

Sir John Whitmore Interviewed

Passion for Coaching

By Dr Angus McLeod

John Whitmore was one of the first people to cite the word 'coaching' in a business context and certainly one of the few to understand what coaching actually means. He was inspired by Timothy Galwey (Inner Game of Tennis) and brought the Inner Game and the founding principals of coaching to Britain. Prior to that, John was a professional racing driver. He won both the British and European Saloon Car Championships and was a member of the Le Mans winning Ford works team. John is outspoken and passionate, but keeps his judgements at bay in the coaching environment. Here he reveals some of the values and beliefs that drive the man in everything he does.

Angus: What is the thrill about driving?

John: The answer has to do with why I went into racing in the first place. I grew up with two very powerful and successful parents. My father was 65 when I was born. I was the 'little guy' and I wanted to break out from behind his imposing shadow. At around 17-18 my rebellious nature came out. I wanted to find myself, and that resulted in a competitive need to prove myself. I was just starting to drive, so the car became the tool of my competitive expression. Friends used to say 'for God's sake do it on the track and don't endanger the rest of us'. I started with an inferiority complex that I needed to overcome. By 1966 I had a superiority complex instead! I had to get out of motor racing before I got any more unbearable! I have little to do with racing now.

Angus: How did you get involved with the 'Inner Game' and Coaching?

John: After motor racing I went into business, a farm, a Ford main-dealership and I became a Director of an industrial design company. Yet, I felt there was more to life. I had material success from both business and racing, even including my own plane and airstrip, but this did not seem to satisfy me. I felt that there must be more to life. I began to study psychology. I thought the best place to look for answers was 'inside' rather than outside. I went to California which was a melting pot of ideas. I became interested in humanistic psychology that was challenging older behaviourist-cognitive models.

I discovered 'The Inner Game of Tennis' which was a milestone in tennis and in sports education generally. The book's author, Timothy Gallwey, applied a humanistic approach to sport and I was very much taken with it. I studied with him, returned to England in the mid-seventies and started the Inner Game under licence from Tim. We ran a tennis and ski school applying these principals but very quickly got drawn into business. People coming onto the sports courses quickly realised that the same skills were needed in their businesses and they enrolled us.

Angus: The Galwey principles are extendable to any sport aren't they?

John: Yes, Timothy put it this way, "In tennis, the Inner Game begins when you discover that the opponent in your own head is more formidable than the one on the other side of the net" and that is true of all endeavours. We tend to sabotage ourselves. We have an enormous amount of potential that seldom gets expressed

and most people realise that. The Inner Game aims to reduce the internal obstacles that we ourselves create and which so limit our performance.

Angus: I am fascinated in this area and wrote a book called *'Passion and the Passion Killers'* which is about these obstacles to 'passion' or energy in our lives, this sounds analogous.

John: Yes, this is such a key area at the moment.

Angus: What happened next?

John: I stopped teaching tennis but stayed with skiing until the business activity took off about twenty years ago. I teamed up with David Hemery about 12 years ago, and then David Whitaker made up the triumvirate which has continued ever since. Both are sportsmen, Hemery being the President of UK Athletics and an Olympian Gold Medallist and Whitaker the coach for the GB field hockey team that won the Olympic Gold in 1988. We dropped the Inner Game name and called what we did 'Coaching'. Coaching became a business buzz-word quite quickly. Then I felt that some people were leaping on the bandwagon and re-labelling their products as 'coaching' when they did not really understand what the underlying principals of 'coaching' were.

Angus: No change there then!

John: They knew that **questioning** was involved, but not the basis of the whole approach. I wrote 'Coaching for Performance' in order to throw down the gauntlet and say, 'here is the definition of coaching'. It worked because the book became the best seller in the field. Some of the impostors fell by the wayside and we were joined in the market by a number of ex-colleagues from earlier sports 'inner game' days. All the successful people in business coaching that I know are now using similar principals to those outlined in my book.

Angus: Why the teaming up with the two Davids?

John: David Hemery was always a thinker. He had stood on the podium in 1968 (with the Gold Medal) and said "why me?" because on paper he was the slowest in the final on that day and yet he had won....

Angus:and by a staggering lead....

John: Yes. He was interested in what made some people more successful than others with equal talent and opportunity. He was head track coach at Boston University and his PhD research was about what made people successful. I introduced him to Tim Gallwey and later David said that he wished he had known about this when he was teaching people to hurdle. David Whittaker had independently discovered the value of the same principals when he applied them to a team. It was the most extraordinary success for Britain which was not on the front list for hockey. His thinking blended perfectly with ours.

Angus: What are the team dynamics in the triumvirate like? Do you have instinctive understandings or do you embody the principals of the Inner Game?

John: We have never really had any conflicts. We have always dealt with, and resolved, minor differences immediately. What is true about us is that we developed a degree of trust and acceptance of one another and can make allowances as needs arise. We are open and honest with one another. We give feedback before anything builds up into a federal case! We have a high level of commitment to each other and we share similar driving principals. I think all three of us are driven by a desire to make a difference in the world by making the workplace a more palatable place to live. We were not just in business to make a lot of money. We have to have a successful business to do what we want to do, but that is the vehicle, the motivation is a higher value goal.

Angus: Was that the piece that was missing when you reached out for psychology and your inner quest?

John: Yes I think so, in hindsight. I was looking for meaning and purpose. As we climb the Maslow hierarchy of needs, we meet different needs along the way but it's not a linear journey. All people need to have meaning and purpose but often can't define it and so project their need onto the games of life along the way. At first, meaning and purpose for me was to be successful in my sport. Eventually, I left that little game to play a bigger game, first business then the game of life itself. I quickly realised that business was just another game and should not be taken too seriously. Pushing bits of paper around or figures on a screen is fairly pointless and not half as much fun as tennis or racing. We use these games to satisfy an inner need. As we evolve and become more psychologically mature, we get more sophisticated about what gives us meaning. In the early stage we look for recognition from others but that develops into a more profound and discriminating search for self-esteem, self belief and for personal fulfilment. The final stage, at least on the Maslow scale, almost always includes a desire to make a contribution in the wider world, and that is what happened to me. What really gave me satisfaction was to make a contribution.

I work in business because business is the biggest source of power and influence in the world. Businesses so often take no responsibility for social issues. Businesses regard social issues as the province of individuals and of governments. They see their job as profit-making only. But the biggest businesses are financially bigger than many countries, but they are ducking out of their wider responsibilities. With power comes unavoidable responsibility. My goal is to get businesses to recognise their wider responsibilities and contribute directly to global conditions.

Angus: What about your corporate model though, is it the Rowntree vision of creating schools and facilities around their sites as some mining companies have done in Zambia or is it more detached action than that?

John: I think it is both. If we say that human beings have a fundamental need for meaning & purpose and that the ideal meaning and purpose is in line with the good of the whole, you could say that (tertiary responsibility) almost becomes a spiritual impulse.

If workers are going to fulfil that need, then they need to feel that their time in the workplace is useful and is a contribution. If they happen to be making wheelchairs for disabled children, clearly their work is meaningful, but if they work for an insurance company, it is less certain. Insurance companies are driven by the bottom line, not the desire to give money to poor people who have accidents. If such a company wishes to retain their best people, those that seek meaning and purpose, then that company must look to make a contribution to society, not just by making financial donations, but, for example, by having their people go out on temporary secondment into the community. This is the way that a business needs to work in the world if the business itself is not doing anything particularly useful – and most are not!

Perhaps the worst example is the tobacco company. Its principle product is death. 6% of the deaths in the world are tobacco related and yet directors of such companies are still placed on pedestals and revered as captains of industry. In reality they live in blind denial and are among the scum of the human race. Pharmaceutical companies, oil companies, the motor industry and even the fashion business all have ethical problems too (which may not be as bad) but are not being adequately faced.

Angus: Such as patenting issues, burying innovation etc?

John: Look at the AIDS issue in Africa where drugs are priced beyond the reach of dying people. Look at the sweatshops and child labour. Look at industrial pollution and global warming. Business is just beginning to face some of these issues now. Here is a fundamental paradox. Enterprise and the economy should exist to enable people to exchange goods and services. In other words the economy

should be in service to people. What we actually have is people being in service to the economy. Until we reverse that, we will not create a sane and stable world.

So many business executives lack a broader vision, and focus only on profit or share-price fluctuations. Of course there are visionaries like Riccardo Semler of Semco or Anita Roddick of the Body Shop, but then you have Shell where they were unable to see that sinking the Brent Spar at sea or the death of Ken Sara Wiwa were unacceptable and were going to haunt them. This was naïve beyond belief but they have had their wake up call. Why are so many executives so blind?

Angus: Is it partly due to the fact that many executives go to work to play a certain role and they are unable to take their real human identity with them? They do their work from a different persona? If you agree with that, how does Performance Coaching make a difference in that bigger picture?

John: We say that coaching is a way of being with people in the workplace and everywhere else – it's a life-skill, not just a work-skill. Many of the analogies we use in our business training courses come from parenting or from sport. This helps people to realise that coaching is much broader than just a business tool. Many people come back from our courses and say that the first place they tried coaching out was at home with their kids, and it worked so well that they had the confidence to take it into the workplace. For me that is fine, it's just what I want, people operating from the same persona **at home and at work**.

Angus: Thinking about the power to change, do you have much influence with governments, and do you influence business and government to work together for the general good?

John: There is a role there, but the doors are not always open. I find that if someone is close-minded that trying to beat the door down is pointless. However, we are quick to move when the doors open. We are keen to influence governments and also education, because it is so backward. So much of it is based upon old behaviourist principals rather than the methods you see at the Montessori Schools and now to some extent in primary schools. There is so much to be done in education. I would love to have more influence there. There are other areas too. Two weeks ago I was in Copenhagen working with the Danish Centre for Human Rights. It was so rewarding to work with people from Africa and the Balkans whose only concern was to right the wrongs in their countries.

Angus: You talked about the triumvirate, is that significant.

John: A three legged stool will always balance whereas a four legged one may rock. I believe in the principal of threes, but do not fully understand it. There may be something about the energy exchange that is important and multiples of three seem to work well. Certain numbers seem to have spiritual significance but who knows?

Angus: Threes work for me because you cannot have stale-mate, things must move forward. Thinking about the Delinger model of psycho-geometrics too, the only shape to suggest direction has three points.

John: I think there must be validity in that but we cannot yet make it into an absolute science.

Angus: What do the people who know you best say about your strengths and weaknesses?

John: A strength is my passion for getting the job done and my belief that little is truly impossible. I inherited a profound sense of justice and fair-play from my parents whose integrity was second to none. I will fight for justice. I abhor the abuse of power by anyone from individuals to superpowers, and by businesses, those that

We have to have a successful business to do what we want to do, but that is the vehicle, the motivation is a higher value goal