

ROB BLACKBURNE



SMARTER

NOT HARDER

Maximise Your Elite Inner Performance

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CHAPTER 1

THE TRUTH ABOUT FOOTBALL

LET'S NOT mess about.

Football isn't fair.

You already know that. You've seen bang-average players get picked. You've trained harder than others and still sat on the bench. You've watched lads with half your ability get big contracts because they're good in the changing room, or because their agent plays golf with the assistant manager.

This game will test every part of you... mentally, physically, emotionally. And here's the kicker: no one gives you a manual. You spend years trying to figure it out on your own, years full of worry, pressure, fear... and before you know it, your career's over.

That's when it hits you. You look back and think: *I wish I'd done it differently.*

I know, because I've heard it a hundred times. Players sit down with me and say the same thing:

'If only I'd known this earlier.'

Here's what no one tells you when you turn pro: you're under the microscope 24/7. Judged by coaches, fans, even by randoms on Twitter with 11 followers and a profile picture of their dog.

When things go wrong, the criticism is loud. When things go right, it's silence.

So you learn to hide it. You tell yourself you can't show weakness, even when you're quietly drowning.

And when that pressure piles up, you probably fall back on the same story I used to tell myself:

Crack on.

Don't complain.

Others have it worse.

You're meant to be strong.

But that's the story that nearly broke me. And is breaking players every single day who still believe it.

Football Isn't Fair

I'll never forget getting dropped for a massive end-of-season game. The cameras were there, filming everything for TV.

I was their first-choice keeper. I'd played all season. And now there's a 'big game' they want to drop me?

But this wasn't about form. It wasn't about how I'd been playing... it was about height.

I wasn't tall enough. We were up against a team that loved putting crosses in and their forwards were massive.

Now, I get the logic. I even went to the manager and said calmly that I was disappointed.

He nodded, took it in, and that was the end of it. But inside I wasn't just disappointed. I was raging. '*This is so unfair*,' I thought.

It wasn't just missing the game that bothered me, it was the humiliation.

The sting of sitting on the bench while the cameras panned across, knowing people watching at home who didn't know the context would think: *he's not good enough*.

And that thought cut deeper than the manager's decision.

That's the fear I see in players all the time. Not the game itself but the judgement. So worried about judgement that it cripples them. Obsessed with what other people might think.

But the truth is you can't control that. You can't control what a manager thinks, you can't control what your teammates think, and you definitely can't control what the fans think.

And that's football. You don't control everything. You don't always control selection. You don't control the stories people tell about you.

Unfair things will happen and the only control you have is how you respond.

That's where your power is.

And that was my first real taste of the brutal truth this chapter is about: football doesn't owe you fairness. It never has. The game will let you down, decisions will go against you, and people will misjudge you.

The problem isn't the game, it's our expectation that it *should* be fair. That's what really screws us.

The moment you let go of that expectation and focus on what you *can* do – your effort, your response, your standards – that's the moment you stop being a victim of the game and start owning your career and making things work for you and not against you.

Environment Over Ability

I've worked with loads of players who've been overlooked. And one thing I've seen again and again is this: sometimes it's not your ability, it's your environment.

Take striker Ali Al-Hamadi. Top talent. Strong mindset. I first came across Ali after hearing him on Sky News. I was blown away by his emotional intelligence for his age, so I invited him on my podcast. He was excellent, and we kept in touch after.

At the time he was at Swansea City, but he made the brave call to walk away from their academy system and go it alone. Bold move considering only 0.5% of academy players make it into the Football League. He went on trial at clubs but nothing came of it.

During a phone call with one of the players that I'd previously worked with at Wycombe, I mentioned Ali. I talked about how his mentality had blown me away and

suggested they take a look at him, which, in hindsight, was mad as I'd never actually seen Ali play football, I just knew he had the right mindset.

Wycombe signed him.

But when he was at Wycombe, Ali felt overlooked. He was coming off the bench and being played out of position, never really able to show what he could do. He felt like he wasn't trusted and started doubting himself.

After a loan spell at Bromley, he moved permanently to AFC Wimbledon and that's when everything clicked. He was finally played in his natural position. The manager backed him. The fans loved him. And that confidence showed everywhere; in his body language, his interviews and his performances.

From there he got a move to Ipswich in the Championship. That same season, they won promotion to the Premier League. Madness, from non-league to Premier League in just a couple of seasons. But honestly, I always knew Ali would go far. Not because of talent, loads of players have that. But because of his mentality.

There are several things I always see in players with that X-factor:

- Resilience
- Self-awareness and emotional intelligence
- Commitment to learn and grow
- Optimism
- Belief

That's the thing about football. You can be the same player, but in the wrong environment you're just surviving. In the right one? You thrive.

There's a quote I use a lot with players:

'When a flower doesn't bloom, you don't fix the flower. You fix the environment it grows in.'

That's Ali's story in a nutshell. Same talent, same work ethic, different environment – and suddenly he exploded.

So if you're a player who feels overlooked, here's the lesson: keep stacking the evidence. Keep trusting yourself. Ask for feedback. Stick to the process. Your time will come. And when it does, it won't be about proving people wrong. It'll be about proving yourself right.

Managers Have Favourites

Let's be honest: managers have favourites. Shocking, right?

But it's true. And here's the thing – it's not always about talent. It's about *trust*.

A manager would rather have a player who's a solid six out of ten every single week than one who's a nine one week and a three the next. Consistency beats chaos.

They want players they can rely on. Players who won't sulk. Players who won't throw a strop or go missing. Players who'll run through a brick wall when it matters.

I've worked with plenty of managers, and do you know what they tell me?

'I don't need a superstar every week. I just need someone I can trust to do their job.'

That's why you see certain lads follow the same manager from club to club. Are they the most talented? Not always. But the manager knows exactly what he's going to get: hard work, the right attitude, and good energy in the dressing room.

So stop moaning about favourites and become one.

Be the player the manager trusts. Be the one who lifts the dressing room.

The one whose attitude makes others raise their game. The one who adds energy, leadership and standards wherever you go.

Because when you become that, the manager will back you. Not because you're perfect. But because he *knows* he can trust you.

Football Is Lonely

I had a player ring me once after being told by his manager he wasn't in his plans anymore. Out of the team. Time to find a new club.

He sounded flat. *'I'm just not motivated, Rob.'*

And I told him: *'Of course you're not. How can you feel motivated when you don't feel valued?'*

Think about it. Imagine you're in an office job and your boss pulls you in:

'By the way, you're not wanted here. We're replacing you soon. But in the meantime, keep turning up every day, stay cheerful, and give 100 per cent for the company.'

You'd be straight to HR. There'd be outrage. Talks about 'duty of care'.

But in football? That's just a Tuesday.

One day you're the king of the club. The next, you're surplus to requirements, told to pack up and maybe move your family to the other side of the country. And you're expected to smile, be grateful, and just get on with it. Because you're a footballer. You're not supposed to act like a human.

And here's the brutal bit: the hardest part isn't the rejection. It's the silence after.

You're still expected to turn up every day. Train. Lift weights. Do extras. Sit through meetings. Travel to games. All while knowing you won't play. You're still walking into a dressing room where everyone's buzzing about the weekend and you've got to pretend you care.

So you fake it. Pretend you're fine. Pretend you belong. Pretend you're motivated. Meanwhile inside you're spiralling: *Am I good enough? What if no one wants me? What if this is it?*

And that's where the danger creeps in. When you feel unwanted, you start to withdraw. Training gets half-hearted. You stop making eye contact. You go quiet in the dressing room. Suddenly people are calling you moody. Unprofessional. And that makes it worse. A vicious cycle.

That's the loneliness of football. You can be in a squad of 25, in a buzzing training ground, with fans chanting your name at the weekend, and still feel completely alone.

Because the truth is, in this game you're always one phone call, one opinion, one injury away from being on the outside looking in.

Work Smarter, Not Harder

Here is one of the biggest lies in the game:

'You've just got to grind, keep working hard, and the rewards will come.'

Hard work matters, of course it does. But it has to be smart. Efficient. Aligned with who you are. Otherwise all you're doing is smashing yourself into the ground.

If all you do is grind, all you're left with is dust.

Football is full of players who've worked themselves into frustration, then wondered why they weren't improving. The truth? They weren't building systems. They weren't protecting recovery. They weren't working on the thing that matters most: their head.

So next time you're tempted to just grind harder, stop and ask yourself:

Am I working smarter, or am I just chasing dust?

Grind To Growth

I started working with Luke O'Nien not long after he joined Sunderland AFC.

He had just made the move from Wycombe Wanderers, a big step up in his career. His debut was live on Sky, and let's be honest, it couldn't have gone much worse. He didn't

play well, and by half-time he was dragged off. Friends and family were watching. He felt humiliated.

From there, things spiralled.

The Trap of Grinding

Luke did what most players do when things aren't going right, he tried harder. He ran more. He spent extra hours in the gym. He stayed at training until five o'clock when everyone else was finishing at two. He even broke into the Sunderland gym after hours just to do more.

And what happened? He got worse. His legs felt heavier. His training dipped. His joy for football disappeared. He became frustrated, angry and stuck in his own head. Confidence drained away and doubt crept in.

That's the danger of the 'just grind' mentality. If all you do is grind, all you're left with is dust.

He sat on the bench for three months. His dream move was turning into a nightmare. Articles questioned his future. Social media piled on. Rumours spread that Sunderland would ship him out. It hit him hard.

After yet another poor performance in a behind-closed-doors friendly, a coach pulled him aside. He said to him:

'We didn't sign anyone else. We signed Luke O'Nien to be Luke O'Nien. Do what you're good at. Run around. Be a pest. Give people the ball.'

That comment planted a seed.

At around the same time I'd also reached out to Luke, and after him playing hard to get for a while, we started talking.

Finding His Game Again

It wasn't long after that I started coaching Luke. And what he came to realise was that his skillset was not the problem. He hadn't suddenly become a bad player overnight. His game was still there. It was his mindset that needed shifting.

Instead of grinding himself into the ground, he started being himself again.

And everything changed.

His football improved. His performances became consistent. He played with confidence, with energy, with joy. He was less fearful. He was enjoying his football again.

He became a regular in the first team, and a big character around the club.

Everything was going great.

Until the shoulder injury.

Breaking Down

Luke dislocated his shoulder mid-game, popped it back in, and carried on. From then on, nearly every match it would come out again, and he'd always just shove it back in on the pitch.

Inevitably, he needed surgery.

The surgery itself went well, and Luke assumed recovery would be straightforward. Do the rehab, get stronger, come back fitter than before. That was the plan.

But the reality was different. Recovery was slow, painful and frustrating.

He felt guilty for not playing. Useless for not contributing. He hated watching from the sidelines. At one point he even left a match at half-time because he couldn't handle sitting in the stands.

His daily routine was gone. Rehab felt lonely. He wasn't training with the team, so the connection with his teammates started slipping. Isolation crept in.

His identity came under fire. If he couldn't play football, who was he?

He lost muscle. He felt weaker. He couldn't pick up his baby girl. He couldn't help at home. That cut him deeper than the injury itself.

He started withdrawing. Staying in bed longer. Becoming angry and irritable. Snapping at people he loved, then feeling guilty afterwards.

And he hid it. Even from me.

Rock Bottom

Until one day, his wife phoned me.

'Rob, he's in the basement crying. Can you speak to him?'

Luke was still attending my Zoom coaching calls, so at the end of one session I asked him to stay behind.

'You okay?' I asked.

'Yeah, fine,' he said quickly.

I pushed again. 'Are you really okay?'

And it all came out.

'Actually no, I'm fucked.'

That was a huge turning point for Luke. The moment he admitted he was struggling. The moment he showed vulnerability. From there, everything shifted.

Rebuilding

We had some extra coaching sessions and there was a real shift in Luke's mentality.

We focused on what he could do rather than what he couldn't.

He started helping Sunderland's academy. It gave him purpose. He felt like he was contributing again. He built connection back into his days. And he enjoyed it.

I also suggested he share his story publicly, to post about his injury on Instagram. At first he resisted. But when he finally did, it blew up. Messages came in from players all over the world.

'That's me.'

'I thought I was the only one.'

He realised he wasn't just helping himself anymore. He was helping others. He was supporting players going

through the same struggles. He was showing them they weren't alone. In that moment, Luke became a leader. He went from client to coach. From player fighting to survive, to leader guiding others.

Today, he is Sunderland's club captain. He's playing in the Premier League. He's not just a player I mentor, he's one of my closest friends, a business partner, and a constant inspiration.

Luke O'Nien is proof that vulnerability builds leadership. Proof that mindset is the real X-factor. And Luke has it in abundance.

And that's how the Inner Game Academy was born.

Vulnerability Is Strength

For years, I thought mindset was about toughness. About pushing through. Grinding. Keeping it all in.

But in that hotel room in Manchester, I realised toughness on its own isn't enough. What you really need is honesty. Openness. The courage to say, *'I'm not okay.'*

When I finally started talking to family, to friends, to other players, it felt like ripping off a weighted vest I didn't even know I was wearing.

Here's the truth: the lone wolf doesn't last. The wolf with the pack survives.

Footballers think they've got to warrior through everything. They think asking for help makes them weak. But it's the opposite. Talking makes you stronger. It gives you energy. It makes you a leader.

That's why I share my story. To show players that no one's immune. Everyone struggles. And the bravest thing you can do in this game is open up, because football is hard. Brutally hard.

I've had players on the phone in tears, admitting battles with addiction. I've had players drinking the night before

games and no one had a clue. I've had players tell me they're depressed or struggling with anxiety.

That's why I started the **0.5% Club**. Yeah, it's about growth on and off the pitch, but more than that, it's a place where pros realise they're not alone.

Because the second you hear someone else fighting the same battle you're fighting, something shifts. You don't feel as broken anymore. You feel human.

The First Yard Is in Your Head

Most players pour everything they've got on to the grass. Sprinting. Lifting. Passing drills. Tackling.

But they ignore the one thing that controls all of it: their mind.

That ends here.

I've worked with players who were flying physically. Strong. Fast. Sharp. On the outside, they looked unbeatable. But inside? They were crumbling.

Why? Because they thought they had to be a nine or ten out of ten every single week. The moment they had a six out of ten game, they panicked. They spiralled. They replayed every mistake in their head until the game had beaten them twice – once on the pitch and once in their mind.

That's the blind spot. It's not their fitness. It's their thinking.

When You Lose Form, It's a Thinking Problem, Not a Technical Problem

Here's the pattern I see over and over again. A player makes a mistake. Instead of taking feedback, they go into judgement.

'I'm crap.'

'I'm not good enough.'

'I've been found out.'

And the weight of those stories crushes their performance even further.

But what if you flipped it?

What if every mistake was just feedback? What if mistakes were part of the process, not proof you're a failure?

That's the mindset shift. Instead of, *'I can't make mistakes'*, it becomes, *'I will make mistakes, and every one of them will teach me something.'*

Imagine the freedom that gives you.

Train Your Brain Like Your Body

So how do you actually train your mind?

The same way you train your body.

You start simple:

- Get help. Find a mentor or get a coach. Don't lone-wolf it.
- Increase your knowledge. Listen to podcasts, read books.
- Start journaling. Reflect. Ask yourself better questions.
- Control your breathing. Your physiology drives your psychology.
- Help others. Coach younger lads. Share what you're learning. You'll be shocked at how much clarity teaching gives you.

I've been doing this for 20 years and I'm still learning. I still get coached. I still look for new tools. That's the point; your mind is the first yard, and you never stop training it.

Remember: **Mindset will take you further than physical talent ever could.**

Change your thinking and your performance changes. Not just on the pitch, but in every part of your life.

You don't know it all and you never will.

Footballers don't need another motivational quote on Instagram. They need real conversations. Tools that

hold up under pressure. Coaches who actually understand them.

I'm not perfect. I still argue with my inner chimp. I still question myself. The difference now is I don't hide from it. I use it. And I help others do the same.

If I could say one thing to my 18-year-old self, it would be this:

You don't know it all. And you never will.

Listen more. Learn from everyone. Leave your ego at the door. Mentality will take you further than any brand deal ever could.

Most players chase status: cars, flashy watches, brand deals, designer clothes, a blue tick and a shitload of followers.

Real status is respect. It's how people talk about you when you're not in the room.

It's the trust you build, the way you carry yourself, the standards you keep.

It's not about image. It's about substance.

That's the kind of status that lasts.

That's what makes you different.

This book is about confidence, belief, performance, leadership and everything in between.

I'm not here to waste your time. No fluff. No filler. Just real tools that actually work when the pressure's on.

You don't need motivation.

You need a plan.

Let's build it, one chapter at a time.

My Story: Ali Al-Hamadi

When people hear my story, they think they already know it.

Iraq. War. Moving countries. Football as an escape.

There is truth in all of that, but it is not the full picture.

The real battle was never what was happening around me.

THE TRUTH ABOUT FOOTBALL

It was what was happening inside me.

Growing up, there was always a feeling deep down that I needed to succeed, not just for myself, but for my family. We came from a council house. Life wasn't easy. No one told me to carry that responsibility, but I felt it. Even at 14, 15, 16, when I realised I was good at football, something inside me said, 'You have to change everything for them.'

That fear made me hungry, but it also made me fragile.

When I made my first-team debut, I thought I had to prove myself every single day. Prove I belonged. Prove I was good enough. Prove the sacrifices were worth it. That's when football stopped being football.

It became survival.

Every bad touch, every bad game, every comment from a coach felt like a threat. One bit of feedback and the story in my head went straight to, 'You're not ready. You're not good enough. They don't rate you.'

And when you believe those stories, they become real.

Your chest tightens. Your legs get heavy. You play safe.

You stop being you.

My time at Wycombe made that louder. I had a strong pre-season; the manager even told me it could be my year. Then the season started, two strikers got injured, and he played a winger up front instead of me. That told me everything. You can train well, say the right things, dream big, but sometimes you're just not the one they're looking at. It hurt. It made me doubt myself more.

Then came Bromley. Non-league. I got dragged at half-time. Andy Woodman told me I'd never make it as a professional footballer. That one stuck. It stayed with me for years. Moments like that feed the fear.

But AFC Wimbledon changed everything.

Right place. Right time. Right people.

The manager trusted me. The fans loved me. I felt valued. I felt believed in. And when you feel that, you stop playing

from fear and start playing from freedom. The goals came, the energy returned, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like myself again.

Then Ipswich happened – and the level went up again.

Pressure went up again.

Expectations went up again.

One moment that really cut me came in pre-season when Kieran McKenna pulled me in and told me I'd been the worst trainer for weeks. That I wasn't good enough. That I was complaining too much. It hurt because, deep down, I'd always battled that internal voice anyway. Hearing it from someone else can either break you or wake you up.

And then came the moment that showed me football really isn't fair.

My first World Cup qualifier start for Iraq. Sixty thousand fans. Huge occasion. I'd spent my whole off-season in Dubai training in the heat, killing myself to be ready. I should've been resting; instead I was grinding. Twenty minutes into the game... sent off.

Weeks of work. Gone in a moment.

Football will break your heart without warning.

And still, my internal story was the same one I'd carried since I was a kid.

Keep grinding.

Keep pushing.

Don't stop.

Don't fall behind.

Don't let anyone down.

It pushed me through dark moments, but it also nearly broke me.

Looking back now, I realise something important: my best football never came from grinding. It came from freedom. From playing like the kid in the cages. Not thinking. Not proving. Just playing.

THE TRUTH ABOUT FOOTBALL

Ipswich tested me enough to see that clearly. Training at that level, performing at that level – I realised the thing that mattered most wasn't physical or technical. It was mental. It was reconnecting with the version of me who played without fear.

If I could go back five years, I'd tell myself this:

Less is more.

Play more football.

Be smarter, not harder.

You cannot control everything.

Football is unpredictable.

Life is unpredictable.

And grinding yourself into the floor doesn't make you a better player – it just makes you tired.

Now, if a young player feels overlooked or lost, I'd tell them to stop searching outside. Go inward. Sit with yourself. Ask why you feel the way you feel. Ask where the story comes from. Understand the human before you try to understand the footballer. They're connected. Always.

That's the truth about football for me. The pressure. The fear. The judgement. The moments that break you and the ones that build you.

But the biggest thing I've learned – the thing that will stay with me for the rest of my career – is this:

Once you stop playing from fear and start playing from freedom, the game doesn't just change – you do.