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Kirsten's business plan — get India to care about the firm

Some interesting aspects of the Indian coach's way of "doing business"

NEIL MANTHORP

Published: 2010/12/31 08:08:35 AM

JUST more than three years ago Gary Kirsten sat down with Paddy Upton and executive coach Dale Williams in the leafy gardens of the Vineyard Hotel in Newlands to plot the future.

Kirsten had accepted the post as head coach of India and longtime friend Upton was to be his assistant, although the nature of his role had yet to be finalised.

The Indian cricket board BCCI insisted there was room only for a fitness trainer while Kirsten felt that mental fitness was more important. Eventually Upton combined the roles, which he was uniquely qualified to do.

Williams, having just joined the two in a joint-venture coaching business called Performance Zone, was there to offer a business perspective — and some ideas on methodology — to one of the most challenging coaching assignments in the world of sport. Their own business, clearly, was going to have to wait.

Kirsten refused to compromise on a single one of his goals. "India has more cricketers than the rest of the world put together and more passion for the game than other countries can ever hope for. Anything and everything is possible in Indian cricket, it must be," he said.

Between them they tried to analyse why the national team had, with a few notable exceptions such as the World Cup triumph in 1983, failed to perform to their collective potential given the individual talent.

Williams suggested that, in the cut-throat world of business, an individual who had fought hard against the odds to reach the boardroom or become a partner, sometimes became preoccupied with maintaining his status rather than caring about the firm or those below him on the corporate ladder.

Kirsten had heard, and seen during his playing days, a similar scenario in the Indian cricket team. He decided "playing for the team" would become central to his coaching philosophy and Upton set about building a coaching programme that would serve as a constant reminder to the players that their best interests would always be served by winning, virtually irrespective of the magnitude of their own performances.

The second cornerstone of Team India's new approach was going to be a gradual but enormous shift away from prescriptive coaching towards the acceptance of individual responsibility. In other words, players would not be told what to do. Instead, they would be told to find out — through hard work and self-analysis — what form of practice and preparation worked best for them, and then utilise the coaching staff to help them do it.

Kirsten acknowledged that his new bosses at the BCCI, not to mention the millions of supporters he would be accountable to, would be as obsessed as his former employers at Cricket SA with winning the World Cup and would be inclined to judge his success on that tournament.

But he had a vision and set his own benchmark for success, in a different place — and higher. "India will become the No1 Test team in the world and then you will see how much more importance the people will attach to Test cricket."

When it was pointed out to him that Australia were 15 points clear of everyone else in the rankings and that India, who were fifth, would have to win virtually every series they played to have a chance of being No1 during his tenure, he replied: "Then that's what we'll do."

"We'll have to come and win a Test series here," suggested Upton.

"Imagine that," smiled Kirsten. "India winning a Test series in SA."

"People would laugh if we said that now, but there's no reason that can't happen."

That is what Graeme Smith and the Proteas are up against. They need to play out of their skins to prove that their former team-mate's journey with India does not have a preordained ending.

• SA have an Indian in the cupboard to trump Kirsten



Indian coach Gary Kirsten (PICTURE: AP)

• SA have an Indian in the cupboard to trump Kirsten

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