

Train Your Brain:

Peak Performance through Mental Training

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Excelling in sport – especially at the high school level – isn't always the easiest thing to accomplish. With the amount of pressures adolescents face on a daily basis, who can blame them if they lose focus every now and then? The purpose of this five-part series is to help you maintain that focus and drive through the use of some simple psychological tools. And no, you're not crazy just because you decide to slip a little mind power into your game. Although, you are probably crazy if you don't see this stuff being able to help you get to that next level whether that be playing in college, winning districts, or even just making the team.

You don't need to read these chapters in any type of sequential order. Feel free to read what interests you and go from there. Please note that the information presented in these lessons is by no means meant to undermine anything said or taught by your coach. The information presented is simply a summary of some of the more popular trends and research in sport and exercise psychology. Anyone interested in these topics could hop on-line or visit the media center to get this information.



Chapter 1: Team Cohesion

"In order to have a winner, the team must have a feeling of unity; every player must put the team first – ahead of personal glory."

– Paul "Bear" Bryant, Head Coach, Alabama Football

Team cohesion – or what is more commonly referred to as team unity – is one of the fundamental blocks upon which effective individual and team performance is built. Through my experience, I have found that cohesion is often recognized and referred to as a dynamic process that is reflected in a group's tendency to stick together while pursuing its goals and objective. A cohesive group will adapt and evolve to achieve whatever goals and objectives have been established, even when they are modified or changed.

Sport teams are perfect examples of task-performing groups who have come together in pursuit of a common goal or objective, such as a team championship, winning season, etc. Individuals in task-performing groups have been found to rally around two principal concerns:

- (1) **Task cohesion** – the degree to which team members come together to achieve a specific and identifiable goal.
- (2) **Social cohesion** – the degree to which individuals enjoy being a part of the team and like one another.

The first of these two concerns can include work output, performance effectiveness, and team success. The second concern involves factors such as friendship, affiliation, morale, or any other factor an athlete may find personally satisfying.

Cohesion and Performance

As old as time itself, the classic "chicken or the egg" question seems to find its way into many conversations about many different things. So, why should this topic be any different? Does cohesion affect performance or does performance effect cohesion? What ever the case may be, all teams start out as simply a collection of individuals. No matter what the relationship is between performance and cohesion, it is absolutely vital to get the most out of both if a team wants to be successful.

Research has consistently stated that strong relationship or correlation between cohesion and team performance. In fact, could be said that there is a positive linear relationship between the two (e.g., when the level of cohesion goes up, so does the level of performance). In a recent study on team cohesion, the researcher states that 83% of the studies he reviewed indicated such a linear relationship (Turman, 2003).

Coaches and athletes need to create a vision of the team as greater than any individual on it (Veach & May, 2005). The concept of creating a "team first" environment is nothing new to coaches and the team leaders. Despite this widely accepted tenant of developing a successful team, it won't just happen on it's own. That being said, if you truly want to put together a cohesive team, you can do it if you take the necessary steps.

Promoting cohesion

Depending on the sport you play, the degree of cohesion your team requires to be successful may vary. For the most part, sports such as golf, track, swimming, diving, gymnastics, and wrestling require a relatively low degree of cohesion. Sports such as basketball, soccer, field hockey, lacrosse, and volleyball require a very high level of cohesiveness. There are some sports, like track and swimming, which include relays as a part of competition and thus require a higher level of cohesiveness amongst the members of the relay teams.

- ♦ **Encourage communication.** With the advent of e-mail the ability to maintain high levels of communication should be a fundamental priority of coaches and teammates. Sending out a e-mail once or twice a week is an easy way to indirectly remind everyone that they are part of a team. Plus, it's keeps everyone on the same page and informed of what is on the agenda.
- ♦ **Team goals.** Just like individual goals, team goals need to be specific, measurable, and challenging. Team goals will help team members stay united and focused on the tasks that need to be accomplished. Team goals can be set with or without the help of the coach, but no matter if he or she is involved, every member of the team should be involved in the discussion and setting of these goals.
- ♦ **Define individual roles.** Stressing the importance of each role to overall team success will help to enhance cohesion. Clear expectations must be established and everyone must be held accountable for their assigned responsibilities. If athletes understand, accept, and carry out their individual roles, they will be more likely to pull together in the common pursuit of achieving the team's goals.
- ♦ **Encourage your team's identity.** This can be done through team warm-ups, jackets, t-shirts, or anything to set your team apart from the other teams in your school, district, or region. Moving away from your school's traditional colors for a change of pace can make team members feel unique and like they have something in common.

- ◆ **Social activities.** What does your team do after competitions or practices? Does everyone go their own way and do their own thing? Something as simple as going out to eat as a team after games allows everyone to relax and unwind together. Setting up a weekly dinner on a designated day will give athletes something to look forward to each week. Many teams schedule a “lock-in” during the early portion of the season immediately after the team has been decided. The 10-12 hours spent together almost force team members to become more familiar with each other and give them an experience they can refer to later in the season when the level of “fun” goes down as the team becomes involved in the post-season. Social activities also give teammates a chance to see each other in a situation outside that of practice and competition. Laughing, joking around, and having fun together allows athletes to spend time together that is not strenuous or dull. Time spent off the field can also include studying together, going to the movies before or after games, team meetings, team picnics, pep rallies, and going to team homes.
- ◆ **Rotate roommates.** If your team makes regular overnight trips during the season or off-season, suggest to your coach or the person responsible that alternating roommates will help to encourage teammates to socialize with and get to know each other better.
- ◆ **Set-up secret pals or buddies.** Assigning secret “pals” or “buddies” for the season allows teammates to get to know someone that they might not normally have the chance to. This is also a chance for someone who might not be as vocal or outgoing to offer support or positive reinforcement in a different way.
- ◆ **Team prayer.** Often overlooked and undervalued as a method of enhancing team cohesion, team prayer has been shown to make a sizable impact according to athletes. It is not abnormal to hear athletes describe the separation that can occur between certain groups on a team. For example, offensive players can have limited interaction with defensive players, starters can find themselves feeling separated from the non-starters, players who did not dress described animosity towards those who traveled, and there was a feeling of separation described by members of different racial and cultural groups (Turman, 2003). Athletes have described team prayer as “one of the most effective strategies for allowing separation, animosity, and individual prejudices to be wiped away moments before game time” (Turman, 2003; p. 101). Team prayer should be a chance to put aside any conflicts and come together as a team. Team prayer should also not be perceived so much as a spiritual event, but as a chance to stress the importance of trusting in your teammates.
- ◆ **Encourage intra-team competition and rivalry.** In such individual sports as swimming, track, wrestling, tennis, and golf, a little “sibling rivalry” can be healthy and motivating. Because in such sports as these, the athletes don’t necessarily need to rely on one another that much, it allows a different type of cohesiveness, one where teammates push each other to succeed.

What Team Members Can Do

Veach and May (2005) offered a list of reminders for athletes, coaches, and parents when it comes to their contribution in building a cohesive team. Because we are discussing what you (the athlete) can do to help your team become a successful as possible, we’ll focus on the reminders aimed at you. So, without further ado:

- ◆ **Get to know each other.** The better you know each other, the easier it will be to work together and accept individual differences.

- ◆ **Communicate honestly and effectively.** A lack of communication most always leads to problems. Team members should not only work at keeping the lines of communication open with their teammates, but also with the members of the coaching staff.
- ◆ **Resolve conflicts immediately.** Letting problems fester can do nothing but cause problems. If you have concern, complaint, or conflict, it is best to resolve the problem as soon as possible rather than gripe, complain, and vent behind the scenes. It is very important to respond to the problem quickly so that the negative feelings don’t build up and explode later.
- ◆ **Be positive and help each other.** Supporting each other goes a long way towards building trust and support.
- ◆ **Accept responsibility.** Understand your role in relation to those of your teammates. Be prepared to accept the responsibilities that are bestowed upon and trust that others will accept theirs.
- ◆ **Give 100% effort 100% of the time.** Working hard in practice and during competition is not only infectious, but it helps to pull teammates together. Let each team member use their strengths to better the team.

Measuring Cohesion

Despite what you may think, measuring the cohesiveness of a sports team is not a difficult thing to do. There are a number of instruments (questionnaires) that can be administered to test a team’s cohesion or measure the satisfaction of its members. These questionnaires can be administered anonymously and informally. Speak with the coaching staff of your team about the possibility of administering such a survey – the results that are uncovered are bound to be beneficial to them as well.

Barriers to Team Cohesion

(adapted from Weinberg & Gould, 2003)

- Breakdown in communication.**
- Disagreement on team goals.**
- Conflict of roles amongst team members.**
- Team members struggling for power.**
- Clash of personalities on the team.**
- Formation of social cliques.**
- Frequent turnover of team members.**

References

- Turman, P. D. (2003). Coaches and cohesion: The impact of coaching techniques on team cohesion in the small group sport setting. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 26 (1), 86-104.
- Veach, T. L., & May, J. R. (2005). Teamwork: For the good of the whole. In S. Murphy (Ed.), *The sport psych handbook*. Human Kinetics: Champaign, IL.
- Weinberg, R. S., & Gould, D. G. (2003). *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (3rd edition). Human Kinetics: Champaign, IL.