

FEATURE ARTICLES

Every Day is Game Day

Mark Verstegen, Founder of EXOS & Director of Performance for the NFL

Interviewed By: Daniel Bolin

Bolin: Mark, thank you for talking with me today. You have quite a diverse background that has taken you all across the globe. Could you tell us a little bit about that journey?

Verstegen: Of course. I have an undergraduate and masters in sports science, exercise science and nutrition. I played football at Washington State University. I got a Masters at Idaho curing an injury which really got me early on into bridging this gap on the continuum of care. What you started to find in sustainable high performance, and it didn't matter if you were dealing with world class athletes or neuroscientists or pianists, it was performers. Those that were competitive and passionate, as well as aspiring performers all shared the same four raw ingredients, of mindset, nutrition, movement, and recovery. They weren't stand-alone verticals, but they were meshed together in their DNA. When there was a systems failure around any one of those or a lack of strategy that is where they would tend to unravel and would have to rebuild from that standpoint. That's what really led my passion and my research.

I went down to Georgia Tech prior to the Olympics and then created the International Performance Institute at what is now the IMG Academy to envision the sports science hub for Adidas Soccer Academy, Better Golf, and all these different things, but it all came from that nucleus of high performance. After about four years, I moved out to

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Mark Verstegen is the Founder and President of EXOS a global leader in human performance. Mark is one of the world's foremost experts on human performance and he pioneered the concept of integrated performance training which he has used in collaboration with elite athletes, the U.S. military, and numerous corporations. He also served as the National Football League Player's Association (NFLPA) performance director for 20 years and has authored six books. <https://www.teamexos.com/leadership-team/>

the West coast with my wife, and we created Athlete's Performance Institute, which is on the grounds of Arizona State University. It is a youth inspired research platform but also application for elite athletes to really come to a refuge. The mission was really simple. It was about understanding and upgrading lives through performance. So we created an environment where we tore down all the walls to provide the finest performance systems with the specialists and platforms seamlessly integrated to efficiently and ethically enhance our clients performance. Everyone got treated equally within that. That led us on the long journey to where we are at today.

Over that history, we are now the global leader in human performance over the last 20 years. In sports, if we were a country, we would have placed 6th and 8th in the last few Olympics, even though that isn't our target market. Half of the first and second rounds of the NFL draft is on average for what we might do. I have been the performance director for the NFL Players Association Health and Safety for the last 20 years. You can look at the same thing globally in soccer, World Cup champions, German National Team support, highest winning percentage, MLS champions, etc. You keep working through those things because it is the same winning formula. We had the great honor in special operations for preservation of force and family. It's a great honor of ours for a long time. We are inside of 35% of Fortune 100 companies related to human capital optimization and human capital preservation. We have a ton of fun doing that. That is the short of where we are today.

Bolin: Thank you for sharing that. I have a soccer background, and that 2014 World Cup Champion German National Team was amazing. You have such a diverse background in business and special operations,

but to go to Germany and have an impact in a foreign country where they embraced you was different. Were you taking those pillars and saying do this and you will have success? Or were you having to tailor it to their culture and team?

Verstegen: You hit it on the head with the latter. When we first showed up, we were incredibly unpopular in Germany. We were American Football and they did not want the point of view. What we came back to was that we were global best practices. That is what EXOS stands for. In so many ways, that is a German approach in that we want to get very specific around what we want to do well. So, what is that vision? What is that purpose? How are we bringing people together? Looking at a style of play to pull off the mission by looking down to each individual player and that player's profile by matching those things up and by understanding them first. How do we elevate each player to have the great honor to put on that jersey or uniform? That was a much greater context for us. Then to continue to make sure that you are at the absolutely at the top of your game day in and day out and not just on and off. I think that is a pretty German approach that resonated well. I would go back to that 2004 to 2006 time frame where it was a very dynamic cultural shift for Germany where there were a lot of dynamics going on. It is similar to some of the things that we are seeing today.

Bolin: At the Air Force Academy, one of the institutional outcomes that we have is the warrior ethos which includes the embodiment of the warrior spirit. We use language such as tough mindedness, tireless motivation, unceasing vigilance, a willingness to sacrifice one's life for their country, if necessary, and a commitment to be the world's premier Air and Space Force.

Verstegen: Goosebumps. That is where I get my goosebumps. That is a tall order and a tall order to ask not just from one, but from all.

Bolin: It is. It involves toughmindedness, grit, hardiness, and the physical and moral courage. Do you see that in driving success at the team and individual level for the German National Team? That is a tall feat to win the World Cup. Everyone wants to do that.

Verstegen: Here is how I might preface that. When you start talking about leadership, I think there is the extrinsic element of leadership and I think there is an intrinsic level of leadership. If I just go to extrinsic, it is what you would expect. It is things like mission, vision, shared purpose and how can we actually bring clarity to that. That starts to become leadership. After that, we have to put in the right structure and systems in the Venn diagram, and I am absolutely passionate about the third circle being empowerment. Playing to win. If we've learned one thing over time, is that some of these things are not small. Structure is not small. How much is just enough structure? How much is just enough systems where everybody can be able to play in a style of play in business or sport that allows them to understand the rules just enough, that leaves them enough freedom? But then they need to be empowered so that they can go play to win. It's critical for creating a performance culture. As an example, a fear of failure versus a joy of performing, passion, and elevating others. It is a group of people who are closed and fixed minded versus, like Carol Dweck says, that are open and growth minded. It's about scared to be wrong versus this continuous improvement and doing everything you can personally. That is the environment today that we have to set up. I think those are the things from extrinsic leadership, like setting up the culture, setting up that leadership that really does differentiate. I also think that within

that extrinsic component is the seamless integration. That seamless integration means that in the past, we could work more in silos, but what we are finding today is that we have to have a multidisciplinary, seamlessly integrated team that is really hyper focused on solving a problem together. Especially, in this kind of Moore's Law of everything being disrupted and changing and knowing that you can't go solve for what is today, you are trying to leapfrog to solve things that are unknown. That requires great collaboration. Let me throw that in the extrinsic bucket of the strategy, tactics, and skill sets of being a leader. We can learn those things. How we apply that has to be localized to where we are at, on the exact environment, and the task that we have.

Now, where I think you and I might get even more passionate, is to come back and look at the intrinsic piece of things. That is where I see the greatest opportunity for growth in the military, business in leadership in the C-suite all the way through management, as well as sport. Let's say I have those skill sets. I have gone to great education and training places like the Air Force Academy and other special colleges and I have these skill sets. My ability as an individual to show up each day, and be able to play those skill sets to the absolute best of their ability. Not all of them, but the right one at the right time, gets to what is a great leader. I think that does require mindset, nutrition, movement, and recovery as a foundation to even show up each day with the qualities that are required of a great leader. That is the opportunity right there that we see that unlocks what I see as probably one of the biggest downfalls around emotional regulation. Around their emotional quotient and their ability to go do great leadership.

Bolin: I wanted to touch on a couple of the points you mentioned on setting the culture and a growth mindset. In your worlds, where it is an elite world,

whether it be special operations, the German National team, or the NFL, you have individuals that are playing for a team. In setting the culture where you are putting the mission or the team first, has that been difficult depending on the atmosphere where, for example, you have elite athletes who might think, if this person is playing, then that means I am not playing?

Verstegen: That's a great question. Let me break it down with ethos, the performance ethos that we have at EXOS. We say number one that there is a responsibility that is greater than yourself. If you want to don this great uniform that represents things like our flag, our country, and provide us our freedoms, that is an innate responsibility that you are signing up for. That is greater than you. If you want to don the U.S. National Team jersey, that is something that is greater than you and it is a responsibility that you are taking on. We will hold you accountable to that. But, you should be eager to go do that.

Secondly, gratitude and grit. Like your warrior ethos, we know that we want our team to show up every day grateful for what they have been given. That means that based on diversity, equity, and inclusion, they may have come from a much different place to get to this starting line, versus others who may have come into it from a different way. It doesn't matter, we need to have gratitude. Then, that grit—to have that relentless determination to see that through, but not just for self, but for others.

Then, we talk about that one team. That one team really is about something that is greater than just me and that we are going to go achieve together which unlocks the highest levels of human performance. When there is something that is greater than self that we can tie

ourselves to, we can literally do things that we could not do, or push ourselves or have a level of commitment to individually, if no one was watching. That is ultimately the definition of a high performance mindset of what am I doing, when others aren't watching? In team environments, we have to also know that one team means that I as an individual, have the responsibility to master self from the first thought that goes through my head to my actions in this "winning the process", where every day is game day. We are in that process all day long until the last thought goes through our head. Even in the most stressful, dynamic environments, I have to own that. I might not be 100%, but I have to own that so that I can show up better the next day and

Ultimately, at the highest levels of leadership you start to realize that the great leader is one who efficiently achieves goals for a greater purpose. They, in that leadership potential, essentially become the servant or the assistant to help others be their best to achieve the common goal.

fulfill my responsibilities, to play my position with my team, so that I can get the best out of those around me. Ultimately, at the highest levels of leadership you start to realize that the great leader is one who efficiently achieves goals for a greater purpose. They, in that leadership potential, essentially become the servant or the assistant to help others be their best to achieve the common goal. In order to do that, they have to be on their A game daily and they also, which is really tough, in their emotional regulation have to disassociate self, their own emotion and their present state, to be able to ask the best questions, be the best listener, to continue to probe, and ultimately gather conviction around

what it might be. That is where I have been lucky to witness a lot of great leaders in the military, in business, and sport. It really comes down to that same DNA of open growth mindedness.

Bolin: That made me think of the sports that I have played over the years, but also my experience of being part of a helicopter crew in formation. What you said absolutely speaks to that where as a co-pilot, aircraft commander, or flight lead, you have your individual role which goes to the mission of rescuing someone who is having their worst day. The flight engineer or the gunner also have to be on their game. That really speaks to my military experience.

Verstegen: That is something that I love, also coming from a perspective of piloting, which I also passionate about, but getting the game plans right, also allows you to free up this capacity to be a creator and adapt to be present to the existing situation that you are in. Everything that you just mentioned where there are so many variables happening to everyone on that team at that point in time, if you are overwhelmed or overloaded with what should be running in your nonconscious, that is a problem. That is why I think you align the structures and systems so that you can be present in the moment and express your skills with great flow.

Bolin: Along with mindset, you talk about engineering your sustainable high performance game plan. That is based on what you refer to as four pillars. I know you have written on those and mentioned them earlier. Do you mind talking about those a little bit?

Verstegen: Here is what we found as we were trying to understand the science and in examining people who had great success, it comes down to these four strands of

their DNA. First, behaviorally and mindset wise, there is something repeatable that is happening there for all of these types of people—pilots, professional athletes, elite operators, neurosurgeons, it doesn't matter. These same behavioral principles come to mind.

The next thing is that you have to fuel for it. You have to identify what that IT is, that purpose or mission. You have the mindset for it and you have to fuel it. As much as we talk about fuel, most people think about below the neck. I need to stay fit and my body needs to do that. However, we start almost all of these processes above the neck. How I fuel will drive my cognitive performance. If I am driving my cognitive performance, both conscious to nonconscious, below the neck just becomes things that are prerequisite. That is where we really start.

The third piece is that you have to move. You have to move to unlock your cognitive performance. From the very first thing that we ask people to do when they hydrate, which is a bit of nutrition, to rolling their foot out as they brush their teeth each morning. Those fascial sheaths and the balance of what it does from right brain to left brain, and starting to get things turned on, is like a preflight checklist. Those movement qualities and how we move to decrease pain, prevent pain, and perform are critical to all things. For example, if I was to take pilots with either neck or low back pain, regardless of airframe, that is a non-starter because it takes intentional focus away from you. If you are already starting in the hole, then you are not going to be your best for the mission, and be that person in the formation that I need to be.

Ultimately, the limiting factor for all performance is recovery. From global recovery of how I fuel and how I move to engineer this perfect day for sustainable high

performance, all the way down to how I breathe. Am I using breath to ramp up or come down? How does that drive my cognitive performance? What am I doing about sleep and sleep strategies? It doesn't matter the environment from downrange, to time zones, etc., all those are strategies that we have to nail and get right.

So, mindset, nutrition, movement, and recovery, but it needs to be on a simple one pager. It needs to be something that I have the confidence that I can own daily. I'd rather have these simple things that I can do savagely well and own that. Then, we can continue to challenge and achieve, challenge and achieve to grow that so most of that is running in the nonconscious. That is where we start to get in a really special situation as an individual, but more importantly at senior leadership and it trickles down in the culture of the organization. That is when you start to create sustainable performance that can adapt to any times.

Bolin: What is resonating with me is the sustainable part. When we talk about warrior ethos, the words we use are toughmindedness, tireless motivation, and unceasing vigilance. So, it is not once, but consistently. In your book, you talk about how every day is game day. So, it is showing up for your crew or your team every day and not occasionally. Being the leader that people can trust. Added to that, you talk about how habits can help move you ahead without thinking about it. Is that an important part of this, when things get tough, because they will?

Verstegen: You have to absolutely fall back on these things that when you had the time, you thought them through, and you have a very organized game plan for where you are currently at and where you want to go. You need to harden that until it runs in your nonconscious. You want to free as much capacity

as possible to address it for the task at hand. In the environments that high performers put themselves in, that will never be easy. In fact, you will probably have more problems when they are under stimulated and the challenge doesn't meet their training and expectation.

Bolin: You have influenced a lot of different job specialties and people. Is there any individual or team that stands out on embracing these pillars where you say, this person or team gets it?

Verstegen: When we started this about 25 years ago, I would say in the NFL, probably 5 to 8% of that unbelievably elite player population would embody what we are talking about today. Now, years later, through structures, systems, the collective bargaining agreement, collaboration, and head-butting with the NFL, coaches and cultures, you now probably see 80 to 85% of the players in the league. The teams are adopting everything that they can to win what is controllable by creating the right cultures and environments. Even then, we sometimes don't get it right. As an example, prior to this year 80% of the injuries that occurred for the entire year occurred in the first 2 ½ weeks of training camp where the team controls 100% of the variables. That is a broken system, so we as cultures within our organizations, we have to step back and ask the hard questions which is great because we have so many analytics. However, it is also the context in which need to view them. What I've noticed about great leaders is that they like transparency. They ask the right questions and the information they are given isn't sorted through five layers of people. General Colin Powell did this and wanted to get the information and raw data to see it and discuss it to get the context around the information. That is the benefit of information today. However, you can also have paralysis through analysis where there is so much information available

that is why we need to have these innate abilities to go to your gut.

Bolin: Being at a Service Academy, we have a difficult mission of developing leaders and developing combat warriors who are ready to take on these challenges we demand of them the day that they graduate. How do you train people to have this warrior ethos and embrace the four pillars?

Verstegen: I think it is like any new skill. The first thing that we really want to look at is how can we make it crystal clear on what those things are? These are not mystical things. I think the education that goes around succinctly breaking down things of, here are the successful behavioral traits. For example, emotion regulation. We know about stress and anxiety, and the different elements of what we want to have, but we also know that we can create relaxation based on certain techniques. Relaxation meaning I'm about to walk into something real, and I can take the next few seconds to frame it, prepare myself, and actually be unbelievably calm and present and execute at a really high level.

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We also know where we can get into focus where people might be distracted and we can all of a sudden get into hyper focus on the situation and block out the noise is also a skill set. So, I think there are ways for us to create the curriculum or how I can localize it to me today and how do I start to own it today? That is the great thing that I do love about the Academies environments is that you are essentially starting to ritualize what it will take from that first thought to

the last thought and own those things. I think the challenge sometimes is to be able to strip things down to the absolute bear essence before you build it back up. You can lose a lot of people doing that so I think it becomes how you engineer that experience.

After that, you need to pressure test it. But once you get through the pressure testing, our job is to make sure that their battery and skill sets are charged all the way back up before I deploy or put them in harm's way. Here is the side note. We were challenged one time during the War on Terror. I take a group of special operators and I narrow these classes down and the last thing we do is deploy them for 30 days out in the desert. I know that I am going to have about a 60% attrition. Can you tell me out of those 30 people I put out, which 8 to 12 are going to be the ones standing at the end because they are going to leave from there and immediately get on the plane and automatically deploy to the Middle East and stand up immediately? So the question in the context of that is we could probably do some stuff, but the equation of how do we test them, challenge them, make sure they are ready for what they are about to go face, but let's not also go and put them in harm's way with 10% left on their battery with no ability to upscale that charge once you put them downrange. I think it is how we engineer the environments to make sure that we put people in a successful situation.

Bolin: You did talk earlier about passion and competition. Between your experiences with the military, business, and sports, what is it that drives the elite performers, the successful ones?

Verstegen: Here is what we really found. Number one, is that it has to be genuinely you. The more you disassociate from your behavioral profile the more emotional energy that will drain from you going

nowhere. You need to be you. You need to find out what your super powers are and you need to be able to embrace those. People will respect that so long as underneath that layer are these great structures and systems and you owning self so that you are always showing up and being present. Remember, the great thing about leadership, is that it has nothing to do with you. It has everything to do with others. When you are a leader, the expectation is that your job is to show up as close to your optimal potential with every interaction each day, all day, every day. That is the reality of it. That is not just something that you can will your way to. That is why the challenge to the warrior ethos is that you can't just will things to happen. You literally have to have a great game plan, a great platform to be able to continue to allow yourself the opportunity to win more than you lose. To be consistently there for those around you, whether in a leadership position or if you are following. That is really the essence of what we would like to get at. So, the behavioral aspects of performance are to be genuine to yourself, make sure you have a great game plan for self so that you show up each day, around open and growth mindedness, you realize that every day is game day and it will have plusses and minuses, you have a skill set to be able to adapt to the ups and downs of that day to reset and regulate and be on your A game throughout that process in a very present, calm, and focused way that can still have an amazing intensity whether you are extrinsic or intrinsic. But you really find out that high performers are competitors and that is what drives them. What you find is a lot of your teammates can also be looking to these people to be led and to be more like them, which is why we need to embody and walk the talk.

Bolin: I think competitor can sometimes have a bit of a negative connotation within leadership. But the Air Force mission is to fly, fight, and win. Winning is

a part of business, sports, and the military. So, being a competitor isn't a bad thing.

Verstegen: We are all in it to win it. At the same time, what I want to make sure everyone knows is there are many factors that go into the definition of winning. Especially in today's world. But, so much of what dictates the success of that outcome, will be all of these tiny micro decisions that you are running in your nonconscious 90% of the time or that you are making throughout the day, every day, day after day. The habits that we talked about that ultimately lead to excellence and success. When we start talking about performing at an elite level will dictate as much about those outcomes as "I hope I do really well today." Or I have to go play some strategy so that I might have a winning outcome. We are in it to win it, but that doesn't mean that you have to be better than me today to do that. It might mean that you elevated me today which elevated self. It is a fun dynamic around what competition is. You have to have a game plan. You have to have the team, that community to be able to help that greater shared purpose. There always has to be a scoreboard so that you have the feedback. That is why you need your teammates, that is why you need leaders, and that is why you need structures and systems, so that I can do that.

Bolin: Added to that, warfare has changed over the years where you have things like Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) operators who could be dropping bombs in the morning, and then putting their kids to bed that night. So, having the preparation and mindset is vital.

Verstegen: That is where I get goosebumps and am deeply appreciative for everyone's service. The hardest thing on a family unit is to be deployed and away. But

there is a whole different dichotomy of what you just described, and how the individual warrior is able to handle that when they show up to be the person in a family unit. It is tough. And I want to make sure there is an exclamation point around those populations. How they are viewed and respected by peers for what they are going through. It is a different thing. That is why I say these teams need to be multidisciplinary and engrained and we need to own the skills sets that we have been talking about to have people starting to focus in on these things because that will help ensure our sustainability, because what we are facing is not going away.

Bolin: As part of the warrior ethos, we work to instill grit, which is a hardiness of spirit and resistance to accept failure despite mental and physical hardships. I wanted to look at the failure part because failure is a part of life. But the avoidance of difficult situations is not an option in the military. Within your experience, how have you overcome that and seen other individuals or teams overcome that?

Verstegen: It is one of our three values at EXOS, which is why I resonate so much with it. Grit can also be defined as consistent work without satisfaction, or delayed satisfaction or gratification. That just means that you stay hyper focused and pound the rock even though it is not manifesting in anything enjoyable at this point in time. Grit is where I think greatness and leadership are truly honed and defined. We see it in almost every successful person. I think the number one thing is to lay the cultural foundation that performance is open growth mindedness. If you don't want to fail, that goes to closed fixed components where you want to set yourself on a pedestal and won't step off of it and they get so paralyzed by those tags. That is on us. Don't do that to people. We want to make sure that we are saying, I love how that person has and wins the

process, but they aren't scared to fail. They are going to continue to learn the way that they learn, and it is not if, but when they will succeed. That is why I love the analogy of "every day is game day." There isn't any game that any of us has played where there wasn't failure. It's that we learn from it and we don't have time to dwell on it. That is why this repetitive nature of growth, stimulus, achieve, challenge, achieve, challenge, is important. Failure is absolutely a part of it. It shouldn't be scary. When we talk about the Holy Grail of highest performance, where mind and body come together, it is flow. This nonconscious state, if you will, where your skill sets are honed, however you have honed them, which includes a lot of failure, where these abilities and skill sets match an equal challenge or slightly stretched challenge where you are hyper focused. Things get slow, and you can really relax where you are hyper present. It is expression of all of the things that we have talked about. That is the ultimate desirable state that we all want to get in, that nonconscious space. That is why you have to own these systems and being in a culture, because environment matters, that sets you up to win day in and day out, where you are empowered to do it, you are owning the responsibility to have gratitude and grit, have continuous improvement, in order to play your position as well as it can be played. But, it is for a greater purpose and that should charge you up in every different way.

Bolin: Thank you for your time and the many people that you have impacted over the years.

Verstegen: I want to thank you and your teammates for your service. There is not a morning or an evening that goes by that I don't start it off or finish it off without giving great gratitude for the freedoms that we enjoy. Thank you!