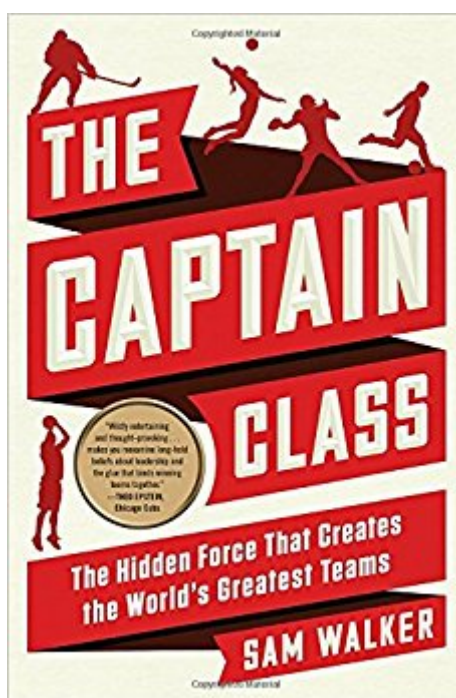


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# The Captain Class: The Hidden Force That Creates The World's Greatest Teams



## Synopsis

The founding editor of *The Wall Street Journal's* sports section profiles the greatest teams in history and identifies the counterintuitive leadership qualities of the unconventional men and women who drove them to succeed. The secret to winning is not what you think it is. It's not the coach. It's not the star. It's not money. It's not a strategy. It's something else entirely. Several years ago, Sam Walker set out to answer one of the most hotly debated questions in sports: What are the greatest teams of all time? He devised a formula, then applied it to thousands of teams from leagues all over the world, from the NBA to the English Premier League to Olympic field hockey. When he was done, he had a list of the sixteen most dominant teams in history. At that point, he became obsessed with another, more complicated question: What did these freak teams have in common? As Walker dug into their stories, a pattern emerged: Each team had the same type of captain—a singular leader with an unconventional skill set who drove it to achieve sustained, historic greatness. Fueled by a lifetime of sports spectating, twenty years of reporting, and a decade of painstaking research, *The Captain Class* tells the surprising story of what makes teams exceptional. Drawing on original interviews with athletes from two dozen countries, as well as general managers, coaches, executives, and others skilled at building teams, Walker identifies the seven core qualities of this Captain Class—from extreme doggedness and emotional control to a knack for nonverbal communication to tactical aggression and the courage to stand apart. Told through riveting accounts of some of the most pressure-soaked moments in sports history—from Bill Russell's legendary "Coleman Play" in the 1957 NBA Finals to Barcelona's "Figo Game" against Real Madrid in 2000—*The Captain Class* doesn't just bring these events to life; it presents a fresh, counterintuitive take on leadership that can be applied to a wide spectrum of competitive disciplines. The men and women who make up the Captain Class were never the most skilled athletes, nor were they gifted orators or paragons of sportsmanship. They were often role players who were allergic to the spotlight. In short, the seven attributes they shared challenge your assumptions of what inspired leadership looks like. Praise for *The Captain Class*: "Well-researched, wildly entertaining, and thought-provoking. In *The Captain Class*, Sam Walker presents compelling narratives about the secret ingredient to the greatest teams of all time—and quickly makes you reexamine long-held beliefs about leadership and the glue that binds winning teams together." —Theo Epstein, President of Baseball Operations for the Chicago Cubs "In *The Captain Class*, Sam Walker gives us important and original insights into the

mysterious ingredients of transformative leadership. A stunning mix of research and narrative. **—Susan Cain**, bestselling author of *Quiet* “If you care about leadership, talent development, or the art of competition, you need to read this immediately.” **—Daniel Coyle**, bestselling author of *The Talent Code* “The Captain Class is a brilliant hybrid: one-part detective story and one-part leadership book, set in the world of sports, and dedicated to a fascinating mystery: What sets apart the greatest teams of all time? I’m not even a sports nut and I couldn’t put it down.” **—Dan Heath**, co-author of the New York Times bestseller *Made to Stick*

## Book Information

Hardcover: 352 pages

Publisher: Random House; 1st Edition edition (May 16, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0812997190

ISBN-13: 978-0812997194

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 1.2 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 60 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #9,813 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #12 in Books > Sports & Outdoors > Miscellaneous > Sports Psychology #23 in Books > Sports & Outdoors > Coaching #73 in Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Social Psychology & Interactions

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Coyle, bestselling author of *The Talent Code* —“The Captain Class is a brilliant hybrid: one-part detective story and one-part leadership book, set in the world of sports, and dedicated to a fascinating mystery: What sets apart the greatest teams of all time? I —, am not even a sports nut and I couldn’t put it down.” —• Dan Heath, co-author of the New York Times bestseller *Made to Stick* —“Sam Walker has unlocked one of sports —, greatest mysteries: the secret to the success of 16 team dynasties. On nearly every page, you —, ll be shaking your head at another revelation about how a team —, s dominance is hard-wired to the team captain —, s leadership. The Captain Class is one of the most surprising, best-written —, and fun —, sports books published in recent years.” —• Don Van Natta Jr., Pulitzer Prize winner and New York Times bestselling author of *First Off the Tee*

Sam Walker is The Wall Street Journal —, s deputy editor for enterprise, the unit that oversees the paper —, s in-depth page-one features and investigative reporting projects. A former reporter, columnist, and sports editor, Walker founded the Journal —, s prizewinning daily sports coverage in 2009. He is the author of *Fantasyland*, a bestselling account of his attempt to win America —, s top fantasy baseball expert competition (of which he is a two-time champion). Walker attended the University of Michigan. He lives in New York City with his wife and two children.

I am not a sports person. Period. My husband and/or son ritually explain the rules of each game to me at the beginning of every season, not because I can’t remember them, but simply because it’s information that I can’t apply elsewhere, so poof, it disappears at season’s end never to return except in the vaguest of recollections. If offsides meant the same thing in every sport, that would help. Also, shouldn’t defense mean defending ownership of the ball? I realize that half of the readers of this review have stopped reading in sheer disgust by now, but I wanted to drive home the fact that...this is not a book about sports, or solely for sports people. To my immense surprise, I could not put this book down. It is phenomenally well-written, so well written in fact that I want to get a subscription to the WSJ so I can keep reading what this author writes. The amount of research, outlined by the author at the beginning of the book, is so staggering that I found myself compelled to find out what that amount of research could yield. Although the title of the book seems to give that away, there is so much more to learn than simply that. The principles that unfold in each chapter are those that can be extended into so many areas of life and business for women and men alike, which on balance makes a whole lot of sense, but is not always in-your-face obvious. When I lamented to friends that I wasn’t sure about my son wanting to play college sports, those who owned some very

successful and prominent businesses wasted no time telling me that a resume with "team captain" of any sport on it automatically pushed that candidate to the top of the list of potential hires. This book made the reasoning behind that crystal clear. "The Captain Class" initially piqued my interest mostly because my son was captain of his high school and college lacrosse teams and I suppose I wanted to have more insight into what that position entailed than I had as a "sports mom" who went to the games, but had no idea what anyone out on the field was doing. So that...and also because of the chapter on the Steelers which no self-respecting Pittsburgh-born person could pass up.

There is some valuable information here. With 30 years of experience teaching and coaching I was hoping for more.

Read this book if you want to learn about what kind of people are behind truly exceptional successes in team sports. A lot (though not all) of the lessons learned can be transferred to leadership in a regular office environment. Don't read this book if you are looking for shortcuts to becoming a "leader" or to looking or sounding like one. The main lesson of this book is simple: anyone can become a leader admired by teammates, but the path there lies through a lot of hard work, selflessness, and sacrifice.

Interesting thesis, and well-supported.

Every so often, I come across a non-fiction book that is so well written that it becomes as impossible to put down as a first-rate spy thriller. The Captain Class meets that rare standard. After reading a few pages, I cast aside a pretty good novel I was half-way through so I could focus on what Sam Walker had to say. His theory, distilled from painstaking research on the most successful teams in the history of sports, is startling in its simplicity. Walker came away from his research convinced that these freakishly successful teams shared one, and only one common factor: each team included a captain who displayed a rare set of character qualities that transformed the team into something extraordinary. What's really surprising is that this "Captain Class" includes few athletes who received public recognition as superstars, and in the rare cases when they did receive media attention, invariably shunned it. Indeed these captains often displayed characteristics that many would consider antisocial, often content to serve unglamorous supporting roles on their teams and prone toward stubborn, opportunistic behavior that furthered their one goal: a winning team. Despite the convincing case that Walker makes for selecting the right captain, it appears that many of today's

teams are discarding captaincy as a purposeless relic and putting all of their resources into attracting star players and high-profile coaches. If more owners and general managers read this book, it may cause them to pay attention to this special class of overlooked leader. As Walker observes, businesses also benefit from having a captain in their midst who is willing to champion unpopular positions and take bold actions for the greater good of the organization. All in all, a terrific read, chock full of important leadership lessons for any organization that strives to be the best.

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