

# Pippa Grange

## ‘The World Cup demonstrated what changes when people feel differently’

Pete Olusoga (Sheffield Hallam University) meets Dr Pippa Grange, the sports psychologist with the England men’s team at last summer’s event.

**The Football Association made the approach to you – what were you up to when they found you?**

I had gone out on my own to build a consultancy, Bluestone Edge. I did that for a number of years, across sport and business, and in time it became more culture, leadership and ethics work... work first with the leaders, work first on the quality of relationships and the way that things get done. These are the things that become culture.

That led to some interesting work, including a review of Australian Olympic swimming after London. The psychology foundations came from formal

learning, but learning how to do culture work was more experiential. Working in the heart of football clubs – working with player groups, mostly leaders, ‘coach whispering’ as it was called then! I would be in the coach’s box, in the dressing room, in the game reviews... in the inner circle. I could marry that with my understanding of psychology and leadership coaching. It all came together under this umbrella of ‘culture coaching’. It felt right and, importantly, it felt useful.

The FA came calling in April 2017. They had done a global search, but were looking for someone who could add the culture and leadership piece to the sports psychology. They specifically didn’t want ‘just pure sports psychology’, by which they meant just player work, whether on field or off. They wanted a more rounded, holistic model of organisational change and a deep dive on improving how the England learning system was working. How do we help people grow within that system?

**Was the work around culture something you specifically set out to do?**

The FA were very specific about what they wanted, and the last few years of Bluestone were specifically around culture and ethics too. I found that I did less player-facing work, and more on the people who were working with players. That’s a model we have at the FA.

I’m a big believer that the environment you walk into is a massive factor in how you are going to behave. Psychological safety, how any of us feel when we walk into a place and see whether we fit, and whether it’s OK to have a go and to risk failing, is critical. Let alone whether we can hear what it is we need to learn. We quite deliberately work on the system and the people who are closest to the athletes. So actually some of the stuff I do with the kit men and the physical therapists is as powerful as anything else, because they’re spending an hour at a time in intimate, one-on-one



settings where people talk. Having them understand what great culture looks like, giving them a lens into what kind of challenges an athlete might be facing, and encouraging good influence skills, good relational skills, a really solid understanding of who we are... I think that's quite powerful.

**In engineering these cultural shifts, is there a particular theory, method or way of working that you ascribe to?**

Yes there's a process. When I came into the FA, Lane 4 had already designed a high-performance curriculum, and we've just deepened that to make it really football-centric – relevant and usable for coaches and players, and added robust method.

We work hard at making it approachable and straightforward without losing any rigour. One of the things I've noticed with sports psychology, or with culture work in general, is that people often don't know how to describe how it works or even what it actually is. As somebody said to me this year, 'a bit horoscopy'. Alas, we are still seen by some as snake oil merchants!

Of course sports psychology or culture is always in a battle to prove itself, because it's not quantifiable in the way that other disciplines are that contribute to a performance model. So I think it's useful to have frameworks and models that help coaches and leaders understand what you do and why, and how you'll do it, and how they'll know it's working.

**It seems like football has become more receptive to sports psychology?**

It's interesting for me coming into football, which I don't have a background in... the work that had been done over the last few years, with Lane 4, there's a receptivity internally to us, but I've actually found that football *per se* hasn't been as open yet as I thought it would be. I think that's in part about how performance psychologists are having to work in football, as consultant staff or peripheral. If you're trying to change a system, you can't be wheeled in to do a session on a Thursday afternoon before a game and expect to create profound change. The piece that has to evolve is understanding that the psychologist or the 'culture coach', whichever term we use, should be an embedded part of the performance system. They should be useful to the multidisciplinary team – the physical therapists, doctors, ops team, sports scientists, analysts and coaches, etc. – as well as to the players. An integral part of the system.

**Often a psychologist is someone who is brought in to fix an issue, an add-on.**

Definitely. I think that all coaches have a stronger understanding of the importance of mental skills for performance... things like resilience and anxiety management. But I still feel the way we describe the discipline is still quite academic. It's not necessarily very 'clean' and approachable yet to the lay person.

Most sports psychologists have a hard time feeling successful even if they're making good change, because they are on the edge of the system. When they're deeply embedded in the system, we really can see some change. It's easier said than done, because it's much more comfortable to belong, to be fully involved in the team; but you need that ability to step back and be a witness, to coach and challenge where you need to.



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It's a tough spot, being a psychologist in a team. If I mentor younger psychologists I talk a lot about how the most important work is the upfront work before you ever get in front of any players or staff members. Negotiating what it will look like, what you can and can't do, what to expect. Unless there is not just permission but buy-in, it is almost impossible to optimise a psychology service.

**Are there still pockets of resistance?**

I don't see that much wholesale resistance – 'this could not possibly be useful, I don't believe in it' – but I see resistance in 'we're fine as we are, we do this stuff already, or we don't fully understand how this can be of optimal benefit'. Even in our organisation there's some proving to do over time, as there would have been with other disciplines. Everyone has to demonstrate how it works. It's resistance to jumping in with both feet and embracing it and loving it, seeing it as a 'must have'.

**Do you think the success of the men's team in the World Cup has had an impact on that?**

The World Cup experience was a culmination of a couple of years before as much as anything else, but it opened people's minds... it demonstrated what changes when people feel differently. It wasn't that there was this brilliant model for culture that changed everything immediately, magic pixie dust stuff, but what everybody really talks about – especially externally to the organisation – is how good it was to see the players feeling free and relaxed. That I

think has turned the dial around a little bit. People understanding why the experience of sport matters, from a psychological perspective, and how culture and environment change that.

**There was such a great feeling. How do you carry that on?**

We're a team of eight, and we do on-camp work and off-camp work. Because it's international we may only see the players for 60 days a year, depending on the tournament year. Summer gave us a huge luxury with the senior men's team for eight weeks, so you really build momentum. The senior coach has been very open, very willing, but we've got 16 teams and we're tasked to cascade and embed those high performance culture factors which we believe are important, a particular way of working with the people. It's a strategy. We plan for good culture, in negotiation with the coach, and it's almost periodised from under-17s through to seniors. What do we want these players to be equipped to do, and how do we want them to feel as they go through? How do we want them to feel about England as they go through their journeys as athletes?

**During the World Cup, manager Gareth Southgate talked about a team that represented modern England, with the chance to affect things other than football.**

I'm a big believer that high-performance culture needs to have a spirit of contribution to something more than the scoreboard. That's part of what Gareth and the team achieved during the summer. We talked long and hard about it before prep camp in May. Particularly in one-on-one conversations. What would success look like to us, separating out what would success on the scoreboard look like, what would success in terms of learning look like, how do we want people to feel, how do we want our fans to feel, what do we want Three Lions to represent? When did it feel great? We had a lot of that exploratory negotiation of what we would commit to before we ever set off. So what we saw and felt across the summer was better than we could have ever imagined – people really enjoyed it, and that was thrilling for us, and particularly thrilling for the players, and we shared that public enjoyment all the time with them. Keeping the balance between any sense of 'we're already done, we're already a success', and 'we've still got games to play, we must keep focused and in our bubble'.

It really did change, but of course that potential was already in each of those players. The environment shifted. Gareth offers such calm leadership, and he's a great storyteller, so he's easy work for me in regard to his narrative, his open mind. That shifted everything. Kyle Walker tweeted that 'this unity amongst the

country is just brilliant, let's stick together, I love you!', and it became a London Tube station quote of the day... I saw it in a media feed and shared that with him, and he was genuinely thrilled that something he said had an impact on others like that. We started to break down the stereotypes of what these footballers were, and that lens into their life was curated not by them but by other media outlets. We encouraged them to tell their own story. We asked them what they would like to talk about, rather than 'don't say this'.

**That freedom really came across, as a fan watching on TV. But I was drained just watching, so did you do 'emotional hangover' work after the summer?**

Yes, with players and staff. Anyone who has worked in Olympic cycles or tournaments will know about the effort to get there, and then the adrenal rollercoaster that is the event, and then you come back and life carries on. Five million emails in your inbox. That extreme euphoria and success we felt – not winning success, but something that was really worthwhile – that juxtaposed so hard with life when we got back. A lot of us were even tired with the positivity... we just needed to go in a hole somewhere. The players may have had two or three weeks at best, and then they were back into playing. Some players who weren't from the big six clubs, their lives had shifted dramatically in that time. So there was a lot of emotion swirling around, most of it positive but still draining.

We didn't see them until September, so we did emotional hangover work when they came back in, but we did it with the staff too. A comprehensive unpacking of what happened, how we felt about it, where were our learnings, next steps. And a full stop. Not that we don't talk about this again, but more like this is where we are, where are we stepping next? With the momentum of summer, everyone was up for that.

Speaking to a colleague who had worked in an Australian Olympic cycle, one observation she made was that she felt that things were parked too quickly... never rest, never embrace the growth or success, just refocus... and that had quite grave consequences in her sport. So it's important to manage that.

But emotionally it was big. I don't think any of us realised how the country responded until we got back. Our families and friends had sort of narrated it for us, but when we got back the emotions rolled on and it was important we put that in context and processed it.

**You were credited in the press with changing the culture, getting us that far...**

I was six months in when we went to the World Cup, and there was some brilliant work before I even stepped through the door. Bryce Cavanagh, he did the unicorns in the pool, I didn't do the unicorns! We worked as a collective. I have quite a strong anti-hero policy, but I think particularly for our discipline... human emotion is so dynamic, and culture is a live thing which is made every day. Yes we had a plan, and yes it went well, but there were so many factors that

went into it, including a staff team who pulled together really well. And luck – which we don't like to talk about! So myriad factors, and it makes me cringe when I think about the overplayed credit I got.

When I really think about what I added – I got people around the table having the right conversations at the right time. That sparked something. It wasn't a brilliant session on 'red head blue head', or managing anxiety, or the work on staying composed on the penalties... none of those things in isolation.

**When England were knocked out, there was a sense – rightly or wrongly – that it was again a psychological issue. That we'd almost over-achieved mentally, with the penalty shootout, and maybe when we got within touching distance of the final it all got a bit much?**

Was it psychological? Obviously it has an impact. I don't think that they ran out of steam psychologically.

I don't think that they capitulated or gave in. I'm privy to those meetings and conversations, and alongside Gareth I run the leadership group. I know what the level of desire and intent was going in. But we saw across a number of teams, the emotion of holding it right until the end of a game or the end of a tournament is something that is a learnt experience as well. That was the youngest World Cup squad bar one, and the youngest we've had for a very long time.

I think about it in those terms, and psychological resilience to hold out to the end is just as learnt as playing a 3-4-3 or any other aspect of managing a game. It's part of a development path that they're on. I also think they weren't homogeneous in that. There might have been some players who really gritted it out until the end, and some who maybe felt differently along that path.

But really it wasn't any more of a factor in my eyes than their physical conditioning, or their game experience. It's part of a whole. I think also England had just really convinced itself that psychologically we were weak, before that. When I came into the group I thought 'this team is a bit of a secret', because there was good work already done. They were willing. It was the guidance and permission to be themselves, it was the frameworks and encouragement and relationships, that would help them really build that momentum. They weren't actually as bad as all that! Going out to Iceland in 2016, there's a whole story built up around the horror and shame of the England team, but of course they had been working on it since then.

**Going through that as a psychologist, what changes did you see in yourself?**

One of the interesting things was observing my own emotions through it. There's usually only one psych in a team; everyone else had a team, and we need to keep in that position where we can still coach. That meant a degree of separation; it can feel quite lonely.

Managing myself within that, and knowing when I was having a moment, or when my mood had dipped. Being willing to be imperfect: I'm a big believer in that. I also reflect on people's feedback... some of the things that I thought were most important were not what other people saw as most important. I did a lot of one-on-one with staff members, on nipping negative group dynamics in the bud... some fed back that that was most important. To take the time to have the space to fully unpack it, that's interesting. I'm grateful for the luxury of a full review. Your own confirmatory bias shifts, memory is notoriously unreliable, so having people feed back into what worked was very valuable.

I hope it has made me a better culture coach.

I notice where I stepped back, where I saw myself thinking 'I don't want to have that chat right now'.

I think I got to understand more about subtlety...

sometimes sport has quite a masculine view of 'go hard

when you're challenged', and it's not my understanding of what works generally. You do need to be bold enough to challenge, but for the dynamics when you're away in one hotel, under pressure, even if its good pressure, subtlety really matters. I think I learnt a lot about that.

"I don't think that they ran out of steam psychologically. I don't think that they capitulated"

**Interesting that you talk about masculinity around sport... let's go back to where you started really, in mental wellbeing. UK Sport launched their mental health strategy recently... how far have we got to go?**

A long way. That's not just specific to sport, but sport is so visible and has particular nuances about the lifestyle that are both protective and risk factors. I still feel that the conversation we're having is around mental illness rather than a parallel conversation around how we flourish, how we stay mentally robust. I'm only a year into football, so everything is caveated with a relative rookie view, but I still think there are some old school ideas around what performance has to involve in terms of suffering, 'toughing it out'. Your own work on burnout is relevant here. I'm thrilled we can have open discussions about it, but if I look at a five-year horizon I want to see a conversation about flourishing rather than just about people who are unwell.

**Now you have the Nations League finals this year. Anything you'll do differently?**

We're focusing on the shift to playing with expectation while maintaining that sense of freedom, going big on confidence... and we're keen to further develop the leadership within such a young team so that they feel a deep sense of capability over time.

Also, I'm going to put Chartered Psychologist Ian Mitchell in with the men's seniors. I'll be by his side as confidant and enabler, but if I'm a leader, I need to walk my talk in growing my team as culture coaches, psychologists and leaders. It will also leave me some room to work on mental health and the women's game!