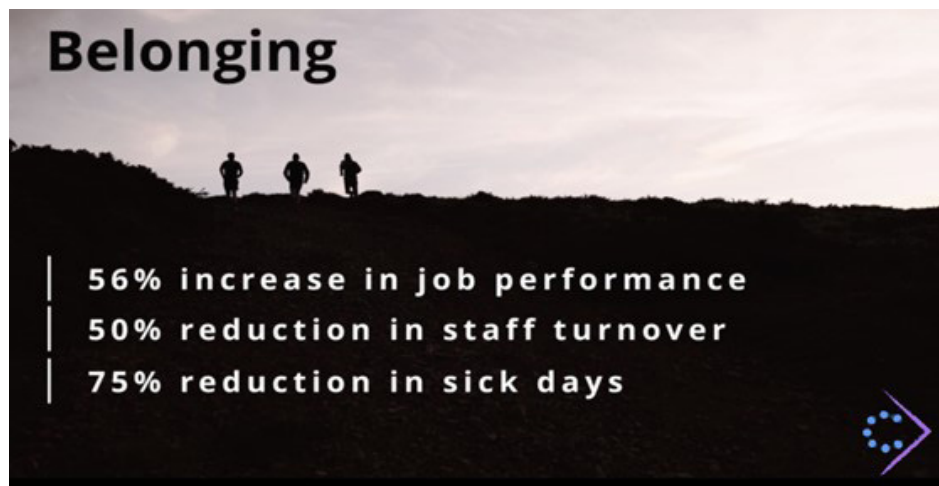
- Post-game reviews, department and medical meetings have the potential to be goldmines. **Valuable insights** about performance, opponents, injuries and nutrition are there waiting to be tapped into. A psychological safe dynamic 'takes the handbrake off', letting the **wisdom and knowledge flow** more effortlessly. In a landmark study of their workplace teams, Google identified psychological safety as being the top predictor of team effectiveness.²⁴
- 'Feedback is the breakfast of champions', they say. But, the quality of the relationship will determine how well the feedback is received. When there is trust or respect lacking, the receiver will likely hear the feedback as a threat, and will then become guarded or defensive. When the relationship is grounded in safety, the **feedback is heard** as supportive and constructive.²⁵
- Keeping a squad of differing ages, cultures and personalities satisfied can be a challenge. When players come to training or match-day feeling valued, accepted and they can be themselves, it's a huge step toward keeping people engaged and bought in. A Harvard Business Review study found that belonging in the workplace is linked to a 56% increase in **performance**, 50% **less risk of turnover**, and 75% **reduction in sick days**.²⁶

- Belonging and safety are natural **mood enhancers**. Feel good chemicals like serotonin, oxytocin, and dopamine create healthy shifts in our physiology, supporting our mental and emotional wellbeing. Positive energy and emotions are 'contagious',²⁷ and will ripple out to positively impact levels of **morale** and **camaraderie**.

3 Take-Aways

Connection as a need: Connection is more than a nice feeling, it's a human need. Players, coaches and staff are searching for it on the daily, whether they know it or not. When met, wellbeing and performance spiral upwards together.

Sacred team spaces: Connection sessions may appear like a modern sports psychology technique, but they are in fact age-old human rituals. When these spaces are held with skill, care and integrity, they have the potential to transform.



The butterfly effect: A football club is an interrelated ecosystem. When safety and belonging are alive in the dynamic, the effects filter into the dressing room, post-game reviews, medical consultations, to the white heat of battle.

How connected is your team?

Now's a chance for you to check the temperature of your environment - be it the players group, coaches, backroom, to medical departments. The following survey will help you to pinpoint how connected your team really is.

*This tool has been designed and refined by myself for various clients in elite sport and multinationals alike.

 How connected is your team?	1	2	3	4	5
I am comfortable sharing my thoughts and ideas, despite what others may think.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
In this team, we put the needs of the team above our own individual interests.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We are ok with giving and receiving feedback, as we know it comes from a good place.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel like my teammates have my back and I have theirs.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Its like we are rowing in the same direction towards something bigger than ourselves.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Our team dynamic is grounded in trust and mutual-respect.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
There is a sense of "we're in this together" on all levels (players, coaches, support staff).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believe what I contribute is valued and appreciated by teammates.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am ok with saying I'm struggling, whether its physically, mentally, or emotionally.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We encourage each other to take risks both on and off the field.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

If you scored 50/50, that's awesome. For those who scored anywhere below, consider this: Imagine what could be unlocked if your team's connection was dialled up another level, or five. What ripple effects might you see on the field, in team meetings, and with the availability of your athletes?

Conclusion

Connection is a potent force in elite football. When people can be themselves and feel truly valued in the environment, it's like taking the handbrake off. Energy flows into what matters - game-plans, team meetings, medical consultations, training drills and ultimately, performance. The group serves as a wellspring of wellbeing and resilience, a buffer against stress and dis-regulation.

Connection is like a fire. It takes care, attention and tending. Connection sessions are a potent and intentional way to keep the fire stoked and burning bright throughout the season. The beautiful thing is, safety and belonging are inherent in who we are as people. They're always there - waiting for the right conditions to come to life.

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- Facilitates The Circle, a self development program for the prison population.
- Runs team development programs for multinationals and corporate leadership teams.



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