

WORDS TO THE WISE

We've all given them, or heard them, and sometimes taken credit when all has subsequently gone well. But are team talks effective? **Mike Dale** took advice from two world-class coaches...

Warrington Wolves coach Tony Smith gets ready for a half-time team talk

Conducted in locked, sweat-soaked dressing rooms or whispered, furtive and furrow-browed, at trackside – the coach's pep talk is something of an enigma.

A few carefully chosen words can inspire victory against overwhelming odds but, as Raymond Domenech will attest, if done badly, team talks can be explosive, ruinous affairs.

Because they're almost always conducted in private, it's difficult to extract first-hand secrets as to how top-class coaches construct their team talks.

Rafael Benitez's folkloric half-time address to his Liverpool side, 3-0 down against AC Milan in football's 2005 Champions League final, has emerged as a rare public peek behind the scenes. 'Give yourselves a chance to be heroes,' he urged, and they duly did. Peter Reid, filmed for the infamous 1998 documentary *Premier Passions*, showed how not to do it, with repetitive, profane rants at his Sunderland players. They were relegated.

So how can a coach make best use of a pre- or in-game talk with their team or individual athlete?

'It's an art form,' says Malcolm Willstrop, whose untouchable reputation as a squash

coach sees many of the world's top players flock to Pontefract Squash Club in Yorkshire to receive his wisdom.

'It's highly significant,' he says. 'You may be able to turn a game and you may equally get it wrong. There are times when I know what I've said has helped, definitely, but there are times when what I've done has been counter-productive as well.'

'In squash you've only got a minute-and-a-half between games (equivalent to tennis' sets). What I say is never technical, rarely tactical. Often it's supportive, being there for them, an odd word. A player can't take loads of rubbish off you in 90 seconds.'

Willstrop was inducted into the sports coach UK Hall of Fame in 2004. He counts former world number one and Commonwealth Games gold medal winner Lee Beachill among his former charges and is currently coach to his son James, the world number six.

In January, James, 27, won the Tournament of Champions (roughly squash's equivalent of the US Open) at Grand Central Station in New York. He reveals the vital part that court-side tête-à-têtes with his father played in his success.

'He barely needed to say anything, it was more the tone of his voice and his calm, it kept me focused. He knew I didn't need loads of advice, he knew I was playing out of my skin. That's the key - not saying too much and overdoing it. He knew exactly the level to pitch at and didn't overcomplicate it. I could hear it in his voice, a kind of certainty. It was an immense feeling.

'Sometimes I can't see things on the court that Malc can. That's where he can turn matches around - one important factor, such as you have to get your cross-courts wider into the deep court or wider into the side wall. That one tactical thing can often change the way a game is going.'

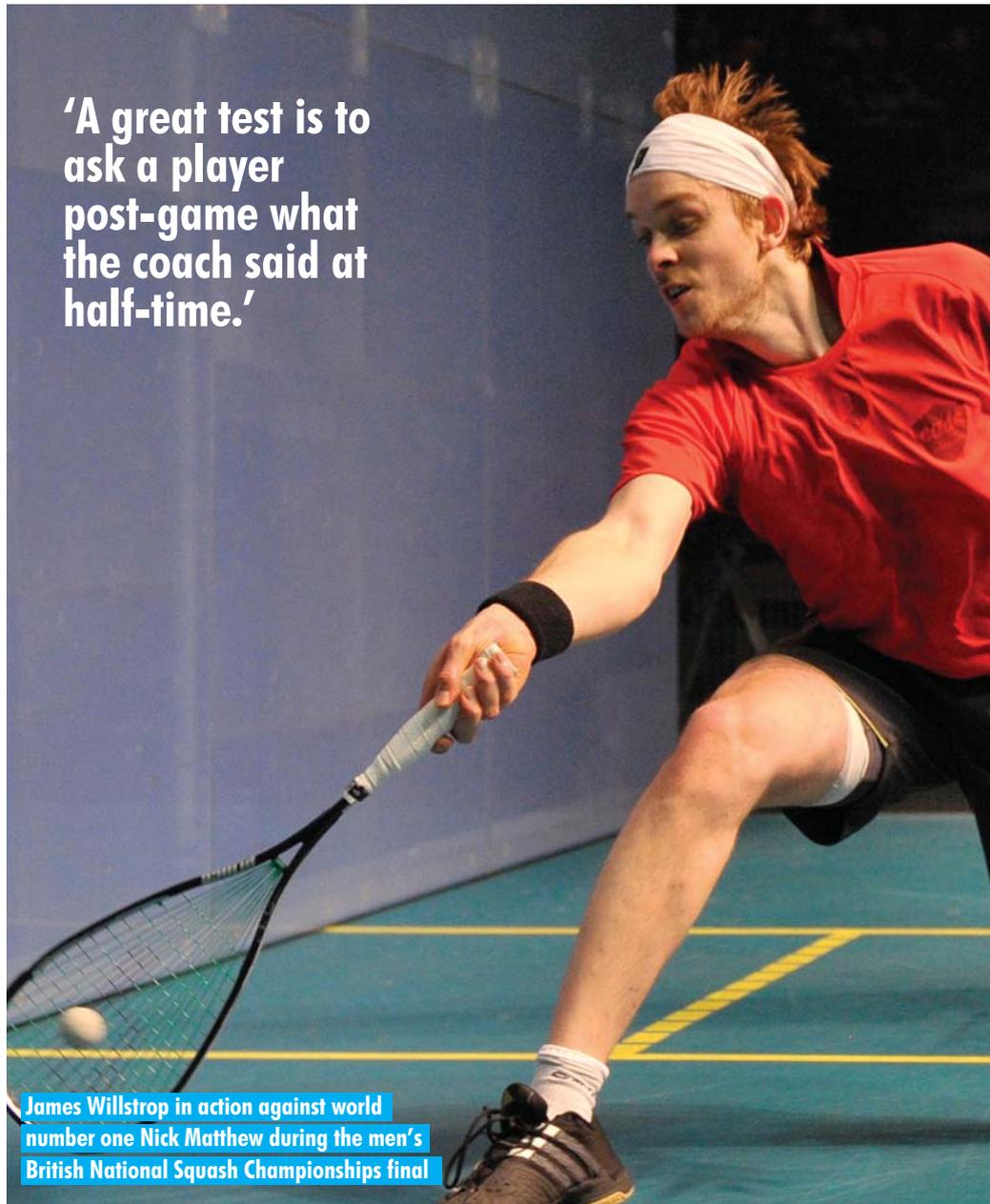
Willstrop snr reiterates his son's vital point - keeping it simple. He explains: 'Doug Sanders (American golfer of the 1960s) once said, "They feed you so much stuff, you forget how to use the fork"... in other words, the idea is to hit the ball properly in the right places, and if you overcloud things you might lose sight of that. That's very wise, because there's always that danger of over-complicating.'

Tony Smith, who has led Super League club Warrington Wolves to victory in the last two Carnegie Challenge Cup finals, says the same is true in team sport. 'There are only two or three things that anybody can take on board, particularly once you're in the game,' he explains.

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'A great test is to ask a player post-game what the coach said at half-time. Most of them have no idea. They may remember one or two things, or they may just remember the essence of it or the mood of the coach. If you need to have some influence, it needs to be simple and

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James Willstrop in action against world number one Nick Matthew during the men's British National Squash Championships final

there can only be a minimal number of changes, if changes are needed at all.'

Smith, a straight-talking Aussie (is there any other kind?), speaks with great authority on coaching techniques and philosophies across all sports. It's his assertion that, in pre-match speeches particularly, varying your approach is vital.

'If you do the same routine it wears thin pretty quickly. Do you always need to raise your voice? No way. If you do the same thing all the time players become immune to the way that you end up speaking to them. It needs to be varied and appropriate to that occasion.

'I like to get my players to build it up themselves leading into a game. If I feel that they haven't built in the right way, that the mood isn't right, that's when I intervene. I make it their responsibility to get each other ready. It's not

just the individual, they'd better make sure that the person next to them is ready to play too.'

Fostering this collective responsibility for pre-match preparation takes time, but Smith's laissez-faire approach seems to work, if his trophy-rich stint at Leeds Rhinos proved anything to go by.

Specific philosophies on half-time team talks are more difficult to pin down. Clearly their content depends entirely on what has occurred



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during the first period of play. Adapting quickly, therefore, is essential.

For Smith, the key is to decide almost immediately what elements (tactics, execution, morale etc) need changing and to use all the short amount of time available to prepare your speech.

'I try not to let it be too reactionary, to have it well thought out before I deliver. If it needs to be a bit emotional, I'll let it be emotional, but I'll have already thought that through. It's fine to show emotion, but I think it needs to be controlled emotion.' The content depends on how well they're performing and how well the plan is being executed or how the opposition are handling the plan.

'It's the duty of the coach to read what is needed on each occasion. Quite often I will

speak to my assistant coaches about that and ask, 'Do I need to alter these people tactically or is it mentally?' I try to go into it with some sort of plan and control over the delivery of it.

'One of the things that a lot of coaches become guilty of is a commentary of what's just happened,' adds the 43 year old. 'That's the last thing they need - they already know that. What we need to do is work on the future, rather than what's just gone by.'

This article is taken from edition 21 of *Coaching Edge*, the subscription magazine of sports coach UK. Covering the latest methods and techniques, and featuring interviews with some of sport's leading figures, *Coaching Edge* is a must read.

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THE COACH'S EDGE

Keep it simple. Limit any in-game advice to one or two specific points.

Adapt quickly and decide what sort of change is needed - tactical, mental or none at all.

Don't be reactionary - use the limited time available to structure what you want to say and communicate it in a controlled way.

Concentrate on what needs to happen next, not on what just happened.

Accept that whatever you say, ultimate responsibility lies with the player. As Willstrop snr says: 'No matter what you've imparted to them, they have to do it.'