



Drop and give me

fifty

by david astle

There are coaches, and then there's Damien Foster. No skills drills, no yelling, no threats – Foster helps footballers find ways to excel off the field as well as on it.

Beyond Soap Water And Comb

is an odd business name, and Damien Foster, the man responsible, is a self-confessed oddity. He can't agree on his own business title, but settles in the end for *mentor*. Among other clients, Foster life-coaches nine AFL footballers, each one a household name, though nameless by virtue of their covenant.

Foster, a former cultural attache in Tokyo, says, "It's not my clients' reluctance to talk about the work we do, rather the resistance they meet from others."

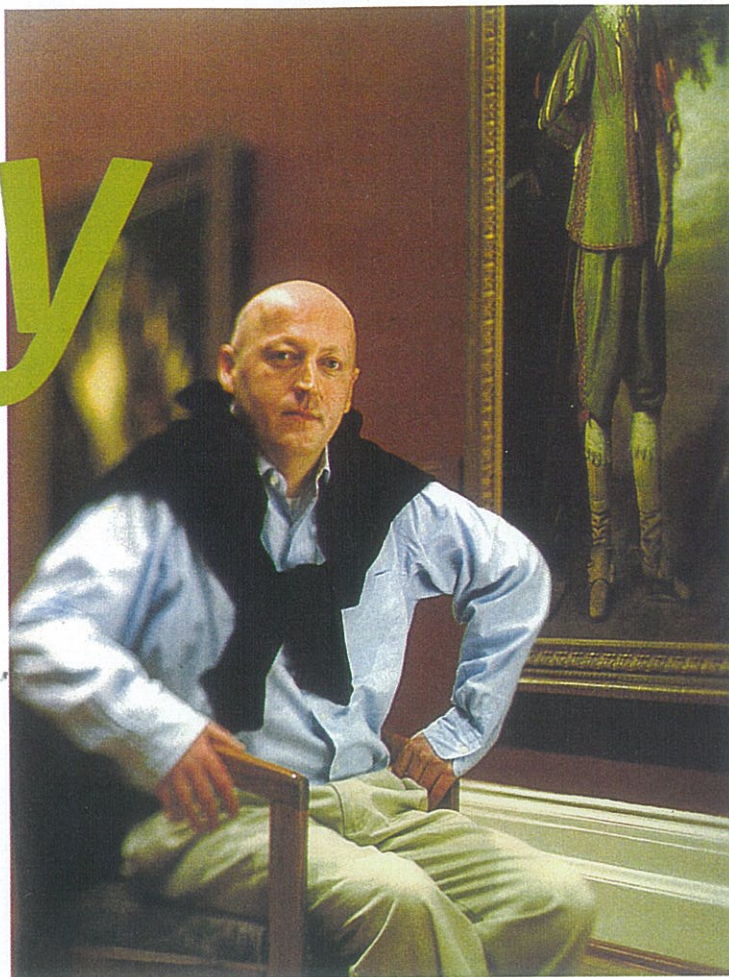
[INSIDE SPORT]: So why does X from St Kilda and Y from Carlton part with five figures per annum to meet a bloke like Mr Foster twice a month? And what is the "work" exactly?

[DAMIEN FOSTER]: I don't advise on financial or legal issues. We look at broader issues: how to raise self-esteem, how to make decisions more wise, more prosperous. *Isn't a footballer's self-esteem fairly high already?*

I disagree entirely. It's how people format themselves. All of my clients are high achievers, both corporate and sport. They get given Audis and all the trimmings. Life looks good, doesn't it? They have people saying "you're terrific." But if you don't feel terrific, you're not terrific.

You teach self-belief?

When you play sport you feel very vulnerable, a bit like an international model. When you're booked, you feel terrific. When you're not, you feel like shit. Football players are on the team, off the team, and their esteem goes zzzzzzz (a zigzag gesture). One of the things I teach them is buoyancy. And when you feel stable, you play better anyway.



James Boddington

Tell us about a lesson you might give.

We do this quirky thing where I give them a piece of paper and we walk down the street and make observations. They might notice 20 things – five of which will be girls' legs. When they've finished with me, they'll notice 2000 distinctions.

And that helps them grow?

Half of them don't realise all the hidden opportunities around them. It's about making their lives richer and deeper. Making a plain carpet into a rich tapestry of choice.

What's the holy grail in all this?

Depends on the client. I ask them to sit down and list five goals you'd shoot for if you didn't have any limitations. I say: "If you're prepared to do the miles, then I can help you reach them."

I teach them about the incremental phases to achieve goals, the number of times you need to pass Go. I'm not into dream stuff, I'm into quantifiable results.

Such as?

We'll take a field trip. I'll check into a hotel with no money, no ID. Or we'll return something to a shop that has a no-refund policy. And I'm not going to raise my voice, but in the end the rottweiler will lick me on the cheek. They'll say: "Would you like the refund in cash, sir?" My client thinks "God, well, if he can do it and he's ugly, I can do it. I'm special."

How does a client hear about you?

Word of mouth. I've been doing this for ten years. There's no leather armchairs or suits. I hate suits. It's very informal. We usually start with a conversation, four hours, which is different right from the beginning. We kick back. After a while they feel less guarded. In fact the first thing most [players] notice about me is the absence of envy in my eye.

You're an enigma from the start?

The only reason they bother talking with me is because the

person who recommended me is a success in their own right, and not just financially. I'm talking happy wife, happy kids. Not some bitter old warhorse whose moment has passed them by.

So you talk. Then what?

I wear them down. I start to see the real them. I'm listening to something different from what I'm being told. The next session is half as long. I start asking punchy questions, testing how happy they are, looking for the bullshit factors.

Why shouldn't they be happy?

By virtue of Australia's obsession with sport, often no-one questions these people. They don't challenge them, you know? Everyone's kind of like, "Come to our party, sit next to my girlfriend's sister." The cringe factor. Suddenly they meet someone like me who doesn't buy their . . . fame.

community consciousness. The way a sport club works is that retired players often become more senior members of that club. You perpetuate the culture.

Ever given up on a player?

Most footballers are very good at learning because they have the physical discipline of training. And they're generally very humble. They're not scared to say, "I want to learn."

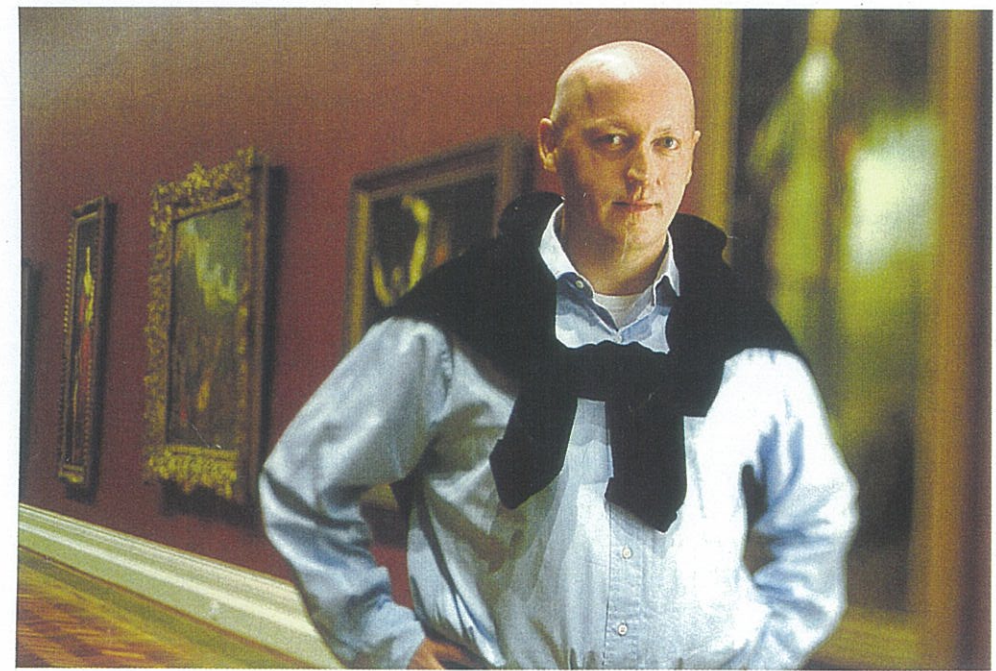
That would surprise most people.

Most imagine footballers having a degree of arrogance.

That's a Channel 7 soundbite. It's a different story when you get to know them. They're like children before they become self-conscious.

Do you think sport is more prone to this man-child syndrome?

When they start, someone at the club



James Boddington

You're not intimidated.

People live their own fantasies through rock stars and sports heroes. In actual fact most [players] are at home having a toasted cheese sandwich.

So then you pick them apart?

I throw subtle grenades. Questionnaires. After a while they know you know. They realise I'm onto them. I might tell them ten things their wives or mothers don't know about them. And if I'm on the money – if I'm astute and can see their potentiality – we can work together.

You enter into a contract?

No contract. I want them to learn a handshake means something. I tell them if I'm not making a difference, we can part company, but that's never happened.

Can you imagine other mentors like you getting into other sports?

I think sport is often ten or 15 years behind

does their shopping and washing. They drive around town in a Range Rover with a 200K income – that's not much of a life-skill package. Whereas I prepare them to make that transition.

So how come AFL players?

Often sportspeople have the lowest emotional intelligence ratio. At school they sat in the back row, they're more logical rather than lateral. They usually haven't read a book for ten years. And we'll start slowly. I'll choose a book that's manageable.

Like what?

Kane & Abel by Jeffrey Archer. Never met a jock that couldn't read it, didn't love it, didn't laugh and cry . . .

What's so special about it?

It's a story of struggle, of jealousy. It's about young boys with big dreams who end up destroying each other. In many ways it's a game of football. ■