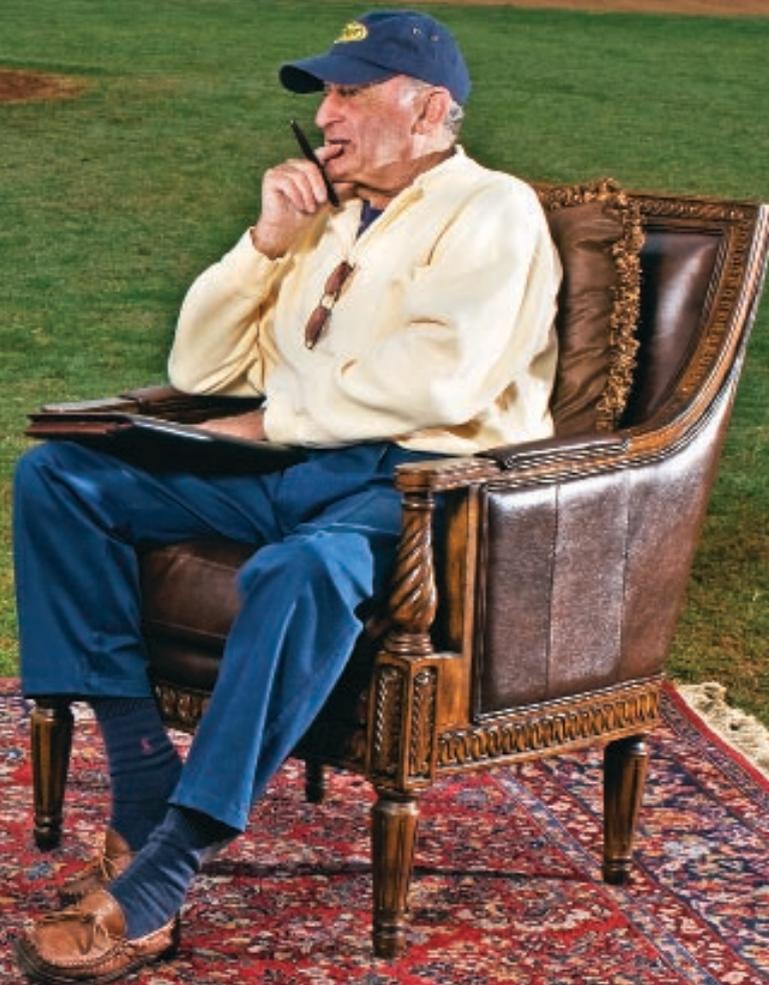

No.8 STAY IN THE MOMENT WITH DOCTOR BASEBALL



What do A-Rod, Greg Maddux, and Roy Halladay have in common? They all overcame their psychological and emotional hang-ups and regained their form with help from Harvey Dorfman.

by KARL GREENFELD *photographs by* NATHANIEL WELCH



THE PLANE BEGINS ITS DESCENT INTO WESTERN North Carolina. The jet may be private, the flight chartered, and the passenger secluded in maple and leather opulence, but inside he is hurting. He is a ballplayer, a superstar slugger, a master of the diamond, and a statistical monster whose projected totals have his plaque landing in Cooperstown one day if he can somehow regain his form. So now he's making this journey to figure out the source of his pain, his humiliation, his unforgivable fucking up, his letting down his teammates and disappointing his fans; his utter, complete, total, unredeemable, one-million-and-10-percent suckitude.

The slugger — who when he is right inspires intestine-clenching fear in opposing pitchers — is unused to admitting to anyone his weaknesses, his fears, his dark past or his depraved present, the psychosis that keeps him up at night, the terror that still has him using Ambien to put himself to sleep. But Harvey Dorfman, the fellow who answered the phone when the star finally mustered the courage to call a couple of weeks ago, said he could help. He told him to come see him.

How long do I gotta stay?

Two days.

How long do we gotta talk?

Six hours a day. But one thing?

What?

You have to be totally honest with me.

When the player enters the terminal, he lays eyes on a narrow, hunched, gimpy-legged little guy with hips soon to be replaced, wearing an oversize U.S. Navy sweatshirt, sunglasses, and a baseball cap. He has thick ridges of forehead wrinkles, jowly cheeks, and a little wattle of skin beneath his chin that flaps as he says hello. When he takes off his sunglasses, his eyes are green and his eyebrows, unlike his hair, are still black. His ears are like bats' wings. He looks like a cross between George McGovern and Mr. Magoo.

This is Harvey Dorfman, baseball's top psychologist, who dishes out common sense, cognitive therapy, and hard-headed discipline to the sport's fragile egos and powerful bodies. He virtually invented sports psychology, though he will insist that he considers some aspects of the field to be, basically, a load of shit. He created the discipline almost by accident, so he is entitled to his opinions. His clients, and there are dozens of them, athletes you watch and cheer for every day as a baseball fan — A-Rod, Halladay, Ibanez, Maddux, to name just a few — say the complete opposite. They say that Dorfman made them who they are today. They say that this journey, this man, saved them.

IN THE EARLY 1980S, HARVEY DORFMAN, THE ONE who fixed all these stars, was not exactly a fancy shrink on the Upper East Side of Manhattan or some psychoanalytic Ivy League hotshot. He was a high school teacher. He lived in Manchester, Vermont, wrote for a local paper, taught English, and coached basketball at Burr and Burton Academy (formerly Seminary). He was, however, a legend in Manchester for having won a state championship, and for his popular sports columns in the *Rutland Herald*. While writing an article on the local minor league baseball team, he became friends with Roy Smalley, then a prospect with the Rangers playing for their local Pittsfield affiliate.

After reaching the big leagues, Smalley kept in touch with Harvey. In 1979 he introduced Dorfman to Karl Kuehl, a coach with the Twins who wanted to write a book about baseball. Kuehl had noticed that players benefited if they were able to push aside their doubts and anxieties about game situations and concentrated on executing, on being completely in the moment, thinking only about the next pitch or swing. Yet almost no one in baseball was looking at this subject. He persuaded Dorfman to join him, and Harvey began to research the psychology of baseball players and how they can get their mojo back.

Dorfman began to visit Montreal and Boston regularly to interview dozens of major league players as they passed through town. It was during this period that he began to formulate his ideas. "I was talking to players about their strategies and their deficits, and I noticed that other players were hanging around, eavesdropping.... I'm talking to Wade Boggs, and as soon as I'm finished, Bruce Hurst says, 'Hey, I heard what you're talking about. Can you spend time with me?' I sensed there was this hunger, it was suppressed.... I knew I was onto something."

He began to apply it with Hurst, the left-handed Red Sox pitcher who, after beginning his talks with Dorfman, blossomed into an All-Star. "With Bruce, what I saw was more what he was doing to himself. He would be dealing, keeping it small, executing his pitches, and then the Red Sox would take a three-run lead, and then he would begin

"I'M NOT A SHRINK; I'M A STRETCH," SAYS DORFMAN. "I DON'T DIMINISH — I EXPAND."



thinking, *Two more innings and I've got a win, a shutout*, instead of thinking about the next pitch. Concentration is prepotent. You have to focus on what you are doing right now."

The Mental Game of Baseball, the book that Harvey wrote with Karl Kuehl, is the single volume most likely to be found on a minor league baseball bus. But it makes for slow going for the casual reader. More than once I found myself bogged down in its steady repetition of self-help and Zen platitudes applied to baseball. The philosophy of the book can be summed up in one cliché: It's the journey, not the destination. Players should stay in the moment, focus on process, and let the results take care of themselves. It is *Zen and the Art of Baseball*, with supporting quotes from the likes of Pete Rose, Tom Seaver, and Wade Boggs. Yet players swear by it. Since its first printing in 1989, the book has inspired Talmudic reading and rereading by ballplayers who dog-ear the pages and buy new copies to replace worn-out editions. "Young players today still read that book, the same as when I was a young player," says four-time Cy Young Award winner and longtime Dorfman client Greg Maddux. "I see them and I think, Well, hopefully these guys won't have to repeat the same mistakes I did."

But if all Harvey had to offer was in that book, then he would never have become the go-to guy for diamond-related psychosis. "The book is great, but it's only a part of it," says 16-game winner and current World Series champ Jamie Moyer. "You have to go see Harvey to get the full benefit."

Sports psychology, informally, has been around a long time, probably since some unnamed friend of David lied and said that Goliath was actually terrified of little guys with slings. It has been an academic field since the 1940s, when European psychologists began the formal study of the nexus of emotion and performance. Myriad performers, from Olympic athletes to bicyclists to golfers, have long made use of mental coaches who offered a variety of techniques designed to finesse their charges into the often described Zen-like state known variously as "flow" or "in the moment." But the insular world



ON DECK Dorfman, in his North Carolina home office, says ballplayers are as screwed up as the rest of us.

of baseball remained, predictably, resistant to such ideas well into the national couch trip that America embarked on during the 1960s and '70s, a golden era of psychotherapy. It was Harvey's genius to meld the then-fashionable ideas of visualization and actualization, of human growth and potential, some aspects of the various Zen-of-sports and Tao-of-sports ideas that were swirling around, to baseball. He understood that ballplayers, like people, sometimes needed to be told that they were good enough, smart enough, and dammit, they should like themselves.

The method he conceived, however, was in direct opposition to the Freudian notion that the way to deal with a person's demons was to bring him back to the source of those fears through psychoanalysis. Dorfman practices a version of Semantotherapy, believing that coming up with behaviors and tools — specific, real actions — to address a subject's fears is more important than the Freudian method of seeking the root cause and then talking about those fears. If a player is, say, afraid of his father, Harvey will urge the player to call his father and tell him to leave him alone. The vast majority of the issues, however, have to do with players getting ahead of themselves in game situations. So Harvey will establish an actual mental and physical routine, starting in practice, so that the player can stay in the correct mental state.

One component of his method is that players be able to visualize their own correct actions and movements in a game situation. Roberto Clemente did this naturally as part of his pregame ritual. "How do you understand through visualization?" Harvey asks rhetorically. "You don't. But you remember.... Visualization is a picture. When I visualize, I am telling my muscles to remember so that I can make the next appropriate action."

BY THE TIME KARL KUEHL WAS NAMED THE Oakland A's farm director in 1983, he and Dorfman already had a good idea of how they might implement their mental approach, and Karl persuaded general manager Sandy Alderson to hire Dorfman as a special instructor. Dorfman recalls the meeting: "They told me, 'Players will run away from you, they will say bad things about you, they'll be afraid of you.'"

Sandy Alderson, now the CEO of the San Diego Padres, remembers his decision to bring Dorfman to Oakland: "I was a departure from baseball myself — I was an attorney — so it didn't take much to convince me there were two elements to success: mental and physical. Still, there were people in the organization who were wary of Harvey, especially among the major league coaching staff."

"In those days, you didn't talk about the mental part," Harvey says. "Everything was mechanics. Because if you talked about the mental part, it made you sound vulnerable, because it wasn't macho.... But anything above the neck, including breathing, was my business."

The 49-year-old cut a curious figure on the major league diamond, with his baggy uniform, sunglasses, and fingerling potato nose. He looked like a middle-aged man who might have wandered off a golf course yet he was ready to challenge a young player with salty talk or to reassure him with fatherly advice. "I had to create a persona," Harvey remembers. "One of not being a Caspar Milquetoast. I had to be a credible figure who was aggressive enough to confront athletes who weren't used to being confronted like that. I blended into the woodwork, and of course, it gave me access to the dugout. I could hear everything that they were saying."

His purview was the entire Oakland organization, major league club, and farm system, which had Harvey traveling throughout the U.S., mentoring the players who would eventually form the nucleus of the dominant Athletics teams of the late '80s: McGwire, Canseco, Eckersley, Stewart, Welch, Honeycutt, Weiss, Javier, and others. (One player he didn't work with was Rickey Henderson. "Certain guys don't need my help," Harvey explains. "Rickey has rocks in his head. You can't mess with his approach.") By the time these players had arrived in Oakland, some of them knew and trusted Harvey better than they knew manager Tony La Russa. "Tony was a little suspicious of me, of my relationships with the guys, until it became obvious I would never undermine his authority," Harvey says. "For one thing, it was clear I wasn't in it for fame. To me, invisibility is one of the components to my being successful. I have this line: If any reporter asks me who I am, I just say, 'I'm nobody,' and keep walking." During the season, he traveled with the team and spent a lot of his time with the major league players, taking off for the farm system from time to time to help younger players. During the spring and off-season, he would work throughout the organization, ensuring that struggling players were given a chance to succeed to the best of their abilities, to "get out of their own way."

He was in uniform as a special instructor for four World Series and became an integral part of two World Championship teams, with Oakland in 1989 and, after moving on, with Florida in 1997. His last major league stint was with the Tampa Bay Devil Rays in 1998. He joined superagent Scott Boras's firm, the Boras Corporation, the following year and is still an employee, though he works independently with repeat clients and with players who are referred to him.

His method is as varied as the problems of his clientele. Ballplayers, Harvey notes, are as screwed up as the rest of us. And like the rest of us, their problems can sometimes interfere with their performance. "Self-consciousness will fuck you up," says Harvey. "Function over feeling." See the ball. Hit the ball. Throw the ball. Catch the ball. He has deconstructed each at bat, for example, and can talk many minutes about the proper and improper uses of the eyes. He can describe the "tendency of eyes to move ahead of objects they are tracking," which makes "eyes jump to the hitting area. They don't track the ball in the middle of the zone," he says, which can lead to an overswing, as the batter is late picking up the ball in the zone. He has written and spoken extensively about the preparations a hitter must make to see the ball. Likewise, he talks with pitchers about executing their pitch no matter the count or the game situation. "I

get pissed when he starts talking to the hitters,” says Maddux. “What is he talking to them for?”

So here are all these multimillion-dollar platinum egos searching for the psychological underpinnings to their struggle. “For some of these guys, this is the first time they have had to admit they are not the world’s greatest expert on themselves. This is their first recognition of their own humanity,” Harvey explains. “They’ve been coddled their whole lives, worshipped in every setting, told they were exceptional, and all along, they were deficit.” (Harvey says “deficit” a lot; it is a catchall to refer to any of our shortcomings.) “They were deficit and they didn’t even know it.” That’s when players take the plane trip to Harvey Dorfman’s couch.

“He told me it’s normal to feel frustrated,” says Raul Ibanez, a free-agent outfielder whose career took off after visiting Dorfman. “He told me, ‘It’s normal to feel the fear, to feel down. It’s normal to feel this way.’ Not a split-second pause later, though, he said, ‘You’re not normal; you’re a professional athlete.... One of my issues was I was concerned about what the manager thought, what the front office thought, what the media was saying, the fans. If I went up and had a bad at bat, I would think, Oh, they’re going to send me to Triple A.’”

Yet as famous as Dorfman is among baseball people, he has remained largely unknown among the general public. That’s no accident: If ballplayers did not trust him to be discreet, they wouldn’t come to see him. Harvey, they know, has no ulterior motive. He is not looking to become known as the guy who revamped ballplayers, nor to cash in as some kind of self-help guru. He lives modestly with his wife of 49 years, Anita, in Brevard, North Carolina. Harvey says he’s in it because he likes ballplayers, and when he sees a kid struggling — and from his 74-year-old standpoint, they are all kids — he genuinely cares. “My priority is the person,” he explains, “not the athlete.”

Scott Boras first met Harvey when he was representing several members of the late-’80s Oakland A’s. “I was fascinated by my initial conversations with Harvey,” Boras recalls, “and I saw the results. Right then I knew I would attempt to hire Harvey. It took me a decade to get that to happen. He’s tough to negotiate with.”

Harvey’s value to the Boras organization is both to keep existing clients performing at the top of their game, and to help lure prospective clients, part of what Boras calls his total conditioning package. “This clearly gives us an advantage over other agents,” says Boras. “We are the only people representing baseball players who provide psychological services, and we believe that’s important, because our job is to get the player performing at optimum levels.”

THE BALLPLAYER WINDS UP HERE, ON THIS LEATHER SOFA, sitting across from Harvey, who is leaning forward from a wingback chair. This is clearly a baseball man’s office. There is a glass-fronted cabinet filled with signed balls: Johnny Mize, Lou Boudreau, Van

Lingle Mungo. A bookcase is piled with biographies of Cobb, Ruth, and Gehrig, plus *Ball Four* and scores of other baseball books. But there are also hundreds of novels: Gore Vidal, Arthur Koestler, William Styron.

The player looks around the room, at this diminutive man seated before him, and he wants sympathy, he wants understanding. Isn’t that why he has come? To be reassured, to be made to feel great all the time, all over, on his insides as well as his outsides? He’s not paid \$10, \$15, \$20 million a season because he is shit. So, come on, little man, tell me I’m the frickin’ bomb.

Instead, the little man says, “Are you seeing the ball good?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Bullshit.”

You see, this little man don’t work like that. He can tell a guy has a problem before he even calls. Harvey watches baseball every day, and he can tell when a guy is going right and when a guy is hurting.

And the player thinks, What have I gotten myself into? Why am I here, locked up in this little lake house with this cranky old man who seems unwilling to believe anything I say?

“If you were seeing the ball good, you would never have called me.”

Harvey is right, of course. The player takes a look around the room, then looks right at the attentive man across from him who is gazing back with big round eyes. Harvey often says, “One week I’m Hamlet, the next week I’m Bozo. You come to me with a certain disposition; I better know who to play.... I am neither an asshole nor a saint, in total-ity. I am whatever is required at the moment.”

So here he is, gazing back at this superstar, projecting sympathy and parental love. Unload on me, his wide eyes, open expression, and eager posture all seem to urge.

And so the player sighs, and he tells Harvey the truth.

HOW IS IT THAT HARVEY CAN COAX AN otherwise vain and inarticulate athlete to reveal embarrassing truths? He wrote in a memoir that as “a sickly child, suffering from frequent and severe asthmatic attacks before the age of two, my world was, for the most part, my room — my bed.” The young boy, born in the Bronx in 1935, attended school only sporadically; his mother allowed him to while away his days listening to the radio, to Gershwin and Irving Berlin, to radio serials, and, of course, to baseball.

It was then, secluded in bed, that baseball took over his imagination. He developed what he would call “a passive, vicarious involvement.” He learned to keep score, to study box scores. The boy was surrounded by grave concern, pills, potions, tubes up his nose and down his throat, poultices to chest and neck, vaporizers, nebu-

ZEN AND THE ART OF PITCHING OUT OF A JAM

BEFORE GREG MADDUX COULD OUT-THINK HITTERS, HE HAD TO LEARN TO STOP OUT-thinking himself. For that, he turned to Dorfman. Before Harvey, Maddux was 8-18 over two seasons with an ERA over 5.50. In the 10 seasons after beginning to work with Harvey, he was 176-90 with an ERA under 3.00. Here’s what the future Hall-of-Famer said about his sessions:

AN UNPLAYABLE LIE

One of the biggest things Harvey taught me is, Don’t lie to yourself. It’s easy to come up with an excuse, but you have to own up to a mistake if you’re going to learn from it.

SIMPLE, BUT NOT EASY

I first worked with Harvey my third or fourth year in the majors. I had a pretty good understanding of what I could do physically, but mentally, I was lost. The lead-off hitter would get on and I’d be thinking, Here we go again...instead of: Who’s hitting now? How do I get him out? I was thinking about the outcome instead of which pitch I had to throw to have success. Harvey made it very simple for me: Think of where you want to throw the ball and how you want to throw it. —K.T.G.





WHO'S ON FIRST? Dorfman chatting with an A's pitcher in 1987.

lizers in his bed tent, suppositories. The ailing child naturally came to admire hale and hearty ballplayers. "I'm six years old and I'm in bed," says Harvey today, "and I'm counting cars, listening to ball games and music on the radio. In terms of influence, experience isn't what happens to you — the boy in bed, alone — experience is what you do with what happens to you. I am gratified with what I did as a result of my experience."

Slow-footed and gasping, Harvey set out to join the boyhood fray one summer morning. On Gun Hill Road in the Bronx, he found a game of "All Across," where boys run from one curb across the street to the other, until all are tagged and the last one becomes "it." Harvey watched and asked to play. He was welcomed, but told, as any newcomer would be, that he would have to start as "it." Harvey was the quintessential "it," faked out of his Buster Browns.

He does not recall how much time elapsed in such humiliation, but in retrospect it has expanded to fill a disproportionately large amount of neural hard drive. But then, a miracle occurred: Two boys taunting Harvey crossed in front of him and collided, one of them falling. Harvey immediately pounced, and pummeled the fallen player. The other players pulled him off, and Harvey burst into tears and ran home. But there had been a breakthrough. For the first time, he remembers, "He was the prey. I had become the hunter." Harvey had become a participant.

From his asthmatic condition, he developed a keen insight into how our fears can define us. "I understood how people limit themselves," he says. "I hitched my wagon early on to that ailing horse, meaning my affliction, and then I started to learn, Don't hitch your wagon to that horse; hitch your wagon to the horse that you want to be."

His own athletic career was a wheezing triumph of his will. He regularly took part in sandlot baseball and football, and majored in physical education at Brockport State Teachers College, where he played goalie for a Co-National Championship soccer team in 1955, all while being excused from running laps or even switching goals when his team was practicing shots.

He graduated with a degree in education and went on to earn a master's in educational psychology before commencing his career as a highly regarded teacher at Wheeler Avenue School in upstate New York, where he would meet his wife, third-grade teacher Anita Wiklund. He then taught at Burrs Lane Junior High in Dix Hills, Long Island, before moving to Manchester and Burr and Burton Academy. He has two children, daughter Melissa, 44, and son Dan, 42, and three grandchildren.

"This is the last one of these I'm ever going to do," Harvey told me as we sat on his back porch, overlooking the lake and the Canadian

geese who were swimming back and forth, jerkily changing direction. He hasn't sat for an interview in almost 10 years and is worried that I will portray him as some kind of "self-help guy." He stresses to me that he doesn't actually care how a player feels: "I only care how you behave." Anita comes out on the porch and tells us it's getting cold. Harvey stands up on unsteady legs. He is going in for hip replacement surgery in a few weeks, and the impending trauma has him feeling his age. He says there are a few myths he wants to dispel: One is that he "fixes" ballplayers. "I don't 'fix' guys; I hate that expression. It's like saying I'm a shrink. I'm not a shrink; I'm a stretch. I don't diminish — I expand."

Later, we are seated in his office, watching the playoffs on television. Harvey doesn't root for teams, he roots for players, for guys he's worked with and knows. There's Carlos Pena, the Tampa Bay first baseman and a client. There's Jason Varitek. There's Roy Halladay. All of them have either made the pilgrimage here or have met up with Harvey at some point in their career. Calling all afternoon on the phone are other ballplayers, seeking a little advice or just checking in. Chan Ho Park, Rick Ankiel, Raul Ibanez, and others leave messages on Harvey's machine, asking him to call them back.

We begin talking about why some players need to visit Harvey to become reacquainted with the most basic physical and functional aspects of their professions. "It's because muscles are morons," he says, and by that he means that muscles only do what we tell them to do, so it's imperative for even the most gifted of athletes to tell their muscles to behave correctly — keep the chin tucked in, and so on.

The instruction then radiates outward into the player's whole psyche, and that's when it can get interesting, when secrets and confidences must be revealed so that Harvey can help the player overcome his obstacles. There was the superstar who was afraid to confront his landscape architect about being overbilled. The catcher who couldn't throw the ball back to the pitcher and would make up pretenses to go out to the mound so he could hand the ball over. The slugger who believed the world was conspiring against him, in part because his alcoholic father had abused him. Another player, linked to steroids, who was considering a comeback and admitted that yes, he had been juicing, and now his fear was that without it he would never be any good. The relief pitchers who live in a state of permanent fear. "When Dennis Eckersley made the Hall of Fame," says Harvey, "I called him and said, 'Congratulations, you soiled yourself all the way to the Hall of Fame.'"

The truth, when it finally emerges, brings forth a torrent of tears, of painful confession, of relief, of unburdening. Finally, the player can tell another soul of his hurt. This little man in his sweats — listening, quiet, almost docile, but always respectful — he nods because he understands. He has stood in the locker room and helped a ballplayer pull on his shirt because he was so paralyzed by fear he couldn't dress. He has massaged the shoulders of a Dominican slugger who was homesick and missed his mother. He tells the player, You know what, it's okay to feel all this stuff, you're human, but you also have to perform, because you're a professional.

Harvey always takes stock of the player. "What I have to determine is whether this guy would benefit from an aggressive approach or a lighter hand. I ask a bunch of Columbo questions. 'Tell me what you are going through right now.' You don't ask questions a guy can answer with yes or no; it's always, 'Why?' The guy's like, 'Well, I came to ask you that.' You can tell if a guy is aggressive. If he's aggressive with me, then I can be aggressive with him. If he's lost, confused, intimidated, why would you want to be aggressive with a guy like that?"

And the player, now seated with Harvey out on the back porch, engages this old man, tells him his darkest secrets, and, together with Harvey, starts to see much more than just the ball. ■