

Revealed: Meet the mind, muscle and hair masters behind the NRL's superstars

THE SECRET SOURCE OF SUCCESS

Special report

Tyson Jackson

Meet rugby league's one percenters.

They may not be seen on the sidelines or in the coaches box, but for most NRL stars and coaches they play a huge role in determining their performance on and off the field.

Gone are the days of players rocking up on game day after a week of

work and a Friday night on the town.

The secret weapons in the modern game now involve mind experts, pilates instructors, wrestling and boxing coaches, and even barbers.

Here is an inside look at those who drive your favourite stars to peak performance, whether it's on the field, their personal life, or even their appearance.

PETER BREEN KICKING COACH



Peter Breen (kicking coach) with Benji Marshall and Harry Grant

Kicking has become a pivotal part of today's game and former rugby union player Peter Breen has made it a mission to help bring expertise to NRL clubs. "Kicking is crucial and it does win games," said Breen. "The ability to go up in sixes rather than fours is a real advantage and when talking about scoreboard pressure, that is it." After being sought by Ryan Papehuizen, Breen took up an opportunity to help the Storm with its kicking and says he was "amazed" by the players' natural talent. "They were very good at what they did, the thing I provided and helped

them with was detail and game pressure, getting tidy and confident with the process," he said. Breen has also taken notes from working with Craig Bellamy, watching the Storm supercoach implement strategies around his players' kicking game. "Seeing how our kicks can turn into big defensive pressure is allowing the players to really understand getting the ball to a certain spot, which is crucial in winning games," Breen said. Since starting Rugby Bricks, Breen has not only provided the likes of the Tigers, Storm and Bulldogs with coaching but his kicking tree design has also become popular.



Instructor Helen Stamatakos at her Menai studio and (insets) with Dragons squad players; Shaun Johnson; Matt Moylan, Kyle Flanagan and Bronson Xeri. Main picture: Sam Rutyn



BRADLEY CHARLES STUBBS THE COACH WHISPERER

"I'm not here to make friends, I'm here to win." Bradley Charles Stubbs, better known as The Coach Whisperer, has become one of the most well-known figures in the game, with his mysterious work off the field helping bring success to a series of teams. Stubbs earned his nickname for his work as the right hand man to some of the game's most successful coaches. Trent Robinson and Michael Maguire both found premiership success under Stubbs's mentorship. Maroons players were told not to mention or reference "HSW" or "the Blues" when Kevin Walters was under Stubbs's influence.

With Stubbs by his side, Maguire broke the Rabbitohs' 43-year premiership drought, and the Roosters became the first team in the modern era to win back-to-back competitions. "I don't care what I see, it might even have to do with one of their closest assistants, I'll tell the coach." "I'm here to help the coach win the premiership." Stubbs has proven he isn't afraid to make the tough decisions if it's the difference between a team winning a premiership and losing. Stubbs went as far as to ban

owner Russell Crowe from the dressing room of their grand final to ensure no one was deviating from Maguire's plan and messages. Stubbs says he is willing to cross any bridge fit means moving closer to victory. "I've had owners, chairmen, boards all banned in grand final week, even to go and watch the player train," he said. "Why? Because what can they say to the players that the coach hasn't already said? "They dilute the messages of what the coach put in all year, which leads to so many of them losing the grand final because egos need to be in the change room."

HELEN STAMATAKOS PILATES

Helen Stamatakos and "Pilates insync" at Menai have changed the game for NRL players who are recovering from or trying to avoid injuries. Stamatakos has trained Olympians to woodchoppers, but her work with rugby league players has caught the eye of fans all over social media. "While I teach pilates to anyone who comes in, I pride myself that I am able to be specific to these players and tailor programs to their backgrounds and level of training," Stamatakos said. The pilates studio, which has helped the likes of Shaun Johnson, Bronson Xeri, Tyson Frizell and Kyle Flanagan overcome injuries has become a hub for the game's elite. Stamatakos has opened her doors for all players who need the help, even being invited to the Dragons regularly to help their entire squad. After being in the

industry for 25 years, Stamatakos said the Dragons have jumped ahead of the pack in bringing pilates into their regular training regimen. "The Dragons are smart, bringing me on board to work with their whole team. Even though it's tricky to fit in, they understand the importance of it, mostly for injury prevention." Having developed a clientele of close to 30 former and current players, the instructor can see the discipline only getting bigger in rugby league. "There is no bigger example of why these players need pilates than this season," Stamatakos said. "Look how many injuries there have been. Players come tired and sore, but they know they need it, they all feel good when they do it and love it."



DAN HAESLER PERFORMANCE & LEADERSHIP COACH

They might not admit it now, but plenty of Penrit fans had just about given up on the team's grand final hopes last year as they trailed the Broncos 24-8 in the second half. Not the players. And for that they can in part thank performance and leadership coach Dan Haesler. It may not involve running into players and scoring tries, but mental performance is becoming one of the most critical aspects of today's NRL game. The three-time premiership winning Panthers believe it can be the difference between winning and losing games. Haesler, who has worked with elite athletes in various different sports, has made it clear that there is more to his work than what meets the eye. "It's just another skill set to develop," Haesler said. "One of the biggest barriers to get over and for people to understand is that I'm not a psychologist, and this isn't mental health." "This is a performance enhancer in the same way working on your nutrition, your physical skill set, and your tactical understanding is."

The experienced performance coach has worked with the likes of Cleary, Shaun Johnson and Stephen Crichton with the goal of preparing them for the "pressure moments". Haesler teaches players to stay in the moment, and it was this ability to stick to their processes which helped the Panthers fight back in the final 20 minutes of last year's grand final. "High performance only exists in the moment," Haesler said. "What takes people away from high performance is worrying or thinking about what has been. 'Shit, Ezra scored a hat trick', or what will be. 'Shit, we're gonna lose'." Haesler said that for players, there was a big difference between saying and doing. While Haesler looks to provide players with clarity so they can figure out the right things that "tick the switch", he believes the fact the aren't the head coach and has no say in selectors allows players to open up about their mental game and confidence levels. "What I try to do is help the players process the important pieces, and then the disciplinary side, or a mental game plan," Haesler said.

KAI KARA-FRANCE

He is one of the UFC's most dangerous flyweights and now Kai Kara-France has looked to transfer his wrestling skills to the Warriors. Working across all grades in Auckland, the long-time fan has used his experience in the UFC to share skills adaptable to rugby league. "I'm not here to teach these boys how to play rugby league, I'm here to stay in my field, which is purely contact related," Kara-France said. Knowing the side had previous wrestling coaches, he chose to build from the ground up, bringing his own style to the Warriors' defensive game. Having never played rugby league,

Kara-France may seem out of his depth, but the Kiwi has found many similarities to his chosen sport. "Body awareness, being efficient with your energy, there are so many things which cross over to rugby league from martial arts," he said. "Even the mindset, in fighting it's all on you. It's an individual sport, you need a team to prepare but ultimately you need to deal with that pressure with no one to hide behind." "On the field it may look like you have a team to hide behind, but what we try to instill in the boys is being accountable with your actions, which is the same with fighting."

UFC FIGHTER AND WARRIORS WRESTLING COACH



Warriors' Burty Afoa with Kai Kara-France watching on

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