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## Team Culture

One of the major differences between team sports and individual sports is the fact that in order to be successful you must rely on others. No matter how dominant, a player, he/she needs the help of dependable and competent teammates. It is often said that Michael Jordan never won a championship until he was able to understand and apply this concept.

An important job of a coach is to get the players to work together. The coach needs to blend the unique individual strengths and weaknesses of the players into a unit that works as one. We often hear this called by sport psychologists as team building. There is now a whole industry of corporate team building consultants. Very often it involves a number of team building activities where the group members do activities designed to work on such concepts as: leadership, communication, decision making, problem solving and trust. The idea is that by doing these activities there will be a transfer of the lessons learned to the workplace. These activities have a place in the world of sport, but it is the coach's responsibility to make sure the lessons are applied and emphasized with the team. One of the best ways to ensure this emphasis is to establish a team culture. While attending the World Championships one could see how different countries had unique team rituals that defined their team culture.

New Zealand, as the host, has one of the most unique pregame team rituals. As any fan of international rugby will know the All Blacks, the national team of New Zealand, performs the haka before each game. It is a ritual greeting from the Maori people to judge the intentions of a visitor. It involves a coordinated ritual chanting and gestures performed while facing their opponent. It definitely bonds the players and gets them emotionally ready to play. Opponents who are not ready for the haka can be unnerved by the experience. What makes this extraordinary for me is that the entire country of New Zealand has embraced this custom. You can buy souvenir T-shirts with the haka emblazoned on the front. New Zealand is very similar to Canada in that it is very multi-cultural. For people of very diverse ethnic backgrounds to embrace this Maori tradition is something special to see. Is it an advantage or disadvantage to have a diverse population when trying to develop a team culture? Originally it would appear to be easier when everyone has the same background and beliefs. With a diverse group you cannot assume that a team culture will develop. Left on their own players will form cliques. They will tend to associate with the players they feel the most comfortable with. As the coach we are responsible for ensuring every player has a voice and place on the team. Unchecked the dominant clique can create a team culture that may drain energy from the team. Personally, I feel a team with players from different backgrounds can be a plus. It takes a little more work on the part of the coach in learning to balance the dynamic between the team and the individual.

The advent of PIDs (personal isolation devices; cell phones, computers, iPods etc. especially when combined with headphones) has contributed to player isolation among

team members. Coaches need to seriously consider when these devices can be used. The Australian team was not allowed to use head phones once the team left the hotel for the game. The coach wanted the players to communicate with each other. This type of policy needs to be decided upon before the competition. If imposed on the spur of the moment it may cause a bigger problem.

Other teams used the national anthem as way to bond the team and focus their emotional energy before the game began. The Australians and the Argentineans both would lock arms and sing their anthems as it was played. I attended the Just for Laughs comedy festival the other night. It was British comedy night. The comedian Bill Carr made the observation; "What's up with the Canadian national anthem. It is kind of afterthought? Oh! ...Canada. It doesn't have to be this way. I sing the anthem every time (not very loud as I don't want to scare the people beside me) it is played. I tell people I am practicing for when it will be played for at gold medal presentation. Then I will sing as loud as possible and with tears of joy in my eyes.

For the team from Croatia they used the postgame as a way to bond. Win or lose they would go to their fans and join in a rousing version of a Croatian song. It was their way of saying; 'thanks for your support'. In general, the fans for the teams from Europe, South America and Africa go to cheer on their team while in North America fans often feel their job is to be the critic. The fans are quick to point out the negative play. For those people who have had the experience of going to a Toronto Maple Leafs game vs. a Toronto FC game you will know what I mean. At the hockey game the crowds spends the majority of the game being critical of the players and the coach. Contrast that with the soccer game where the crowd spends the entire game in well choreographed songs and cheers. Negative fan support has trickled down into the amateur ranks. I often find it difficult to sit in the crowd of a youth basketball game because of the critical comments from the crowd. This negative environment impacts the culture of the team. It can be very difficult to rally from adversity when the crowd magnifies the gloom with their critical comments instead of positive cheering.

Coach Steve Konchalski had some interesting thoughts on how you can create a team culture. Anyone who has ever seen his St. FX. teams knows that they come ready to play. He stressed that when the team left the locker room they came out as a team. He also wanted them to come out with passion and energy. This build up started with the team meal. He felt this was the start of the pregame preparation. Everyone needed to be in attendance. From there the team had a practiced routine that led to the tip off. He spent time immediately after the meal thinking of what little words of advice he would say to each player before the start of the game. During the game part of the culture he instilled were the players on the bench giving energy to the team.

How a team spends it times away from the court is important in building a team culture. Team Canada's coach, Greg Francis, has a unique ritual before the first game of an international tournament. It involves the handing out to the game uniforms. To see the players get their team Canada jersey is a special feeling. The team also ate all meals together. How players make use of down time is very important in building a positive

team culture. There is a division between team time and individual time. The coach needs to ensure a balance. Too much time together is just as bad as not spending time together. One of the best team building activities the Canadian team did was spend our off day touring the sights of Auckland. Seeing these young men climb down into the crater of a volcano was spectacle I will never forget. Locking players away in the hotel room and asking them to think only of basketball is very draining to the players in the long term. No one can stay focused for that long. Former national team coach, Peter Ennis, used to talk about the gold and green zone. The gold zone was when the players needed to be thinking basketball. The green zone was when they needed to let go of basketball and be regular teenagers. As a coach it was important to help players recognize the difference.

In summary, the coach must take the responsibility to develop a positive team culture. The coach needs to consider how the players will interact with one another both on and off the floor. Some things to consider:

- When is team time and when is individual time?
- What rituals and routines does your team have; pre-game, in-game and post game? Do they add or subtract from the team's performance?
- What traditions do you have that binds this team with past players and teams? How do we dress? How do we behave when we are together?