



*How the concept of Self Led Sport (SLS) can improve outcomes for those involved in the elite sporting community.*

Adam Gilchrist's autobiography – *True Colours* – was published in 2008 but I only got around to reading it during the summer of 2021/2022 while watching his successors in the Australian Cricket Team make life miserable for the English in the Ashes series. A long time coming I know – but I'd been busy for the last 13 years or so raising a family and establishing my private practice as a Clinical Psychologist in North Queensland. But it was well worth the wait and it touched on something I've been thinking about for the last 30 years or so which is the relationship between elite sport and psychology.

I'm unable to make any claims to membership of the elite sporting fraternity myself – although I was a fair country cricketer and a serviceable AFL footballer back in the 1980's. My cricketing claim to fame was playing in a representative match in country Victoria in 1989 which involved six Victorian cricketers at the time including Merv Hughes, Jamie Siddons, Dav Whatmore, and the journeyman from Sri Lanka, Aravinda de Silva who was playing a season in Melbourne. As part of my fascination with sport I've followed various sporting codes my whole life, both nationally, and internationally, and have been fascinated with the highs and lows associated with the sporting arena itself, and the broader domain of the participants' lives in between their sporting achievements. But the greater part of my life in the last

two decades has been devoted to my work as a Clinical Psychologist and I distinctly remember making the sacrifice in the mid 90's to drop weekend cricket in favour of my studies when the academic commitments started to heat up.

*The three domains of issues in the sporting world: clinical, non-clinical, organisational*

It has been a fascinating journey watching how my profession of Clinical Psychology has infiltrated the public domain to deeper and more nuanced levels in recent decades. But the uptake of professional psychology services in the sporting elite has largely been limited to issues related to sports performance, goals, and expectations rather than the typical issues for which the general public have accessed help. But elite sportspeople need help with *clinical* issues too including the usual significant challenges faced by the general public such as anxiety, depression, suicidality, and eating disorders just to name a few.

But consider the following *non-clinical* issues which have also increased pressure on elite Australian sports stars in the last decade, and the problem seems to grow exponentially:

- individual behaviours on the field including racism, sexism, temper tantrums, and outright cheating.
- individual behaviours off the field including sexual misdemeanours, sexual assault, domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, aggression and physical assault, and gambling issues.
- behaviours of coaching staff including body shaming, misogyny, and outright sexual abuse.
- club behaviours which have impacted on and off the field including salary cap breaches, supplement scandals, and cheating scandals.

- The rise of social media and media attention generally which exposes a skill deficit in terms of athletes' interacting with the media and the public and minimizes athletes' privacy.

Finally, there can be seen to be a third layer of problems – the *organisational or systemic issues* which make up the bigger picture and which encompass the dynamics between the elite sports person and the collective sporting administration who consist of executives, management, coaches, player agents, and the official governing body. There are many issues in this domain too and some of them include: the diplomatic impact of racism, sexism, and allegations of cheating; the impact of questions around gender and disability; and more recently the role of vaccination in determining an elite athlete's capacity to enter a country and engage in a tournament. With all of this in mind it can clearly be seen that significant assistance for the elite sporting community in the three domains of *clinical, non-clinical and organisational or systemic issues* is urgently needed.

#### *Internal Family Systems as the solution – people have parts*

But what single therapeutic model could possibly address these various layers? Most psychological models are designed to improve the individual's quality of life by addressing unhelpful cognitions, processing trauma, or reducing the symptoms of mental illness in some way; and they often do this very well. But the range of issues faced by elite sportspeople and their organisations is broad and complex, reaching across many different domains (as outlined above) and featuring many of the different subtleties of life. This broad range of issues calls for a flexible, comprehensive, and far-reaching model designed to help people with these myriad problems. As I was reading Adam Gilchrist's story it became abundantly clear to me that a model already exists which meets these requirements, and which could be

applied seamlessly and helpfully in the elite sporting domain with individual athletes and the systems inside which they work.

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is an evidence-based model of psychotherapy which aids life-changing transformation and allows those employing it to understand the individual mind and larger human systems in novel ways. The IFS Model is a synthesis of two existing paradigms: the first is the idea that our personality consists of various ‘subpersonalities’ as part of our ego or psyche – or in IFS language – we all contain many different *parts*; and the second is the integrative mechanics of systems thinking. IFS views each person as having access to all the psychological and emotional capital they require and rather than pathologising the individual (as many psychological models will do), IFS seeks to empower and propel them toward wholeness and healing in all aspects of their life. Importantly, IFS is an evidence based therapeutic modality and is rated by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) as ‘effective’ for improving general functioning and well-being on the National Registry for Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREFF). Let me give a couple of examples of how IFS could have been helpful even for Gilchrist in his already wildly successful career. But first, to do this I will need to outline the basic tenets of the Model.

*So, what is a ‘part’?: Exiles, Managers, and Firefighters.*

In the IFS Model, *all parts are welcome*, and a big element of the genius of the Model is that it provides a process whereby our *feelings* can be seen inside us as *parts*. But what are parts? Essentially, they are our feelings and experiences which exist as independent, living, breathing entities inside us and which are developed through ongoing communication and the fostering of an internal relationship. Think of the movie *Inside Out* where Riley’s parts are like little people inside of her, each with their own feelings and

desires cheering her on or making her recoil back in fear. Riley's internal family of parts is made up of Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust and each of these *feelings* is represented by a little person inside her. You might be able to name some of your own parts which IFS groups as: Exiles; Managers; and Firefighters.

For example, have you ever felt so vulnerable or young in the face of life's challenges that you have been thrown into crippling inaction or a devastatingly low mood? (*'I am so sad, ashamed, anxious, or frightened'*). This is what IFS refers to as having Exiles or vulnerable parts. Exiles are often represented in our internal system as a vulnerable version of our younger self (a little boy or girl or sometimes even a baby) and the name fits because the memories, feelings or sensations are so painful that we tend to try and bury or deny them. We put them into an internal exile.

Similarly, have you ever heard different voices in your imagination propelling you to manage various behaviours to make sure you *avoid* a range of painful thoughts or feelings? (*'I must make sure I'm not late or else I'll feel embarrassed, sad, ashamed, anxious, or frightened'*). This is what the IFS model refers to as having Managers and they represent one level of our protective parts. Managers are often represented in our internal system as powerful entities (warriors or CEO's for example) and the name fits because their job is to manage/control the system to ensure difficult feelings do not arise in the first instance.

But, if the Manager is overwhelmed and ultimately unable to stop you avoiding these painful thoughts or feelings from arising, have you ever then responded to them in ways designed to *reduce* or *eliminate* them? (*'If I eat that tub of ice-cream or drink that bottle of alcohol I will temporarily alleviate my feelings of shame, anxiety, or fear'*). This is what the IFS model refers to as having Firefighters and they are

another level of our protective parts. Again, the name fits because having bypassed the watchful eye of the Manager and somehow allowed the fire to start in the first place, the job of the Firefighter is to douse the painful flames of the difficult emotions and put them out.

Finally, have you ever felt in the zone in a situation – filled with confidence, calm, and creativity – when the odds were against you and everything should have felt doomed? At time when you felt in a powerful place of flow where everything goes right? (*'I'm responding from a place of feeling centered, calm, creative, courageous, and confident'*) This is what the IFS model refers to as Self (or Self energy or being Self led) and the awareness and engagement with Self energy is one of the key aspects which separates IFS from other psychotherapeutic models. Self energy allows us to reach our fullest potential and while we are all naturally born with it and have the capacity to access it, at times it is blocked out because our parts are running the show. These are the main elements of the IFS model: Exiles, Managers, Firefighters, and Self energy. In IFS the Exiles, Managers, and Firefighters are simply referred to as *parts* and the understanding is that they exist on a background of Self-led behaviour or Self energy.

In IFS we understand that each and every single one of our *parts* has a positive intention for our overall system and the harm mostly arises when we try and suppress our inner parts, push them away, and ignore them. When we do this, they become even more extreme and the issues intensify. Even our parts who exhibit destructive behaviours like gambling, compulsive shopping or over-eating, have positive intention for us, but the behaviour is just a maladaptive strategy that can be understood through the IFS lens. Think of a symphony orchestra; all the instruments and performers in the orchestra are important, but the conductor (Self) needs to ensure that all the instruments are in tune and the performers come in and leave at the appropriate time. If they are not able to be heard inside the symphony orchestra, the

temptation for some performers can be to simply play louder or come in when it is not their allocated time. But a better approach is for the conductor to ask the various performers and their instruments to start, stop, and adjust their volume at strategically (and auditorily) pleasing moments. This is the key to audible harmony in the orchestral world and it is also the key to inner psychological harmony in our real world. When Self is the natural leader of the internal system and parts can allow space for Self to lead, there is more internal collaboration and harmony. The standard IFS approach – administered by the conductor (Self) – is to acknowledge the part, establish its role within the individual, ask about its objectives and fears, and then if appropriate, request that it step back a bit or provide some space for more Self-led behaviour and energy to come in.

*Self energy and the various processes of IFS: all parts are welcome, unblending, and unburdening*

Now, that we know a little about the different parts of us, let's think of Self energy as the underlying, fundamental quality we are all born with which cannot be damaged and which leads directly to Self-led behaviour. In IFS, Self energy is characterised by what are known as the Eight C's: curiosity, compassion, calm, confidence, courage, clarity, creativity, and connectedness. Self energy is a fundamental quality in all of us, but it can easily be masked by protective parts who tend to take over when we feel strong negative emotions. When this happens, we can be overwhelmed by frightened or controlling parts of us (a process in IFS known as blending). But in IFS, *all parts are welcome*, so when they are invited by the symphony conductor (Self energy) to step forward, explain their purpose, and reveal their fears, they feel heard and validated. Because the effort has been made to welcome them and provide the right level of validation and support, these parts are then often open to stepping back, and creating space for more Self-led behaviour and Self energy in the system. This process is known in IFS as *unblending*. A final

process in IFS which needs to be outlined is that of *unburdening* whereby the burdens of shame, fear, or unworthiness (just to name a few) which are generally carried by the Exiles, are let go or emotionally processed. This typically takes place during an inner ceremony or ritual thereby creating space for their natural (and ultimately more helpful) qualities to come in and improve the functioning of the whole system. The unburdening of a part allows for it to be free of its formerly destructive role and resume its positive natural qualities instead. The processes of *unblending*, and *unburdening* typically happen in the therapist's room and follow a protocol which is supportive and predictable. The work is guided by the therapist and combines a tight algorithm of questions with a free-flowing imaginative space which ultimately allows for the internal parts to be heard, validated, and supported.

As an example, think of a 40-year-old man – we'll call him John – who is experiencing crippling anxiety and shame which manifests in extreme feelings of anger and worthlessness. In working with his IFS therapist John is encouraged to close his eyes, notice his emotions, and identify the various parts inside him which carry those emotions. With the right level of support, thoughtful questioning, and careful use of the IFS processes, John is able to gain several insights. First he can identify his anxiety as a Manager whose job it is to ensure he 'gets everything right all the time'. Then he is able to recognise his feelings of anger as a Firefighter whose job it is to create a distraction in him and those around him, thus avoiding any anxiety. Finally, he is able to get in touch with a 5-year-old Exile who carries high levels of fear and shame from violence inflicted on him by his father. Work of this depth would generally not occur in one session, but would take numerous sessions over a period of time. When John is able to use his Self energy to witness and unburden his 5-year-old Exile, his Manager and Firefighter no longer need to work so hard and are therefore also transformed by the IFS process which alleviates internal distress and suffering with his system.



*The various processes of IFS in the elite sporting world:*

So, with a basic understanding of parts, Self energy, and IFS processes in a fictional therapeutic situation with John, let's look back to Gilchrist's autobiography to provide some examples of the way in which IFS can be used with the sporting elite.

*1. All parts are welcome*

Gilchrist notes that, while success on the field is important to the elite sportsperson's outcomes and satisfaction, on-field achievements are only part of the challenge. Some of the additional and arguably less visible challenges include being able to fit in with the various characters in the team and negotiating the relentless day-to-day challenges of games, tours, schedules, and crowds. But with the wisdom of hindsight, Gilchrist suggests it is 'taboo' to discuss these issues and goes so far as to indicate it is 'a violation of the sporting ethos of self-confidence to admit you might not be very happy among the group of people you're spending every day and night with'.

This initial example provides the first opportunity to illustrate how IFS is suited for the elite sporting world. Using the principle of *all parts are welcome*, the coach or team psychologist invites a team discussion of these *taboo* issues and ensures that all the different parts will be acknowledged, welcomed into the space, and that their roles will be clearly outlined. Safe in the knowledge that Self energy is able to be open to and accepting of any extreme parts, the skilled therapist is able to approach the previously

‘taboo’ topic and open up a range of conversations which facilitate closer team bonding and better understanding of the different personalities that necessarily inhabit a sporting organization. When individuals are curious, calm, connected, and compassionate, they will be more able to accept their teammate’s unusual characteristics, or the day-to-day challenges of the profession and the fear and rigidity associated with the difficult team dynamics can be named, addressed, and dissolved. Key questions which are helpful to create the dynamic of *all parts are welcome* include:

- What parts feel particularly present or strong at the moment?
- Whereabouts in or around my body do I feel that part?
- How do you feel toward that part?
- What is your earliest memory of this part?

## 2. *Unblending*

A second example from Gilchrist’s autobiography which illustrates the way in which IFS can serve the elite sports environment is found in the descriptions of his fear of failure when going out to bat both in India in 2001 and England during the famous Ashes series of 2005. On both these occasions Gilchrist refers to being in the depths of nervous anxiety and doubting his ability as a batsman and cricketer, and he is brutally honest in the role these feelings played in his ultimate lack of on-field success during both those tours. But viewed from an IFS lens, these intense feelings of anxiety and doubt are simply his parts who have briefly taken over and temporarily drowned out access to Self energy. Consequently, if they are treated as parts and made to feel welcome, the principle of *unblending* can then be employed to

help these parts step back thus allowing more Self-led behaviour and Self energy into the system. There are many useful questions to facilitate the *unblending* process, but some of the key ones include:

- What does this part want me to know?
- What is this part's role or function in my system?
- For how long has it been performing this role?
- What is this part most afraid would happen if it didn't perform this role?
- Would this part be willing to agree not to overwhelm me in this moment?
- Would this part be willing to step back so that Self can lead in this moment?

### *3. Unburdening*

A third example of the use of IFS as a helpful psychological model in the elite sporting field is with the common issue of perfectionism amongst elite sportspeople. The setting of high expectations and standards is common in the elite sporting world and is typically contextualised as being of benefit to the overall aims and goals of the sportsperson *at the time*. Whilst frequently being highly functional for the athlete at the time – particularly when harnessed and exploited in the name of pushing oneself beyond traditional limits – these extreme parts are often driven by an underlying fear of criticism or rejection if the extreme goal is not attained. This can lead the athlete toward an obsessive tendency to micro-manage details around diet, body shape, schedule, training requirements, equipment, and other elements of their sporting life. But again, IFS provides the perfect model for the athlete, both mid-career and when facing retirement, to resist the adverse consequences of perfectionistic parts – this time using the process known as *unburdening*. After appropriate setup, the skilled IFS facilitator can guide the

individual through the process of *unburdening* whereby the feelings of shame, inadequacy, and worthlessness which were driving the perfectionistic behaviour, are able to be released. This allows the now unburdened part to take on new qualities which expand and support the system to become more fully individuated and empowered. After the process of *unburdening*, the system is able to access more Self energy allowing the individual to create realistic, helpful, and better calibrated goals which can be achieved joyfully and with ease. The need for undue striving to avoid criticism, anxiety, or fear is diminished, and accomplishments are encouraged to flow from an innate interest, sense of purpose, and desire for natural creativity. The unburdening of parts is a highly important element of the IFS method and is a delicate and nuanced process which should only be facilitated by appropriately trained and highly skilled IFS therapists. However, when the appropriate setup has taken place, useful questions to facilitate the process of an *unburdening* include:

- Do you feel ready to let go?
- Would you like to begin to release some of the load you've been carrying?
- Where in your body have you been carrying this burden?
- What qualities would you like to invite back in that you lost all that time ago?
- What does this unburdened part want to do now?

*Internal Family Systems providing a solution across all three domains*

Let's now remember the contention that IFS is a structural intervention which can be used in the three domains of the elite sporting world: the *clinical*, *non-clinical*, and *organisational* domains. As an example of how it can do this, let's turn to the infamous incident of racism at the Sydney Cricket Ground in 2008

when Harbhajan Singh was accused of calling Andrew Symonds a 'monkey'. Notwithstanding the fact that racism in cricket, indeed in sport in general, crosses all boundaries, cultures, ethnicities, and nations, the tension between Harbhajan Singh and Symonds as reported in Gilchrist's autobiography provides a case in point. First, at the level of *clinical issues*, Symonds has gone on the record as saying that the incident in 2008 changed his whole relationship with cricket and precipitated a deterioration in his mental health and an increase in drinking. He also reported feeling stressed and responsible for four of his cricketing colleagues who had been inadvertently dragged into the saga and negatively impacted. Second, at the level of *non-clinical issues*, the problem of racism in sport has been prominent and complicated in recent years across various sporting codes. The incident between Harbhajan Singh and Andrew Symonds saw India threaten to withdraw from their tour of Australia at the time, and it continued to play out in ensuing years when they both ended up playing for the same team in 2011 in the IPL (the Mumbai Indians). But the fallout carried on and it was further reported on in the media another seven years later in 2018 when further tension arose between the pair around the dynamics of Harbhajan's apology and the repair process generally. The issues were cast at the time as being based on problems with racism in sport. Finally, at the level of the *systemic or organisational* domain, there were major national and diplomatic tensions between India and Australia which played out in the relationship between the Board of Control for Cricket in India, the Australian Cricket Board, and the International Cricket Council. Recently, in Australia, we have seen how the international sporting, political, and diplomatic domains can become intertwined at this level with the Australian Open tennis tournament which drew in leaders from the respective countries. At each of these levels, the *clinical*, *non-clinical*, and *organisational*, the IFS model could have usefully employed the principles of *all parts are welcome*, *unblending*, and even *unburdening* to provide some structure and processes to help facilitate and resolve tensions.

*Self Led Sports as an IFS based intervention for your sporting organisation*

Consistently rated as one of the top five cricketers Australia has produced in its history of test cricket – a form of the game it has been playing since 1877 – I’m not suggesting Adam Gilchrist’s career could have been much brighter – although anything is possible! But I certainly am suggesting that many elite sportspeople, sporting executives, and sporting bodies could employ the principles of IFS with stunning success to take their already considerable achievements to stratospheric new heights.

**Self Led Sports (SLS)** is an elite psychologically oriented and sporting focused program based fundamentally on the principles of IFS. It is designed to provide high level guidance, mentoring, and leadership coaching to individual elite sports people, sporting organisations, and the collective sports administrative and executive staff who support them. **Self Led Sports** utilises the processes of *all parts are welcome, unblending, and unburdening*, allowing the recipients to acknowledge, communicate, and interact with their different parts in a multi-dimensional way with a stance of curiosity, compassion, and clarity. In doing so, the participants in the process *change their very relationship with themselves and those around them.*

Engagement in the **SLS** process is designed to develop greater acceptance, openness, and inner harmony which contributes to an overall improvement in all aspects of the elite sports person’s life. Indeed, engaging in the **SLS** process and taking up the principles of IFS, fast tracks the recipient into a way of life which values diversity, openness, compassion, and authentic communication. It enables participants to engage in an inner dialogue which creates space for, and ultimately establishes the presence of a confident, calm, creative, and courageous internal leader (Self). When the system is in harmony and all

parts are more connected and collaborating with one another, all aspects of life flourish allowing clinical, non-clinical, systemic, and individual issues to be acknowledged, communicated with openly, and ultimately addressed.

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