



JOHN FELTON

BUILDING LEADERSHIP CAPACITY –
TAKING CARE OF YOUR MIND AND BODY

LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



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EPISODE 16



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MURRAY: Welcome to my podcast. I'm Murray Wright and this is Leadership Moments, real people stories about the people and the moments that have influenced and shaped their leadership.

Today I'm talking with John Felton. John is a clinical exercise physiologist, an Olympian and a pioneer in improving health and well being in community, corporate and clinical settings since the 1980s. John is director of The Centre for Personal Performance, an Australian company focused on improving the health and physical function of Australians. John competed in the Whitewater Slalom Canoeing in the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta and remains involved in the sport, being lead designer for many of the past and future Olympic whitewater courses.

John, welcome.

JOHN: Thanks Murray. Great to speak to you today.

MURRAY: Great to have you with us. As always, I'll be using the three Leadership Moments questions as a frame to talk about your personal leadership stories and share the insights that they give us. Now John, your bio notes that your passion is fueled by helping people take the right health steps to improve their condition, their health and their ability to enjoy life. Can you talk a bit about that, your role and how you go about doing this?

JOHN: Yeah. I guess a lot of that is rooted in my history, I guess, my educational history background, my sporting background and how I was brought up and understood exercise and sport to be a big part of my life and, you know, from that scene you have to be part of everyone's life. Now one of my probably greatest influences was a gentleman by the name of Dr. Frank Whitebrook and Dr. Frank was the founding principal of Northern Rivers. At the time it was the Teachers' College and has become Southern Cross University. And he at the age of 68 or 69... I used to paddle kayaks with him and I was in my early 20s and over an hour he'd only be between five and ten minutes behind me. So I was at the top of my game, that I was, and he was not that far behind. So it gave me an incredible respect for what you can do at an older age.

MURRAY: So what is it you do now in terms of your work and your business?

JOHN: Yeah. So one part of The Centre for Personal Performance where we're sitting today is in the exercise clinic and the exercise clinic is a clinical rehabilitation facility where we look at assisting those people that might have a chronic disease or a



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chronic muscular skeletal dysfunction. So we'll work with people that are undergoing chemotherapy or rehabilitation for breast cancer, colon cancer, lung cancer, brain cancer or any of that. We will assist people who have diabetes or other endocrine diseases such as Parkinson's. We'll help people with hip and knee replacements. We'll look at assisting people that may have chronic back problems or issues of, I guess, life disrupting sort of diseases or injuries. So we work really closely with them. We work really closely with their specialist and their GPs to, I guess, strengthen the muscles around any injury, but also you know, generally improve their mobility and give them a better quality of life and allow them to actually enjoy life to a much greater degree.

MURRAY: Great. I'm interested in your journey. You're an athlete, top level athlete and now you're a director of health clinics. What is it that gave you this passion for helping people to live well?

JOHN: Yeah. Interesting questions. I mean I guess, I was in the sport for a long period of time, you know, working within, I guess, jobs that were helping me do my sport, but not necessarily pushing me much further forward. I was certainly always in the recreational health area and I competed, I guess, in my last event, the Olympic games when I was 35 years of age. So, you know, up until that time, I was a little bit of a vagabond. I traveled the world paddling whitewater in some... you know, the Alps in France or the Rockies in the US, which allowed me to sort of be part of nature, but also be part of sport and be with a community of vagabonds in that sporting arena, which was a really lovely part of my life. But through that process, I then you know, got married and had children, but that grounding came back to me and allowed me to actually think about what I really wanted to do with my life and what came through loud and clear was that I understood and loved what exercise and lifestyle could do, not only to improve your health, but also to stop and turn around some of these chronic diseases that we saw in society. And in the early '80s I started working in some of the first corporate health programs in Australia. I worked in Canberra with one of the, if not I think the first cardiac rehab program in Australia and that really took my, I guess, fancy or allowed me to look at, you know, what you can actually do and it was the time when I guess the medical community was really focused on what was happening with surgery, those you know... some incredible work done with heart transplant surgery at the time. There was incredible sort of advances made in Pharmacology. But understanding what exercise could do was really not there and it was almost discounted in a way and I think we've seen over the, you know, the past 20 years an incredible change in what people now understand is important to... everything from helping to rehabilitate from say breast cancer to using exercise to change the way our bodies work. So we can use exercise now to change at a cellular level what happens to the mitochondria within the cells, which are the little I guess energy users or creators within the cell and a lot of times, as we age



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those mitochondria get worse at their job or they don't work at all. But if we can use exercise... and some of the latest research in high intensity exercise shows us how we can actually make those mitochondria new again. And what that means is that it's increasing our ability to fight things like endocrine diseases and diabetes because we're working at a cellular level at one of the drivers of those diseases.

MURRAY: You talk about HIT the high intensity exercise. It's becoming quite a buzz at the moment and I'm doing a bit myself in a limited format and feel the benefits for it. Can you explain what that is and how it works because it... personally I find it really powerful?

JOHN: Yeah. There's some great research around HIT. I guess the protocols are fairly solid around two minute intervals, 30 second rest, two minute intervals. You do that four times and you get an increase of around 60% in performance. We're doing that. Now it's hard exercise, so when you're talking about high intensity exercise, you're really looking at maximal efforts for those two minutes. So when you do high intensity exercise you actually have to work at that level. You have to work at that full level to get that amount of full improvement, but you can still get great improvement. You may not get the extent of it. You might get half of it by going to, say 85% and you still get this mitophagy effect, which is that improvement in the mitochondria, but you also get improvement of gene expression and improvement of, you know... which is autophagy, which is the cleaning out of the cell for the faulty proteins and the split DNA that's in the cell that sometimes can continue on. That's when... you know, if that continues on for a number of years, you also become senescent and a senescent cell is a cell that doesn't actually work properly. It's still alive, but it doesn't work properly and then after a few years those cells can go on and become a cancerous substance.

MURRAY: Yeah. Okay. I read Dr. Michael Mosley's book "Fast Exercise". Would you recommend that for people?

JOHN: Absolutely.

MURRAY: Yeah.

JOHN: Absolutely. I think Dr. Mosley has done a great job in I guess getting the message out about what exercise is important. A lot of the guidelines are related to a specific outcome and they're not related to weight loss. So if you're looking for weight loss maybe those guidelines aren't correct. But if you're looking for heart health maybe they are correct, but maybe there's... you're not doing enough. So you



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got to be really specific and this is where it's important to get I guess good quality information from probably an expert physiologist is your first point of call for that or you look at some of the guidelines from the American College of Sports Medicine, Australian Sports Medicine Federation. Those sort of organizations help to define it.

MURRAY: And those guidelines, they're online. You can access them.

JOHN: Absolutely.

MURRAY: So we'll put links to that in the show notes.

JOHN: Yeah.

MURRAY: Thank you. That's really interesting. As you've gone through this journey now, you find out what you want to do. You talked about the old professor who had kept up with you at kayaking and made you feel not so good about being so young and fit. What would you say or who would you say... who else has influenced you in your career, particularly around... as you're building that career and taking on a leadership role within the field?

JOHN: Yeah. Look I think my career and growing up has been littered by people who have influenced me. You know, you certainly... you start off with your mother and father who influenced you probably some of the greatest amounts you can by making sure that you are able to value people. That you value what everyone brings to a certain situation. You don't make assumptions about what anyone can bring by looks or background. You enjoy people for who they are. So I think that's a really important piece. I think my family at the moment, my wife and my children, give me great clarity about what decisions I make and how they affect me on a day to day basis and I think that's really important to understand that. And then if you look back through I guess my early years, one of the greatest influences is a sports journalist who... by the name of Max Godby who ran a newspaper. But he also spent a lot of time with me when I was in my early teens and I was like a typical early teenager. The last thing in the world I wanted was any publicity because of my sporting ability because that creates a focus on you. Max was able to, you know, even to an awkward teenager, get me to understand the impact that that has on a community and even though the community itself wasn't at all my races or whatever, they were very strongly behind what I had to do and that was really important for the fabric of the cohesion of the community... to have those sort of role models with you in the community for other young people.



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One of the other people that made an incredible impact on my life was a guy by the name of Jeff Templeman, who was a body builder in the '70s and '80s. And Jeff was wise sort of before his time. And what Jeff was able to impart to me was, you have to own everything and it's incredible that once you start to own everything, you own your problems, you own your mistakes and then when you work within a team, you start within a team to own things that happen and by owning things that go wrong, knowing the things that go right, you're able to fix them or you're able to move forward. I just find that if you don't own stuff, you can't move. If I, you know, look to sort of I guess other people that have had impacts on my life, there's sort of... you know, there's any number of people and, you know, it's a huge honor to work with the people I work with in the exercise clinic here because I work with a lot of young people here all of whom are incredibly selfless about how they approach what they do, how they make incredible changes to people's lives to be able to, you know, give them opportunities to do things they haven't done for a lot of years or change, you know... just change a small part where you take pain out of someone's life just opens up a whole new world. The ability to walk down a pavement for a lot of people because they're not stable enough in the way they walk. If you can improve this ability, what happens is those people are happy to go out. So these amazing young people I'm working with here spend so much time getting people to be more stable so that they can actually have that social contact, they improve their quality of life, but of course they're fitter or stronger, but because they can interact in a way to opportunities they've got previously.

MURRAY: That's some great points you're putting in there and that last point, that's really... for one it's always with connecting into what you're passionate about in what you do in your life and the why. There's this piece about impacting... you were touching on it earlier. I think people aren't always aware of what impact they have on the people around them and then that impact beyond. And that example of someone without pain now can go down the street and be socially interactive and know that they have an impact on their wider community. So we should remember and be conscious and aware of what we're doing because it has a big impact. And I love the piece about owning it. Was there a particular moment or a particular thing where that really resonated with you?

JOHN: It's interesting and again you're like... as a young man you're I guess in a group that were, you know, quite aggressively, you know, active young men and women and there's a lot of teasing that goes on within that group and it's just banter and all of that and even though it's said in fun I guess, you know, teasing is never acceptable. It's not great and, you know, you think it is, but it's... and it is from your side, but probably



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not from the person who is receiving it and I guess one day... I'm working in a hotel and I'm in the bathroom and I've, I don't know, just done my hair because, you know, you get back at the bar and you're on show again and then one of the guys from within who is one of these teasers came in and said, "Hey, you know, you've made yourself look good and all of that," and I know that he's going to go back out the front and just tell everyone and use that to tease me for the rest of the night. So I then I thought well stuff this And I went back out and I said, "So and so just caught me in there. I was just doing my hair to get ready to come back out." And he came back just to do it and it was, it was... there was nothing left.

MURRAY: Yeah. you took it away from him.

JOHN: Yeah.

MURRAY: So it was...

JOHN: So if you're owning that, you do disarm a lot of people who use that.

MURRAY: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Nice.

I hope you're enjoying this talk with John. We had to cut the interview short that day. So we picked it up again a few days later. This time talking online.

So John, welcome back. We are doing this interview in two parts. What I wanted to talk about now was, we'd met in the corporate context and when we met it was about helping leaders understand how to manage themselves and build resilience. Can you talk a bit about what you do in that space?

JOHN: So we've been working with corporates doing personal performance, but we used a technology called heart rate variability and what we do is we look at someone's heart rate over a period of three days and what we're really looking for is what's called the R-R Interval and the R-R of a heart rate trace is that little the beep at the top. So we're looking at the distance between each of those little beeps and in millisecond. So when those little beeps are very uniform, where it was called sympathetic nervous system control and that's when we are in a stress situation and when I say stress, I'm not talking about stress in a bad way. It's just the body's response to a stimuli that gets us a little bit sort of anxious or ready to get on with the task ahead and in a very stressful situation in what we call fight or flight and that's where stress hormones are released into the body and we get ready to run, fight or hide. Now the other side



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of that is the parasympathetic nervous system control and that's when those little beeps are a bit more random and the more variable they are, the more recovery we get because your parasympathetic nervous system is what helps you recover and the further you can get into that, the better you sleep, the better you get some down time and the better you recover your resources. So what we're doing in corporates is we're looking at the balance of those two areas, sympathetic and parasympathetic, and we look at how do we get somebody into more recovery through the day and in controlled situations. So they're not continually in a stress situation because if that's the case they're in chronic stress and we get the sort of release of adrenalin or epinephrine, which are great for alertness and those things when we're running away from things, but they still get out of the blood stream in just a few minutes. But we also get a release of cortisol. Cortisol is a fabulous drug. We use it in medicine as an anti-inflammatory, but too much cortisol in the blood stream keeps us in a heightened state of anxiety. So it can upset out physiology. It can upset the way our brains work and it can actually impact us getting recovery and good sleep. So what we're trying to do in the performance space is limit the amount of time in sympathetic nervous system control or in that stressed area and maximize throughout the day the balance that you can get from parasympathetic control or in that recovery zone.

MURRAY: I think the recovery piece is interesting because you know, we see the sporting teams. They build up to the weekend game and then you see them having a recovery session. It's very scientifically monitored. Whereas with executives, quite often I think you find that they're just on all the time.

JOHN: Yeah. I think we were talking about this before that... I found out about this whole recovery piece when I was an athlete and as I was competing in the Olympic Games as a 35 year old, I found I couldn't train with the younger athletes. I needed much more recovery. So as you sort of extrapolate that, I guess into a corporate sense, if you're always on in high profile meetings you... I guess don't get home until late. You work late. You have a few drinks at night. You don't get good sleep and you're in this sort of sleep deprived zone where you haven't had enough recovery. So you're actually impaired. There are some great studies that equate as little as two hours a night of sleep deprivation with... almost being the same as .05 impaired with alcohol.

MURRAY: I think the interesting part about that as well is that when people are losing that performance, they don't realize it. They think they're doing great. I think there is a sleep study that talked to that.

JOHN: Yeah. That's exactly right, Murray. There's The Journal of Sleep is about a study



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where they looked at three cohorts of 48 individuals where they gave one group four hours of sleep, one group six hours, one group eight hours over a two week period and what they found was that at a four hour deprivation on it... I mean after about three days, that the cognitive performance almost fall down to where it was if you had two days of no sleep. In the six hour deprivation, they found that that took a little over a week and that's seven days, and that came down to that level as well. But interestingly enough, those people on six hours of sleep rather than near seven or eight didn't feel like they had any impairment whatsoever. So this is one of the... I guess one of the problems with sleep deprivation. One, we'd wear as a bit of a badge of honor when we tell people well we only need to sleep hours or six hours a night. But the other side of it is because we don't realize how impaired we are... we don't even realize that as an organization or as a country... the impact that that is actually having on one-hour productivity but also how it's actually increasing the risk within the organization. You know, you get much more rushed decisions when you're tired. You reduce your empathy, and I think we all know that, that when we're tired, our fuse is a little bit shorter and we don't have the capacity to take in I guess a number of disparate views that we can actually sync together and make a decision from.

MURRAY: So what does good recovery look like for a busy executive?

JOHN: It's an interesting thing and a lot of the time we'll see within the organizations that we work with; very very few people have any rules about how they have to recover so that they can perform. So, we're just done a large group within a financial services organization and what we found out of 40 participants that most of them were getting around about... I think the average sleep was about 7.4 hours a night. And so you look at that and you think, "Wow. That's actually pretty good." But when we drilled down and we looked at how much delta sleep or deep sleep where you get the recovery, then it was only 44% of that number, so less than 20. So less than half and then over that, the other side of that is that we've got a sleep deprived group. And so there's a bit of a I guess a misunderstanding that getting good sleep is about length of sleep. You know, if you have alcohol later in the evening after sort of eight o'clock, then you're going to lose up to an hour for every unit of alcohol you have of deep sleep. So we're very really careful when, especially when we're in a stressful time at work where we've got tight deadlines, that you don't use alcohol as a stress reduction tool when you come home. By doing that, by making sure you don't use your computer and being dark about eight thirty, nine o'clock at the latest at night. Don't eat after nine o'clock at night. Don't do hard exercise after nine o'clock at night. Have a period where you can slow down before you get into bed whether that means reading or some other sort of relaxing thing. I mean television is not too bad as long as it's not too exciting and the other thing is if you're managing your melatonin levels



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then what generally happens you need to... you keep the room a bit dark from about nine o'clock and you get an increase in melatonin. You can have a cool shower before you go to bed because you need to cool your body down and you don't want to... your bed to be too warm. So it's really about, you know, cutting out light, cooling your body down and making sure you're not heating up overnight. One of the best ways to help reset your melatonin into the normal cycle of the day is in the morning you need to get about a thousand lumens of light into your eyes. So if you can go outside earlier in the morning, that really helps reset those time clocks.

MURRAY: That's super. Some great tips there and insights, John. Let's come back to you a bit and that brings us to the second question and that question is, what was your 'aha' moment, the moment when you suddenly understood what this leadership thing was all about?

JOHN: Murray, I'm not sure. I'm...

MURRAY: It's not easy.

JOHN: I don't think I'm... I don't think I'm all that smart so I have 'aha' moments all the time and I guess one of those times was... I was the Competition Manager in the Sydney Olympic Games just for whitewater kayaking and I headed sort of 600 or so staff of paid and volunteers and that was a really sort of exciting and incredibly dynamic environment. What I learned about how to sort of manage and not even manage it... how to actually get a large group of people that have only just come together in a very short period of time to all understand exactly where they're going and what their role was. And so what I found was that I was, I guess a bit of a story teller in that I spent a lot of time painting these sort of mental images that for people and at the same time, fitting what they did into that image so they understood how their role impacted on the final product that was going to be beamed to, you know, billions of people around the world. And it didn't matter if I was talking to my operations director or the volunteer that was doing the parking security. If everyone understood how their role fitted into the final picture. I guess that was my 'aha' moment... was that you don't necessarily have to manage your supervisor as much if they really understand where they're going and what they're doing.

MURRAY: That's so powerful and it really resonates with a lot of work we do with teams or even one-on-one coaching. Often when you get to this point and people realize, "Oh, I've just got to remind people of the big picture." And we often forget it and we forget to talk about that and it is so powerful when leaders can do that and keep people involved in that big picture.



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JOHN: Yeah, and I think it really gives meaning and if they understand, you know, why they're doing something then their ability to make a decision around their role and what happens at that granular level is so much greater that even you can do it because you don't have the knowledge that they have at that level.

MURRAY: Very powerful. Great. Thank you for that.

JOHN: Absolutely and I mean being able to instill that pride in what you do and how you do it, is very powerful for the culture within the organization you're trying to build and foster.

MURRAY: Yeah and I think there's a thing for leaders there to... as you were saying just constantly talk about it and refer back to that big picture. Keep it simple. Keep it so that people can relate to it what their role is, but just keep talking about it so it becomes just part of the fabric.

JOHN: Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely.

MURRAY: Okay, John. That's great. Now third and final question, what would you say was your biggest failure and how does it inform your leadership today?

JOHN: Not really sure about this. I mean, I left school and then went on to university to study accountancy. And so...

MURRAY: It's very relevant to what you're doing now, John.

JOHN: Well... that's right. But I left after six months.

MURRAY: Yeah.

JOHN: And I did that because I... it was an incredibly poor decision for me because it just didn't fit. Again I couldn't see the big picture. I went there with something in mind and when I got there it wasn't what I thought. And so after that I got on a plane and I went to Canada and competed in my first world championship in whitewater. And I spent some time there and so the next seven years sort of went past with me sort of traveling around the world and competing. But then it sort of... it all came to an end after the Olympics and I just sat there and I really had to think back on that moment because I was there at that point again where I had to make a decision of what I was going to do. And the thing that sort of resonated and sort of hit coming up was that



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I really don't want to do something that I don't enjoy and it doesn't excite me. And that's really pretty much stayed with me the whole time and now I don't mind what I do as long as it ticks those two boxes.

MURRAY: Thank you for that. That's been some great knowledge, insights and great to hear your experiences and the success you've had over the years in this field. Whenever you talk... I see it with groups that you talk to and I myself, I've been there and I'm motivated to do things differently after listening to you. How would you recommend people go about that? Is there a book or other information that you would recommend?

JOHN: There's not a lot of great books. There's a lot of information out there that's fluff.

MURRAY: Right, yeah.

JOHN: You can certainly go into our website at personalperformance.com.au and we've got a number of articles on there that are evidence based articles on the different areas of performance... everything from sleep to the use of alcohol, food, a little bit in there about gut, neuroplasticity. So there's this diverse range of impacts on the body from a whole different way that we're really trying to put together at Personal Performance. But this and other things, you know, you need you to look at with the sleep and with the neuroplasticity side of it that are really important as well. So I would suggest reading widely. As I said, we'll put that up on the personal performance stuff. We'll also add... we haven't been able to upload some books up there as well and I will send them through to you.

MURRAY: That would be great and we'll put all those links on the Show Notes.

John, thank you. Again thank you very much and now again people listening to this, they might want to reach out and connect with you. How could people do that?

JOHN: Yeah. Absolutely. They can connect with me at [john.felton](#) on LinkedIn or [jfclinic](#) on Twitter.

MURRAY: Beautiful. John, thank you for your words of wisdom and I look forward to seeing you soon again.

JOHN: Fantastic, Murray. Thank you very much for your time. It's been a real pleasure.



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MURRAY: Thanks, John. Bye.

JOHN: Bye now.

MURRAY: A great reminder from John about the importance of looking after ourselves so that we can be at our best both physically and mentally and what great tips about getting a good night's sleep.

That's it for this episode. Thanks for listening. Head to murraywright.com for the transcripts, key learnings and resources from today's and past episodes. Once you're there, why not subscribe to the Leadership Moments podcast. That way, you never have to miss one. Until the next time.

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