



should call this to his/her attention. It is critical that coaches make their athletes feel comfortable talking about these health issues.

III. Regular check-ups - Athletes should visit their team physician and/or consulting gynecologist for regular check-ups.

WHAT CAN COACHES DO?

I. Initiate discussion - Coaches should clearly communicate to athletes the importance of immediately investigating menstrual irregularities, emphasizing their effect on athletic performance and later health. A team meeting should be held to discuss the topic.

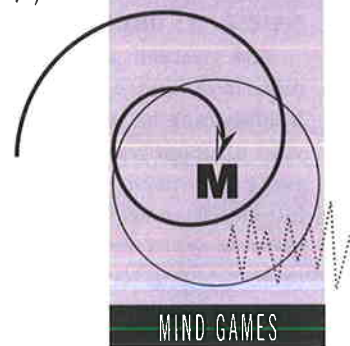
II. Become more informed - Coaches should learn as much about menstrual irregularities as possible. Handouts are often available from local physicians and nutritionists.

III. Refer to physicians and specialists - If an athlete approaches a coach with a menstrual irregularity question, the coach should refer that player to the athletic trainer, team physician, or their personal physician.

Menstrual irregularities need not alter the life of the young female athlete. Unfortunately for many athletes, the importance of treating them is secondary to improving performance. Coaches and the sports medicine team, through educational programs, play an important role in the overall health and well-being of the athlete, aiding not only athletic performance but quality of life.

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Preparing For Major Competitions: Team-Building



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(This is the first of a three part series on preparing for major competitions. Parts two and three will discuss practicing for the stress of big competitions, and competition mental plans, respectively)

Many coaches and athletes believe team-building is an important factor in performance at the Olympic Games and other international competitions, especially for team sports. What surprises many people is that team-building may also be critical for success in individual sports. In fact, the challenge of team-building is often more of an issue for coaches of individual sports. Unlike team sports, where team-building occurs naturally in training and competition, individual sport coaches often face the task of working with a "team" of individual athletes brought together before a major trip. This article outlines basic team-building concepts for coaches who seek to develop a team environment

(Continued on page 10)



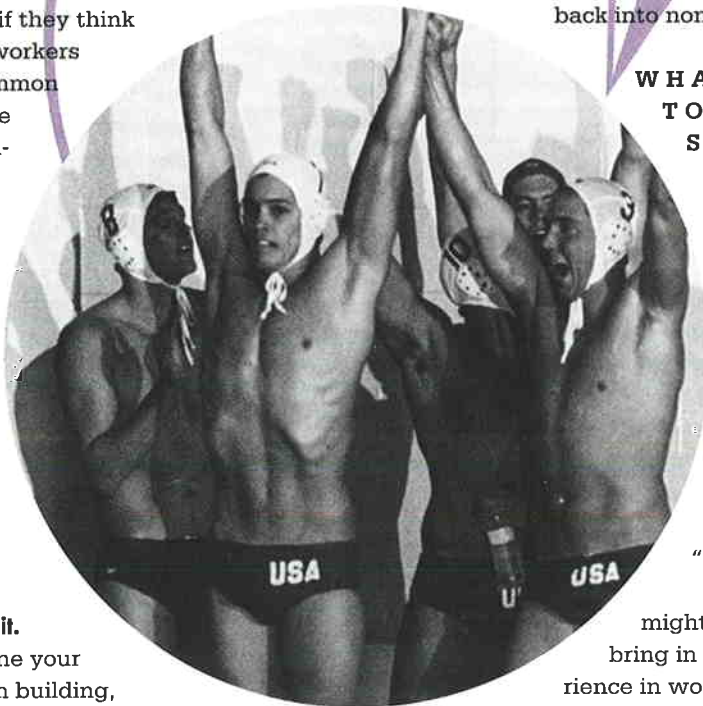


STEP 1: Decide if it's important enough to take the time.

Ask yourself: *Does a team environment promote individual excellence, or interfere with it?* Medals may be won or lost based on how well your athletes work and live together in training and competition settings. If you direct team-building activities toward performance, rather than because you want everyone to be happy, your team-building work will be more focused and effective.

STEP 2: Decide what you expect from a team.

You may not be able to develop the ideal team environment with the athletes you are currently coaching; the baseball champion Oakland A's of the early 1970s, for example, were notorious for internal friction. Thus, while you may want your athletes to socialize and be friends, these same athletes may have developed rivalries as they competed for team slots; therefore, it may be more appropriate to make the team environment "professional" rather than family-like or friendship-based. In other words, some athletes respond better if they think of teammates as co-workers striving toward a common goal. Once you decide the kind of team environment you want, make your athletes understand that environment is expected. If the athletes do not understand what is expected, developing the team environment envisioned by the coach will be very difficult to achieve.



STEP 3: Talk about it.

Once you determine your expectations for team building, you need to communicate those expectations to your athletes. Early in the team-building process, have a team meeting to discuss the advantages and challenges of successful team building. Consider adopting the following meeting structure to start the team-building process.

- 1) Team Strengths:** Discuss the things that make the group strong. These characteristics can be used as rallying points during competition.
- 2) Team Challenges:** What things might get in the way of a strong team and strong performances? Have the team brainstorm about typical challenges such as team negativity, fear of competition, or internal conflict that can cause dissent. If the team acknowledges challenges, it will be easier to overcome them.

3) Team Goals: Have the team decide on goals for the entire group. These goals should help make individual goals easier to achieve. Examples include: better communication, competing with other teams rather than members of your own team or focusing on the team strengths during competition.

STEP 4: Walk the talk.

Show the importance of team goals by emphasizing them prior to and during competition; evaluate whether the team is achieving the goals. Don't be afraid to have a team meeting during competition which focuses on re-charging the team, reminding the team of its strengths, challenges, and goals. Remember, *the team looks to the coach for reinforcement*; if the coach acts on team goals, the athletes will follow his/her lead. Once athletes see that you expect the team environment to support individual excellence, they will make an effort to work for the team environment. If the athletes see you ignoring team issues, they will become cynical and slip back into nonproductive behaviors.

WHAT ABOUT TOUGH SITUATIONS?

There are a number of situations which may interfere with effective team-building. These situations include:

- 1) a history of conflict between two or more of the team members.
- 2) a lack of confidence in your own ability as a "team-builder."

In these situations, it might be worthwhile to bring in a consultant with experience in working with teams.

Bringing in a sport psychology consultant may offer some advantages for a coach in a tough team-building situation. Consultants should not make decisions about athletes' playing time or training issues, and consultants should be able to tolerate the strong emotions that sometimes occur in team-building. A good consultant can free up a coaching staff to become part of the team-building process rather than just orchestrating it. Finally, watching a consultant work on team-building can provide coaches with new ideas on handling these issues in the future.

For information about the USOC's Sport Psychology Registry of consultants around the country, call the Sport Science and Technology Division of the USOC, at (719) 578-4516.