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ON SPORT PSYCHOLOGY



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The previous two columns highlighted a number of distractions and issues that have the potential to disturb a "personal best performance," outlined the best perspective to take into a competition, and articulated three distinct phases of preparation that ensure a solid Olympic performance. As we move closer to the start of the 2000 Olympic Games, as well as toward other major summer competitions, Penny Werthner and Cal Botterill continue the dialogue on how to go about ensuring great performances and look at specific ways to build a group of athletes into an effective team.

We know that great performances happen in sport when an athlete feels a sense of "team." How exactly does that happen? Are there different kinds of teams? How can you build a "team" in individual sports? What are some of the actions a coach can take that help facilitate a team developing well and in time for a major competition?

Let's look at each of these questions.

ARE THERE DIFFERENT KINDS OF TEAMS?

When we think of building a "team," we often think first of the team sports, such as basketball, hockey, or water polo. This is not surprising because we know that to play well and succeed in these sports, it is necessary for all the athletes to articulate and share a common purpose and a common goal, such as qualifying for the Olympics, or winning a medal. We also know that it is crucial to the success of such teams that each athlete values being a part of the "team," that they work well together, and that they clearly understand and, equally importantly, accept their role on the team.

When we think of individual sports, we often don't automatically think of "team." Yet we can go about building effective teams within these sports, although it might be in a different way than in the team sports. It is important to think about individual sports from two differing "team" perspectives. There are the sports such as canoe/kayak and rowing where once the team is selected, only one Canadian athlete competes in each event, such as **Caroline Brunet** in women's K1, or **Steve Giles** in men's C1. Then there are the sports such as speed skating, athletics, and swimming where, even when the team is selected,

two or more teammates contest each event. At the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics, four Canadian teammates—**Jeremy Wotherspoon**, **Kevin Overland**, **Sylvain Bouchard**, and **Patrick Bouchard**—competed for Canada in the men's 500m and 1000m. (Their results were phenomenal. In the 500m for example, Wotherspoon won silver, Overland bronze, Sylvain Bouchard finished fourth, and Patrick Bouchard was fifth). Building a sense of "team" in individual circumstances is more difficult, but it is certainly possible.

An aspect of "team" that does exist within certain individual sports is relay teams and crew boats. For example, relay teams in athletics or short track speed skating, K2's, K4's, C2's in canoe/kayak, and the women's or men's eight in rowing are opportunities for the coach to create a "team" within a team.

HOW CAN YOU BUILD A "TEAM" IN INDIVIDUAL SPORTS?

Building an effective team in any sport is a critical factor in ensuring an environment that allows great performances by each and every athlete on a team. When you are able to move athletes from a group of individuals, with a primary focus on their own personal interests, toward a team, where there is a common focus and a significant emphasis on helping each other as well as themselves, the chances of succeeding at the international level grow significantly.

The nature of team sports requires regular team meetings to clarify and revisit team goals, discuss strategy, resolve issues, plan for each game, and debrief. Individual meetings, to ensure that each athlete clearly understands her or his role, are extremely important, but occur less regularly. In individual sports, the shift in emphasis is noticeable. As a coach in an individual sport, you might have training groups, but the majority of your feedback and discussion about training is with the individual athlete; team meetings are less frequent.

However, in all sports, it is through these team meetings, as well as through training and competing together, that a "team" is successfully

built. We need only look back one issue of *Coaches Report* to the lead article "Creating an Olympic Success Story," to see the value of bringing athletes and coaches together to discuss thoughts and emotions, to search for and find commonalities, and to develop an understanding and appreciation of the power of "team."

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE ACTIONS A COACH CAN TAKE THAT FACILITATE THEIR TEAM DEVELOPING WELL AND IN TIME FOR A MAJOR COMPETITION?

One of the most fundamental ways coaches can build an effective team is to ensure that the communication between themselves and their athletes is open and frequent. What does that really mean? It means setting up regular meetings, both individually and with the team as a whole, to discuss training, to plan and prepare for a competition, to agree upon guidelines for the team. Most importantly, it means setting up working sessions to talk about what is required to build a "real team," to discuss thoughts and feelings, and to work honestly through issues or concerns.

You might begin by developing an understanding and appreciation of the value in building a team and the importance of a shared willingness on the part of everyone involved to work toward developing a team. You might discuss the concept of "positive rivalries," particularly in an individual sport where teammates continue to compete against each other at major competitions. In essence, what this means is, "I hope you are good, because that means I need to be better and that is good for both of us." When athletes and coaches really embrace this idea, everyone wins and the mind is clearer to focus on the competition ahead. You might want to talk about how each athlete wants to feel, both as a group and individually, when the worlds or Olympics are over. This encourages each athlete to think beyond just the winning of a medal. You might want to discuss the differences between a "real team" where teammates feel genuine support and caring, and a "pseudo team," where athletes and/or coaches say they agree to work together, but their actions say otherwise. You might want to encourage a discussion of possible emotional



dilemmas, for example if someone gets really stressed or terrified, who will they seek help from, what do they need to do? This can lead to further dialogue and a plan of action for who is in the "bubble" with the athlete, and who is outside.

Let's look at specific examples of what was done to ensure the successful development of a powerful "team."

Looking back at the Olympic long track and short track speed skating teams selected for the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics, there were numerous ways that "team" was built within these individual sports. First of all, prior to Nagano, the two teams had been quite separate entities. In trying to build the two teams into one powerful skating team at the Olympics, it was decided that a summer training camp would be held in Calgary with both teams together for the first time. Over the course of 10 days, the athletes did some training sessions together and there were working sessions outside of these physical training sessions to begin the process of understanding how they would all work together. There were fun team-building sessions on the football field, with the coaches leading the way. There was a dinner party at a coach's house.

The summer training camp was the beginning of building a powerful team and served a number of purposes. It reminded the athletes that they were all working hard physically, with at least one goal in common: each was committed to doing their best and, in many cases, to winning medals in Nagano. It also enabled the athletes to get to know each other better, in situations both inside and outside of training, and in a relaxed summer environment. The building of a climate of respect and better understanding of each other, both within each team and across the two teams, led, ultimately, to incredible mutual support at the Olympics. The short track team athletes and coaches went out to support the long track athletes, and the long trackers came out in full force on the final day of competition to support the short trackers.

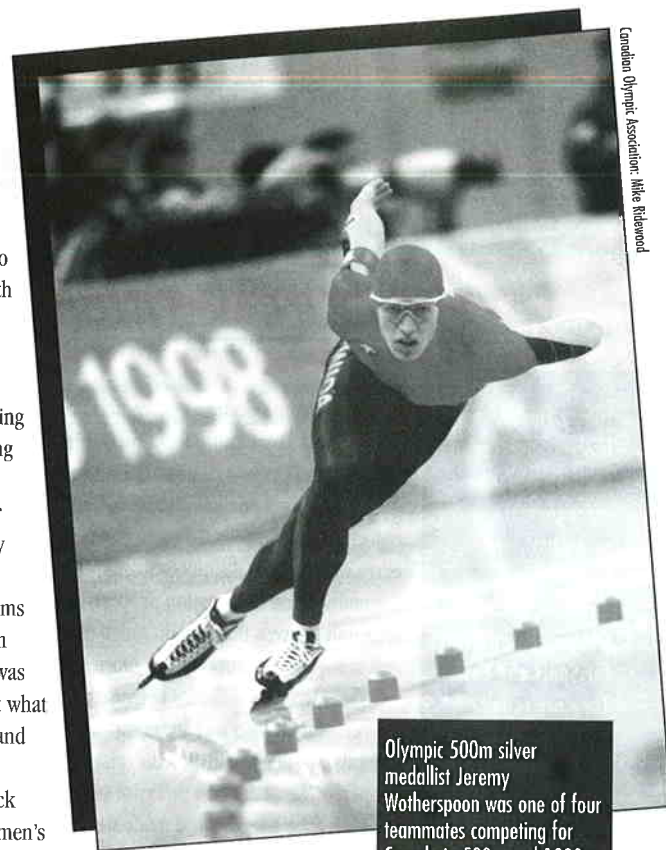
Another example of how "team" was built was the meetings for each of the teams prior to leaving for the Olympics. In the case of the short track team, all the athletes, coaches, and support staff met just prior to departure to set the scene for the demanding three weeks in Japan. Individuals (including coaches, athletes, and support staff) were asked what they needed to be at their best, what kinds of things they didn't need/didn't want/or might hurt their performance, and what kinds of things they might do to help other team

members. Athletes talked about needing it to be quiet after 11 p.m., about needing help around skate preparation, about wanting to be left alone to prepare for their race, about who they wanted around them prior to racing, about being willing to help with someone else's skates, "only please don't ask for that help in the hours right before my race." All of this and much more led to greater understanding of each other, both as individuals trying to excel at the Olympics and as teammates who could help each other accomplish these goals (or, at the very least, not hurt another athlete's preparation). When issues and problems arose in the village, they were so much easier to resolve, because often what was required was simply a reminder about what had been talked about, agreed upon, and planned for back in Calgary.

A final example from the short track team has to do with the women's and men's relay team, a "team" within a team. The preparation began three years before the 1998 Olympics. In those three seasons, at the '95, '96, and '97 world championships, most world cup competitions, and the Olympic qualifier, the relay team members and the coaches met to discuss and plan for each race. Given the years of experience and expertise of the athletes on each of these teams, the coaches listened first to the athletes' plan, and then adjusted, added, or reminded the athletes of what they needed to do to race really well. None of these meetings lasted much more than a half hour, but they ensured that all four athletes on each team knew what their job was and agreed upon how to race that particular race. It became a normal and important part of the preparation for racing leading up to the Olympics. **Derrick Campbell**, a member of the men's gold-medal-winning relay team, said: "Those meetings helped us be so prepared. They reminded us of all the things we knew we should and could do." As a result, coming into Nagano, the relay teams felt very much a "team" and extremely well prepared.

WHAT ARE THE LESSONS LEARNED FROM THESE EXAMPLES?

First, the coach or coaches in these sports played a critical role in putting in place the structure that helped facilitate a group of athletes moving toward becoming a genuine "team." Then, with structure and a process in place, the coaches were able to step back a bit and listen to what the athletes had



Canadian Olympic Association: Mike Richardson

Olympic 500m silver medalist Jeremy Wotherspoon was one of four teammates competing for Canada in 500m and 1000m.

to say, to really hear what they felt they needed or wanted to do, and to allow each athlete freedom to make some decisions and take personal responsibility.

Second, an understanding was developed and cultivated over time, by the athletes, coaches, and others involved with the team, that building an effective "real team," with the ensuing energy and feelings of mutual support, would be a significant factor in achieving success, for both the individual athlete's performance and for the overall success of the team.

Third, building a team and good communication through meeting, talking, and listening are inexplicably linked and are an ongoing process, which means you don't just meet once or talk once and assume all is well.

Finally, as powerful as this concept of building team is, it is also extremely fragile. Ensuring the continued existence of a strong team requires continual work and commitment by every individual involved with the team. ❖

ENDNOTE: *It is important to point out here that in the examples we've used, these individuals were experienced Olympic level athletes. With younger, less experienced athletes, you would need to still listen well, but more direction and structure would be required and looked for by the athletes.*