

Mike Brearley  
ON FORM  
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Mike Brearley holds a special place in the history of English cricket. He captained the national side thirty-one times, between 1977 and 1981, at a time of great turmoil in the cricketing world, and led the team to 17 victories with only four defeats. His status as an extraordinary leader was cemented by the 1981 Ashes series. Recalled to the side after the first two Tests, with England floundering and 1-0 behind Australia, Brearley promptly transformed them into champions who won the next three matches in a row.

Some say he was lucky. His years as captain coincided with the prime of Ian Botham, and much of his opposition was weakened by defections to Kerry Packer's renegade World Series Cricket. But there is plenty of independent evidence for his leadership skills. Brearley gave up a promising academic career in his late twenties to become full-time captain of Middlesex. The side had been in the doldrums since the 1940s, but with Brearley at the helm they won the county championship four times over the next decade.

In 1985, not long after his retirement from cricket, Brearley published *The Art of Captaincy*. This gave some insight into what made him special. Thoughtful and imaginative, sympathetic yet stern, he gained his colleagues' trust by always being ready to see things from their side. The book also contained plenty of lively stories from the field and the dressing room. It is widely recognized as one of the best books about cricket ever written.

*On Form* is a different kettle of fish. It does contain some cricketing stories, but much more of the book is devoted to the human psyche. Since retiring from cricket, Brearley has worked as a full-time Freudian psychoanalyst. (In what will surely prove a unique double, he followed his Presidency of the Marylebone Cricket Club in 2007 with that of the British Psychoanalytic Society the following year.) For Brearley, "form" is a matter of being on song, of not allowing concentration to curdle into stress or anxiety, and it can manifest itself in all walks of life, as well as on the sports field.

It might seem a strange transition, from the cut-and-thrust of the cricket field to the quiet of the consulting room. But perhaps it's not such a great step. Cricket is a slow game, especially in its traditional form, and Brearley played a great deal of it. In a career that lasted more than two decades, he completed 455 first-class matches. That's about four solid years' worth of seven-hour cricketing days. He would have had plenty of time to observe and reflect, before making the occasional judicious intervention. From what he says, the role of an analyst is not dissimilar. (Incidentally, despite his oft-noted failure to complete a Test century, Brearley did make an impressive forty-five first-class tons. That's more, for example, than two of his successors as England captain, Michael Vaughan and Paul Collingwood.)

Perhaps the cricketer and the psychoanalyst also coincide at another level. A cricket captain needs to be thoughtful, but not too

thoughtful. In *The Art of Captaincy*, Brearley writes about Ted Dexter's failings as a captain. Dexter was an innovatory tactical theorist, but when his theories didn't work, or there was no call for them, he would lose interest and let the game drift. As Brearley put it, he was "more interested in ideas than in people". In some ways, Brearley seems the mirror image of this. Despite his ability to get inside the heads of other athletes, he shows little interest in the underlying mechanics of sporting success. Over the past few decades, sports scientists have made great progress in understanding the physical and psychological structures that distinguish elite athletes from the rest of us, but neither of Brearley's books shows any interest in this work.

When it comes to clinical practice, Brearley displays a parallel attitude. He is keen on intuition. He worries that the regimentation of medical practice will eliminate "nose" and feel, not just in psychoanalysis, but also in other branches of medicine. Advocates of "evidence-based medicine" might find some of his comments worrying. I have no doubt that Brearley is a great boon to his patients. He describes a number of cases with sympathy and obvious insight. But he takes the Freudian assumptions behind his work for granted. His new book is dense with literary and classical illustrations, but virtually free of any reference to scientific studies.

In his penultimate chapter, Brearley says that at a late stage he cut some of the psychoanalytic material from his book, in order to save it for a future work on *The Art of Psychoanalysis*. Perhaps he will make more effort in that book to defend Freudianism against those who doubt its theoretical credentials. For now, though, at least we know more about how people are understood by someone who is undoubtedly blessed with a special power to inspire them.