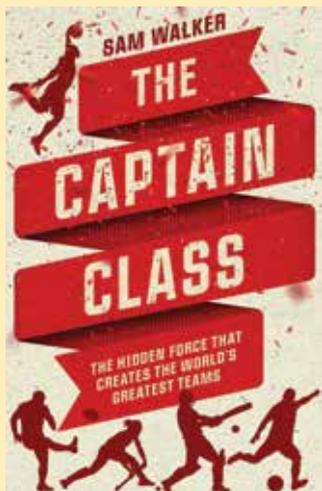


## The Winning Code



### The Captain Class: The Hidden Force That Creates the World's Greatest Teams

**Author:** Sam Walker

**Publisher:** Random House

**Pages:** 352

**Price:** Rs 1230

In 1872, the England national soccer team began playing teams from outside the British Isles. For the next 80 years, the national team would not lose a single game at home. And then, a month before Christmas in 1953, a Hungarian team whose captain and top scorer was a pudgy 5-foot-7 striker who had never learned to dribble with his right foot came to Wembley Stadium. When the Hungarians took 43 seconds to score their first goal, the English knew they were in trouble.

They lost that day 6-3, a score that hides a game in which the Hungarians outshot the home team 35-5.

For Sam Walker, a Wall Street Journal features editor and a former globetrotting sports journalist, the Hungarian soccer team of 1950-1955 is one of the greatest athletic teams of all time. Walker does not make this declaration lightly. In his

provocative and fascinating book, *The Captain Class: The Hidden Force that Creates the World's Greatest Teams*, Walker describes how he developed a formula based on criteria ranging from quality of opponents and opportunities to prove superiority, to uniqueness of accomplishment, which he then used to identify the 16 greatest teams in competitive sports history. Some of the teams, such as hockey's Montreal Canadiens of the late 1950s or rugby's New Zealand All-Blacks of the late 1980s, will be familiar to many sports fans; others, from Australian rules football's Collingwood Magpies of the 1920s to handball's 2008-2015 French national team are unexpected — but a delight to discover.

Why and how had these teams so completely dominated their sport in their time? Walker's investigation led him to a startling discovery: Every team had one captain or leader during its entire period of dominance. And once that leader left, the dominance ended.

Like a detective unravelling a mystery, Walker then set out to discover what traits those vital leaders had in common, if any, that could explain their impact on the success of their teams.

Between 1997 and 2016, one team, the San Antonio Spurs, stayed at or near the top of the NBA, winning an astounding 71 percent of their games during those 19 seasons. Other teams have won more titles

**F**rom soccer and hockey to rugby and basketball, dominant teams have one thing in common: a single, strong captain for the long-haul

than the five championships collected by the Spurs, but for Walker, their incredible consistency of excellence over such a long period of time earned them a spot on Walker's list of all-time great teams. And if one talks about the Spurs during this period, one name immediately comes to mind: Tim Duncan.

In his book, Walker considers Duncan the epitome of what he calls "the water carriers." Although graced with incredible skill, Duncan's first and only goal was to help his team win, not put up big numbers. This selflessness, this willingness to carry water for the team, extended off the court, as when he accepted a salary far below what he could have received from other teams, to allow the Spurs to sign better players.

Walker summarises Duncan's defining personality trait as "a willingness to do thankless jobs in the shadows." It is, according to him, one of the seven traits that set the "elite captains" apart from the rest. The other traits are "extreme doggedness and focus in competition"; "aggressive play that tests the limits of the rules"; "a low-key, practical and democratic communication style"; "motivates others with passionate nonverbal displays"; "strong convictions and the courage to stand apart"; and "ironclad emotional control."

These may be surprising traits for some. Perhaps the fundamental lesson in *The Captain Class* is that neither cockiness, flamboyance nor even immense talent will make you a team leader. While they might please their fans, such outsized personalities can actually undermine a team's eventual success — a theme explored in "Blowhards, Snobs and Narcissists," a chapter in the 1997 clinical psychology book *Aversive Interpersonal Behaviours*. One of the co-authors of that chapter was a Wake Forest undergraduate student named Timothy Duncan. ■