

## **Prologue:**

It has to be remembered the time this was written. Social attitudes were very different back then generally and GRG, was also of an age where even his personal perspective would have been slightly 'old fashioned'. If you keep this in mind, I think the points made will be better understood.

I remember, G.R.G. had a long discussion with the then very young Neil Adams, who was just setting out on his coaching career about "basic technique". Adams was very enthusiastic about the idea of 'basic technique', my father was not. This happened at a West of England area training session, at which I was participating.

I hope, this little historical note helps with the reading and digestion of what is contained in this 'playlet' by my father?

F.G. July 2024.

## **A COACHES' POLYLOGUE:**

**O R**

### **THERE ALWAYS FREE CHEESE**

### **IN A MOUSETRAP.**

Geof Gleeson. July 1986.

#### Characters.

- FRED:** a top performer, but not as the top. About 18/19 years old.
- GEORGE:** Fred's coach, one of the old school, meaning that he has had no formal training to be a coach.
- FATHER:** Fred's father; about 40 years old, never made it, or indeed anything else; life has shown him complete disdain, for he has made no demands of it.
- GIRL FRIEND:** of Fred's. An office worker. Her only future is motherhood, but that man will shatter her as easily as it may save her, for that's all she has.
- THE CRITIC:** The "explainer" who knows all the answers, but none of the questions. About the same age as George.
- THE STRANGER:** about 50 years old. A passer-by who likes the game and what it can do.
- SETTING:** Nowhere in particular, somewhere near a sports hall or stadium.

At first there is an empty space, very symbolic – the womb of life, Sartre's hell on earth etc.

Fred and George walk on, both in track suits, although George is wearing a raincoat over his. There is no indication of any particular game Fred has been playing. The audience can please themselves.

COACH                    Jesus! I've told you enough times. You can beat that stupid sod anytime you like. Why didn't you?

FRED                     I know. I know. I know! I know I can beat him, but as soon as I get near the bastard the strength runs out of my fingers, as though someone has pulled the plug.

COACH                    You must plan.

FRED                     Plan? I do plan. Christ I plan. Just like you tell me. I make my objectives, just like you tell me. I train hard just as our agreed schedule says I should train. I mentally rehearse beating the arse off him every time. Great! I'm a champion. I meet him and fall apart like a rotten bag. What do I do? What can I do?

A man has followed them on. His obvious intention is to offer advice. The chance has arisen so he seizes his opportunity.

CRITIC                    I'll tell you what to do kid. The trouble with the kids of today is that they don't know their basic techniques. Learn your basic techniques son. That's the key. Back to basics. Learn them and you can beat the world.

COACH                    Who the hell let Charlie Chan in? Jesus, send him back to guard the Great Wall of China. The Chinese may need him, but I sure as hell don't. I don't want to listen to crap like "you need basic techniques". If I want to consult the Delphic Oracle, I'll go to bleeding Greece.

From the opposite side of the space comes Fred's father and girl friend. They have obviously come to meet Fred, but not necessarily in this spot. They are a little put out by suddenly meeting Fred, George and the Critic as a small crowd.

FATHER                    (Plaintively,) Hello Fred. Fred how could you have lost? You'll break your mother's heart. She's spent all our money on you – well the housekeeping money really, you know. I can't give you any. You know how much I'd like to, Fred, but they're getting

very tight at work now. I want to see you improve yourself, get on in the world, but I can only so so much you know.

FRED Hi! Looking for me? Well you have found me. So, you don't like me losing? Well you had better get used to it!

GIRL But Fred, you looked so good. You were so much better than the rest.

FRED (His patience and tolerance was getting short). You sound as if winning is like a fashion. You wear it like a blinking new 'at. Well you don't! You win 'cos you win; you are the best. Today I was not the best and I don't know why.

CRITIC I've told you Fred. Christ! What more do you want to know? Back to basic technique.

FATHER That seems good sense to me Fred. Why don't you – if it helps you win?

COACH Hell! It's got nothing to do with "basic technique"! Winning is all in the mind. You have got to have the winning technique working in your head, then they will come out when the right time... the right time... (he ends feebly because he is not sure what he means. With more conviction he continues.) It's called mental rehearsal.

CRITIC That's all new fangled nonsense. You've got to practise your technique, till you can do it without thinking. That's what I say: do it without thinking.

FRED I was mentally rehearsing.

COACH (In despair) Give me patience! Will someone take this joker and drop him off some highrise block of flats?

FATHER That's funny. I thought you were sleeping. So you were rehearsing eh? Never heard of sleeping as a part of training – well not in my young days. I suppose things do change.

FRED (Looking at his father intolerantly) Don't like your sense of humour, dad. Since when have you been a comic at my expense?

FATHER I'm not being funny son, I really did think you were sleeping.

COACH Jesus, now I'm getting hearts and flowers. Let's go somewhere, Fred, so we can talk this out between ourselves

GIRL Oh Fred! You can't leave me now. I've sat all through that tournament – or what ever you call it – waiting for you and now you want to leave me. It's not fair. It's not fair, I tell you.

FRED (chooses not to hear her) O. K. let's go somewhere and sort it out.

At that moment a stranger walk in from the same direction as the father and girlfriend came from.

STRANGER May I congratulate you. That was an excellent performance.

FRED Excellent? But I lost!

STRANGER Of course. There was far too much emphasis on technique and not nearly enough on skill.

COACH Jesus, another coach! They're coming out of the bloody woodwork. How can you have too much technique? It's what the whole bleeding game is about – technique. Fred here has good technique!

STRANGER No doubt. That's what I said. I am suggesting he should have more skill.

COACH Skill – technique? What's the difference? There is none. Technique is skill. You must have technique.

CRITIC Now then, how about that. Perhaps you've got some sense after all. That's what I told you, you've got to have basic technique.

COACH Not basic technique you silly old sod. There's no such thing as basic technique. I'm talking about technique – the way of action, basic technique is the camouflage of the bull shitter. Technique is what is needed, good technique.

STRANGER Yes, that's true enough, but only after you have learnt skill first. How can you know what technique is, unless you already have the skill?

GIRL Fred! Are you going to take me home or not?

FRED Learn the skill first? How the hell do you do that? That's stupid! It's like saying go through the door before you've opened it.

STRANGER Perhaps that's not a bad idea. If there was a big rock perched on the top of the door so that it would fall on your head as you walked through the door you had just opened. How would you go through the door unscathed? A skilled performer may well KNOW the rock was there and take it down before he opened the door.

FATHER But that's stupid too, you can't do that. It can't be done. You can't walk through a closed door.

STRANGER Of course it can be done. You get in through the window, take down the rock and then open the door.

Father and son nod understandingly. The father because the complexity of the solution makes him feel strangely light headed the son because enlightenment is creeping upon him.

FRED Pretty bloody obvious really (thinking). I see what you mean by skills. Going in the window is tactics isn't it?

COACH Tactics? Tactics! Now steady lad, don't fill your head with a lot of theory, that's dangerous. Your job is to win, not to ponce about, trying to look like a one-man football team.

GIRL Fred! I'm getting desperate. You have not been talking to me. I deserve your attention. I mean more to you than this lot – well except your father. What are you going to do? We are engaged for goodness' sake.

CRITIC The only tactics we had in my day were not to lose, how not to lose. Now that's important. As long as you don't lose you've got a chance to win (he smiles)

complacently). That's what I say!

FRED (To himself, but out loud). But "not losing" is too negative... it's banging on the door, knowing that noone's inside, waiting for it to be opened.

STRANGER That's a remarkable example of astute thinking. Clever lad! I do believe you have begun to understand what I said. As a class performer you must be able to think.

COACH Jesus, now we are into thinking! We have to think, if we are to play. Bloody rubbish! Technique must be beyond thinking. Thinking gets in the way of performance. Good technique must be done without thinking. It must be automatic. Chance is there – BANG – you do your thing, without a moment's thought or hesitation.

FATHER Yes, that's right son. At work we can do our job on the line and talk, it's noisy, but we can. We've done the job for so long now, we can do it and talk easily – it makes the job more interesting. But it's tiring. You know how I get home at night – exhausted.

GIRL (Excited because she can join in). It's like me mum. She watches the tele and knits. She says it's relaxing 'cos she doesn't have to think about either of them. How's that Fred? (she waits for a complement).

FRED (To the stranger). Yes, how do you account for that?

STRANGER We can start with the door opening analogy. Custom, our heritage, dictates to us to think only in narrow, straight lines. We can only open the door one way. Custom says we can only think of one subject at a time and then only in one direction, as if we are moving trains, constrained by railway lines. There are two sides to opening a door.

Thinking is more like the tide coming in – seen from a boat. It surges up the whole breadth of the beach, some parts more slowly, some faster. The force of the waves vary according to the slope of the sand, the sea has no edge, no direction, only movement forward, backward and then forward again. That's how thought moves. Forward on a broad front – if it meets obstacles it goes back and starts again – in different directions with a different amount of force. It adapts its form to meet the action that is needed. That's how knitting and TV watching is done, not without thinking, but with a wave of thought that encompasses both actions, the working of

the fingers and using of the eyes. Of course its low “force” thinking; the movement is slow but sure, but simultaneous thinking is going on – as our two friends have so correctly pointed out.

COACH                    Rubbish! That’s not right. You might think you are thinking about two things at the same time, but really you alternate quickly between them – like an electric current. But you only think of one thing at a time.

FRED                    (Pensively). But I can think of attack and defence at the same time. When I started I couldn’t. I could only think of attack...and then I would think of defence. And that’s when I got beat... in the gap between thinking of defence and attack. The opponent would feel the gap and BANG... down I would go like the Israelites from Egypt.

GIRL                    Oh Fred, when are you going to talk to me? We’ve still got time to go to the Disco. You said you like going to the Disco with me, can’t we go now Fred? Then we can go back to my house after. You know what that means....

FATHER                I would like to take you both, but I have not got the car – his mother has, so you’ll have to go on your own. (His contribution fades away as he realises he is not saying anything.)

Girlfriend look miserable.

COACH                That experience has nothing to do with thinking. If you do your job long enough and in the right way, you simply get to know how to do it better than anybody else. That’s natural.

CRITIC                That’s right! Practice makes perfect. Do it often enough and it becomes right. After a couple of years you will have a perfect basic technique.

STRANGER            May I respond with another cliché? It is only perfect practice makes perfect. However, in the context of skill performance perfection has no meaning...unless it means something like “as good as your imagination can imagine” and in your case, if you would pardon me, that would not be very good. Thinking is performance. You cannot do a skill if you are unable to think you way through it.

COACH                Thinking is performance? What did that bloke say? I think therefore, I am! Are you

saying I think therefore I do?

- STRANGER Absolutely right. That's very accurate paraphrasing. The orient talks about the spark created by two flint stones banging together. There is no gap between the impact and the spark. Similarly there is no gap between thought and action. They are the same.
- FRED The spark is perfect. The flint stones clash and there is only one possible result – the perfect spark.
- COACH (With growing respect for Fred). That's right Fred, that's the definition of perfection. At any single moment in any competitive circumstance, there is only one possible technique that can work in that circumstance, and that's the perfect one – for that situation.
- CRITIC The longer this bleeding argument goes on the more I agree with you, or at least the more you agree with me....
- COACH (Interrupting). That worries me, perhaps I am wrong after all.
- CRITIC (Ignoring the coach). That's what drives a good performer on, perfection – the need for perfection.
- GIRL Oh Fred, he's right, sometimes you do look lovely. You move effortlessly, just like a ballet dancer. Real poetry in motion, that's what you are, it's when I love you most. It makes me feel all funny inside.
- FATHER I wouldn't use those words Fred, we all know what ballet dancers are, but I know what she means. There's real beauty there. It's art, that's what it is, art (the final words are a declaration of enlightenment.)
- COACH Of course sport is art. Indeed I would go as far as to say that really effective technique is always beautiful and that's how you know it's effective because it's beautiful. Effective technique is perfect technique, which is of course art.
- FRED (Introspectively). But beauty is not art.  
(It is the stranger's turn to show respect for Fred)



STRANGER                    That's very perspicacious Fred. How right you are. Beauty is to do with cultural expectation. Art is to do with understanding reality. If sport IS art, it is not to do with the expression of personality – that which makes a phenomena beautiful, but with the ability to manipulate reality. Surely that is the purpose and the object of training – to develop the ability to manipulate reality? Competition is a dual between two kinds of reality – as personified between two people or two groups of people. Training is all to do with learning how to control one's own reality so that it can be imposed upon someone else's. To make the opposition move in to your framework of reality. In that way you win.

CRITIC                        What a load of crap. I said hours ago all you have to do is beat the other guy. To do that, learn your basic technique. Practice hard, train hard, learn the fundamentals, that's the way to win. Don't waste your time on imposing your reality on him, beat him that's all!

COACH                        There's something in what he says, Fred. It's no good getting buried in all this philosophy stuff. That won't win you gold medals. Hard work will. Hard training will put you up there on the winner's rostrum.

FRED                         But winning isn't always enough! When I started I had little bother about winning. In fact I didn't really know what I wanted, only that I liked doing the sport. You came along and started yelling about winning and how important it was, you seemed to know what it was all about. There was no other alternative, so I went along with you. I convinced myself I did want to win, but I was never comfortable with the notion.

FATHER                      What's that son? You didn't want to win? Why do you train so hard? I don't understand.

GIRL                         You could have taken me out more Fred. That wasn't fair, that wasn't...

FRED                         Oh winning's alright. I'd rather win than lose, but... I was going to say winning is not important, but of course it is, very important... but it's not like everyone tries to tell you. There's something else...

COACH                        Of course there is Fred, we all know that it's called "intrinsic motivation", meaning it's about self satisfaction. Winning gives you a feeling of something well done...



him? Has motivation anything to do with fathers and girlfriends? (he points to them). Are the pressures they create – and they create many kinds – are they motivations?

FATHER Well, certainly I want my son to be the best in the country and I know his mother does too....

GIRL (Interrupting). Well, I don't care if he wins or loses, but I do like to hear people say how good he is, because then I feel proud that I love him.

FRED I like my family and friends to be proud of me, it gives me a great amount of pleasure, but I don't feel that as motivation. As far back as I can remember, I have always wanted to do this sport. I got my friend to take me along to the club so I could join and start learning. I call that my motivation – the need to play this game and no other. Nothing or nobody can make that need greater, although some may make it smaller (he looks at the coach and smiles). Old George here, keeps on demanding more and more commitment, which I am reluctant to give, not because I don't want results – because I do – but because I feel he's squeezing me into a mould that I do not want to fit. (He turns to the stranger) You said to me I should win by trying not to win. I want to say, by not wanting to win, I want to win. Who can help me sort out that crazy statement?

Here the argument closes so that others can make their contribution to the never ending debate about skill acquisition.

G. R. G. July, 1986.