



Looking the Part : The Importance of Body Language

Author : Kieran Shannon

Occupation : Chief GAA Editor, The Sunday Tribune;
and Sport Psychologist

It was the moment we all knew that the 2007 Premiership was going back to Old Trafford. With nine minutes to go in the Manchester derby, Darius Vassell missed a penalty. For once, Andy Gray was, unlike poor Darius, spot on. This tale of two clubs in one city was a tale of two penalties. When Cristiano Ronaldo had stepped up to take his penalty, you could just tell from his demeanour – chest out, eyes up – he was going to score. Vassell's body language screamed he was going to miss.

There were other factors in disastrous Darius's miss against United, naturally. His and City's recent record at penalties was dismal. A self-fulfilling prophesy was obviously at work here, while City's methods of practicing penalties under pressure obviously hadn't been sufficiently real or scrutinised.

But, as a recent study suggests, the aura he transmitted to Edwin van der Sar literally increased the Dutchman's chances and confidence of saving that shot by two.

A sport psychologist called Ian Greenlees and some UK colleagues of his conducted an experiment with 40 male tennis players who competed at regional and national level, and showed them four short videos. Greenlees told them the clips were of three opponents they'd probably be facing later in the season, when in fact, they were models.

In each of the four videos, each of the players entered the venue, walked to a courtside seat, removed his racket from his bag, and then moved to the baseline to do a series of warm-up exercises before approaching the court to begin to play.

In each of the four videos, the clips of the first and third players were the same but the footage of the second player was manipulated. Although he performed the same 90-second warm-up, he was filmed doing it under four different conditions.

In the first clip, he portrayed positive language and wore tennis-specific sportswear. In the second, he portrayed positive body language wearing general sports gear. Then he displayed negative body language, firstly, wearing tennis-specific gear, then, sporting general sports gear.

For positive body language, the models had their shoulders back and chest out, with their chin level with the ground and their eyes looking directly at the camera (their opponent) for prolonged periods of time. For negative body language, they were hunched, with their head and chin down and their eyes looking down or only briefly glancing at their opponent.

Then Greenlees asked the 40 club players to rate their chances of beating each player. The findings were fascinating. While 52% of the club players expected to beat the player displaying negative body language and general sportswear, only 24% of them fancied their chances against a player displaying positive body language and general sportswear.

It's all called impression formation. We practise it every day. One study showed that male college students who were led to believe they were having a phone conversation with an attractive woman behaved more sociably towards her than a conversation with a woman they believed was "plain". We make schemas about others, that is we form a picture and impression of a person's characteristics, behaviours and motivation often before we've had any form of interaction with them.

Diarmuid O'Sullivan realises this. In that same 2004 championship, John Carroll's shoulder torpedoed into O'Sullivan's chest. After the game O'Sullivan found he had broken his ribs but at the time he got back up to his feet as soon as he could. He didn't just want Carroll to form the impression that he was fine; he wanted to form the impression that he was indestructible.

Dr Jim Loehr, who has worked as a sport psychologist to Faldo, Agassi, Courier and Navratilova, would say O'Sullivan engaged in tough acting. He faked it 'til he made it. If you want to look confident, first act confident and soon you'll become the part. Loehr once asked a great Spanish bullfighter what was the most important thing he



learned when facing the bull, and the matador replied, "It's my look. That is the basis of my confidence. I am in control." It wasn't just confidence that gave him his strut; the strut gave him his confidence.

It's all called impression formation. We practise it every day. One study showed that male college students who were led to believe they were having a phone conversation with an attractive woman behaved more sociably towards her than a conversation with a woman they believed was "plain". We make schemas about others, that is we form a picture and impression of a person's characteristics, behaviours and motivation often before we've had any form of interaction with them.

Diarmuid O'Sullivan realises this. In that same 2004 championship, John Carroll's shoulder torpedoed into O'Sullivan's chest. After the game O'Sullivan found he had broken his ribs but at the time he got back up to his feet as soon as he could. He didn't just want Carroll to form the impression that he was fine; he wanted to form the impression that he was indestructible.

Dr Jim Loehr, who has worked as a sport psychologist to Faldo, Agassi, Courier and Navratilova, would say O'Sullivan engaged in tough acting. He faked it 'til he made it. If you want to look confident, first act confident and soon you'll become the part. Loehr once asked a great Spanish bullfighter what was the most important thing he learned when facing the bull, and the matador replied, "It's my look. That is the basis of my confidence. I am in control." It wasn't just confidence that gave him his strut; the strut gave him his confidence.

After that Loehr began training his athletes in the 'matador walk'. It really resonated with Spanish native, Aranxta Sanchez-Vicario. When she lost her first set to Steffi Graff in the US Open final later that year, Loehr noticed that you'd swear she'd won such was the composure, control and confidence in her body language. She came back to win.

There is a difference between posturing and positive body language. Not all of us can be like Linford Christie, who is convinced he won the 1993 World championships before it was ever raced by taking off his top and warming up in the lanes of some key opponents; his contemporary John Regis took such exaggerated posing from weaker competitors as a sign of a lack of confidence. Sally Gunnell recalls how before the 1992 Olympics final, as her rival Sandra Farmer-Patrick strutted her stuff and moaning about the conditions while shooting Gunnell "daggers", the eventual champion just lay there with her legs up against the wall, conserving her energy. "The message I was giving out to everyone was, 'I've done everything there is to do. I'm in total control.'"

Look at Armagh's body language; when they were shooting 22 wides in the 2003 All Ireland semi-final, did their body language ever change? Or think of Michael Schumacher. In his book, 'Success from within', the Irish sport psychologist Brendan Hackett cites an old article Paul Kimmage once wrote of the Grand Prix champion.

"There is something about his body language as he steps from his car this morning, something about his arrogant strut as he crosses the tarmac. It's his chin. The thing that strikes you most is the way he carries his chin. High. Imperious. Godly. It's a chin that says, 'My name is Michael Schumacher and I'm the best driver in the world.'"

Schumacher had the matador strut. Poor Darius had not.

So, some tips to finish off.

1. **Be yourself but be strong** – remember Sally Gunnell
2. **Sometimes you have to fake it 'til you make it** – remember Diarmuid O'Sullivan and Sanchez-Vicario
3. **Keep your head, eyes and chin up** – remember Schumacher and Ronaldo
4. **Your body language should not change from the start of the game to the finish of the game** – remember Armagh

