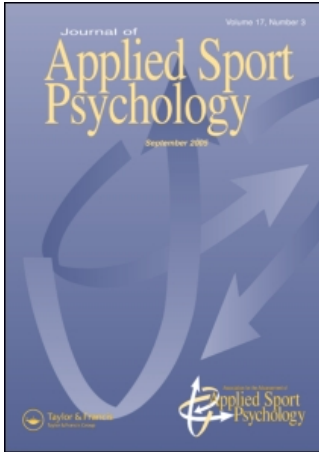


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Expert Coaches' Perceptions of Team Building

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To date, most team building programs in sport have assessed athletes' perceptions of improved team functioning. However, the coach plays an invaluable role in the development of the team. The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions of expert coaches on the topic of team building and to create an understanding of team building strategies specific to elite sport. Focus group methodology was implemented with a group of Canadian intercollegiate coaches. Twenty-nine coaches participated in one of five focus group sessions. Six themes emerged from the analysis: (a) fundamental elements of team building, (b) team environment, (c) coach's role and characteristics, (d) team building activities, (e) lessons learned, and (f) relationship between team building/cohesion/performance. Results improved the understanding of group cohesion and team building, and specifically addressed the role of the coach in developing a cohesive team.

Cohesion has often been cited as a central and crucial element in the development of a team of people working together (Zander, 1975). Cohesion, a fundamental group property, has been defined as "a dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs" (Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1997, p. 3). If cohesion is the desired final outcome, then team building is the process to facilitate its development.

Team building can be characterized as team enhancement or team improvement (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998). When team building is successful, it is assumed that team synergy is enhanced which leads to improved team performance. Historically, team building has played an important role in business and industry. A meta-analysis by Neuman, Edwards, and Raju (1989) reviewed 126 studies that utilized various organizational development methods to modify employee satisfaction and/or other attitudes. Multifaceted interventions (e.g., team building) demonstrated greater effectiveness in changing attitudes than did interventions that

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focused on human processes (e.g., goal setting, participative decision making) or modifying techno structure (e.g., those intended to affect work content, work method or interpersonal relationships).

Team building research in the sport and exercise domains has received relatively scant attention. Anecdotal reports have highlighted the benefits of team building on cohesion in a sporting environment (Botterill, 1990; Carron, Spink, & Prapavessis, 1997; Yukelson, 1997). The positive effects of team building have recently been reported in three empirical investigations that used various methodologies to investigate factors that helped and hindered elite American athlete performance (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Voight & Callaghan, 2001). In the first of these studies, Gould and colleagues used focus group methodology with athletes and individual interviews with coaches. One of their conclusions was that including team building exercises in training programs increased the development of cohesion and improved performance. As well, Voight and Callaghan's team building intervention program with two university women's soccer teams was found to improve team unity and performance. Finally, conclusions based on quantitative investigations that have specifically examined the relationship between team building activities and increased cohesion have been equivocal, with some finding no evidence to support this relationship (Bloom & Stevens, 2002; Prapavessis, Carron, & Spink, 1996), while others have reported improved perceptions (Cogan & Petrie, 1995; Stevens & Bloom, in press; McClure & Foster, 1991).

While findings regarding the importance of team building in sport are not clearly established, most would agree that one of the most pivotal roles in the team building process belongs to the coach. In fact, Yukelson's (1997) multifaceted approach to conducting team building in sport includes seven suggestions for ways that coaches can impact team functioning: (a) get to know athletes as unique individuals, (b) develop pride in group membership and a sense of team identity, (c) develop a comprehensive team goal setting program, (d) provide for goal evaluations, (e) clarify role expectations, (f) set aside time for team meetings, and (g) establish a player counsel.

Only one known study to date has examined the strategies used by coaches to develop cohesion. Ryska and Cooley (1999) conducted an exploratory study to survey coaches as to their adopted strategies. Two general themes emerged. Coaches reported strategies designed to enhance the individual athletes' bond to the team as a social unit (e.g., learning personal information about each athlete, accepting individual differences). Coaches also reported strategies designed to clarify task cohesion. This dimension, labeled as role development, included developing a sense of team ownership and clarifying role behaviors. Patterns of strategy use differed across gender, competitive level, sport type, and sporting culture.

While the aforementioned article offers valuable insight into the strategies used by coaches to increase cohesion, a more detailed understanding of team building use is necessary. In particular, how and where does team building fit into the overall job of the coach? A good starting point might be Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, and Russell's (1995) coaching model that defined the main components for creating a high performance environment. They found that the overall goal of any coach is the development of the athlete. This can be achieved across various dimensions. Most relevant to the present investigation are those classified as the central components (i.e., organization, training, competition).

The organization component involves applying knowledge towards establishing optimal conditions for training and competition by structuring and coordinating the task involved in reaching the goal. This includes tasks such as setting a vision, seasonal planning, establishing team rules, and working with assistant coaches (Côté et al., 1995; Desjardins, 1996). The training element involves the different components of technical, tactical, physical, and mental

training (Bloom, 2002). The competition component involves all aspects that occur on the day of the game, including those in pre-competition, during competition, and post-competition (Bloom, Durand-Bush, & Salmela, 1996; Côté et al., 1995). Thus, it is possible to surmise that if team building is to occur in sport, it would begin with the coach's organizational ideas, carry over to the training sessions, and ultimately impact performance during competition.

In sum, many individuals contribute to the team building process in sport, although the most crucial person for developing the team may be the coach. Coaches participate in almost all aspects of team life. Thus, it is interesting to note that there are no documented empirical accounts in the sport psychology literature that solely focus on obtaining coaches' thoughts on the importance and relevance of team building and on the process of carrying out team building activities. The purpose of the present study was to assess the perceptions of expert coaches on the topic of team building and to create an understanding of team building strategies specific to elite sports.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were head coaches ($N = 29$) from five higher education institutions affiliated with the Canadian Inter-University Sport (CIS) league, which is comparable to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the United States. The CIS is an organization for student-athletes that coordinate national championships for different university sports in Canada. It provides a framework for student-athletes pursuing excellence in their sport while attending university. Coaches were recruited with the assistance of the athletic director at each university and purposely represented a variety of individual and team sports. The coaching sample was comprised of 6 females and 23 males. Head coaching experience ranged from 2 to 30 years ($M = 13.2$ years, $Md = 12$ years). See Table 1 for a more detailed demographic description.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were obtained through focus group interviews led by a moderator and an assistant moderator (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). The moderator had extensive experience with qualitative interviewing techniques. The assistant moderator was a sport psychology student who had coached at the university level. A videographer who had coached at the university level was also present at each session. Each subject participated in one focus group session of 90 to 120 minutes in duration. The focus groups were held at each of the five universities and conducted at a mutually convenient time for the coaches. Each session was videotaped and audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis. At the time of the interview, the competitive season was completed for all coaches.

During the focus group interviews, coaches were asked to define their perceptions and use of team building activities. The moderator followed an interview guide during each session. Following the suggestions of Morgan and Krueger (1998), the interview was divided into 6 main areas: (a) opening questions, (b) introductory questions, (c) transition questions, (d) key questions, (e) ending questions, and (f) summary questions. Prompts were used to expand on the explanation and understanding of each question (not all questions had prompts, only some of the key questions). Coaches were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that they could respond freely whenever they had something to contribute. The questions followed a sequence of general to specific, which allowed the participants to gradually move deeper into the topic of discussion.

Table 1
Coaches' Demographic Information

Coaching Code (#1–29)	Current Sport	Currently Coaching Males (M), Females (F), or Both (B)	Years of Coaching Experience
1	Football	M	18
2	Hockey	M	8
3	Volleyball	F	10
4	Swimming	B	17
5	Alpine Skiing	B	2
6	Soccer	B	11
7	Track & X-Country	B	10
8	Hockey	M	18
9	Basketball	B	22
10	Football	M	10
11	Nordic Skiing	B	2
12	Wrestling	B	4
13	Curling	B	15
14	Synchro	F	5
15	Lacrosse	B	12
16	Volleyball	B	17
17	Basketball	F	20
18	Track & Field	B	22
19	Hockey	B	6
20	X-Country	B	30
21	Volleyball	B	14
22	Hockey	M	28
23	Waterpolo	B	19
24	Soccer	B	10
25	Volleyball	F	8
26	Swimming	B	30
27	Rowing	B	17
28	Hockey	M	9
29	Rowing	B	6

Opening questions are fact-based questions, as opposed to attitudes or opinions, and are designed to make people feel comfortable. They are not intended to obtain useful information for the study and are typically not analyzed. Our opening questions were as follows: “Please tell us your name, what sport you coach and how long you have been coaching” and “What got you into coaching?”

Introductory questions encourage conversation and interaction among the participants by introducing the topic in an open-ended manner. Our introductory question was as follows: “When you hear the term team building, what comes to mind?” Introductory questions are not

critical to the analysis, but are designed to get people talking. However, given that the conceptual definitions of team building typically found in sport research were derived in organizational settings, it was important to ensure that participants and the researcher had the same understanding of the topic.

Transition questions are designed to help the participants broaden their understanding from the introductory questions. They also serve to make more of a connection between the participant and the topic of investigation. Our transition question was as follows: "Have you ever used any type of team building activities with your team?" This question also served as a logical link to the key questions.

Key questions drive a focus group session and consist of two to five questions that may take the participants 10–15 minutes each to answer. Four key questions were developed for the present investigation and are listed below:

1. Where do your team building (TB) ideas come from?

Prompt: When do you implement your ideas during the season (why at that time)?

2. What do you feel is the relationship between talent and cohesion?

3. Tell us about the TB things you tried to do but were not successful.

4. How central is the coach in building a team?

Prompt: Do you lead all sessions?

Prompt: Does your focus change during the season?

The above questions all relate to applied aspects of team building and help to develop some understanding of team building as used in elite sports (as mentioned in the purpose).

Ending questions follow the key questions. They are designed to bring closure to the discussion and to enable the participants to reflect on previous comments. Our two ending questions were, "All things considered, we have talked about several aspects of team building, including what you do, where your ideas come from, and how you do it. If you had to pick the most important element for a coach in relation to building a team, what would it be?" and "Is there anything else you would like to add about teams or anything we missed?"

A summary is completed at the end of the session whereby the moderator reviews the key points made during the focus group session. The following questions then followed the summary: "Is this an adequate summary? Does it capture what was said here today?"

Our interview guide was derived from a variety of sources that examined team building, cohesion, and coaching psychology. Because this was an exploratory analysis of a previously undeveloped topic, we relied on a variety of sources to help create our questionnaire. The following section will discuss the make-up behind each of the four key questions.

Empirical research in coaching psychology (e.g., Côté et al., 1995; Moraes, 1996) stimulated the development of our first key question. In particular, we were curious to know which of the three primary components of the Coaching Model (CM) were related to team building. For example, did coaches plan team building activities prior to the season, as they do with other elements of their team? If they did, where did their ideas originate? We also felt there might be a relationship between team building and physical training, where coaches use rope or activity courses as a way to simultaneously improve both the fitness and camaraderie levels of the team. Moraes' research on ways of enhancing coaching knowledge found that expert

coaches acquired knowledge in a variety of manners, including attending coaching clinics and seminars, reading books, networking, observing other coaches, and mentoring. We were curious to see if this extended to team building.

Our prompt for question one focused on when coaches implemented their team building activities. Paskevich, Estabrooks, Brawley, and Carron (2001) suggested that the nature of cohesion changes over time and is a function of the teams' motivation. It was suggested that a newly formed group is initially task oriented. Then, as the task element becomes clearer, the development of social cohesion increases in importance. We were interested to see whether coaches perceived team building to be an important factor to consider over the groups' development (i.e., from beginning to end). Also, we wanted to examine whether team building strategies were initially task oriented with a more social focus later in group development.

Research has differed in its opinion of the relationship between talent and cohesion. For example, an important finding from Mullen and Cooper's (1994) meta analysis was that the relationship of performance to cohesion was stronger than that of cohesion to performance. Thus, it could be argued that talent (which leads to improved performance) is more important than cohesion. Conversely, Carron, Colman, Wheeler, and Stevens (2002) found in their meta analysis that there was no difference in cohesion as a cause versus cohesion as a result of successful performance. Thus, we were interested to know what coaches felt was more important to developing a successful team—talent or cohesion.

Team building literature primarily focuses on successful strategies (e.g., Ryska & Cooley, 1999; Yukelson, 1997). Ryska and Cooley identified strategies used—not necessarily successful strategies. It was our belief that some of the coaches' ideas would not have worked. We wanted them to describe some of these situations, including the outcome.

The fourth and final key question addressed the role of the coach in team building. Our creation of this question centered around the debate in the literature as to who may be the best person to implement the team building ideas—the coach (Carron et al., 1997) or sport psychologist (Yukelson, 1997).

Data Analysis Procedures

Focus group interviews were transcribed into a computer before being printed. Categories were generated at the completion of an inductive analysis using the "long table" approach (Krueger, 1998). The approach involved dividing the text from each interview into chunks of text that conveyed a specific meaning to the researchers. These chunks of text were given labels, called codes. The researchers chose the names of the codes as being logically related to the data they represented.

Precautions were taken to ensure the trustworthiness or accuracy of the data analysis. First, the moderator and assistant moderator completed an oral summary for the participants at the completion of each session. This provided an opportunity for the participants to agree or disagree with the general interpretations of their input. Second, all of the sessions were video recorded. The purpose of this task was to serve as a back up in case the audio recordings malfunctioned and also to check the nonverbal communication patterns of the participants, should the research team deem it necessary. Third, the moderator, assistant moderator, and videographer completed a debriefing immediately after each focus group had concluded. These sessions were tape-recorded; the purpose was to gather the initial perceptions of each member of the research team while the session was still fresh in their minds. Examples of items discussed included common themes emerging and dynamics between the focus group members. A fourth precaution was to have three researchers independently check 30% of the codes in order to search for accuracy and to clarify meanings and interpretations. After the first researcher completed the analysis, each of the two researchers was provided with the list of six

codes and approximately 100 randomly selected codes for tagging. The codes were provided separately from the chunks of text in order to eliminate the bias of the first researcher. The inter-rater agreement amongst the team was high (over 80%). The only point of contention focused on understanding the definition of each term. Finally, meetings were held with members of the research team to discuss preliminary findings.

RESULTS

Six themes emerged from this analysis, and they were labeled as: (a) fundamental elements of team building, (b) team environment, (c) coach's role and characteristics, (d) team building activities, (e) lessons learned, and (f) relationship between team building/cohesion/performance. The frequency of the responses in each category can be seen in Table 2.

The following section will explain each of the six themes, including similarities and differences in the coaches' responses. The quotes have been assigned a number ranging from 1 to 29, in order to protect the identity of the coaches.

Fundamental Elements of Team Building

During the focus group interviews, the coaches were asked how they defined team building. The coaches used phrases such as group dynamics, group cohesion, team chemistry, trust, camaraderie, and the coming together of individuals in pursuit of a common goal to describe the meaning of team building. Several coaches described team building as a "synergy," where the whole was greater than the sum of its parts:

I see the team that we build as being greater than the summation of the individual parts. That involves not just defining roles but chemistry and people buying in, supporting each other, understanding their role—whether they like it or not, doing it as well as they can. (17)

When I think about team building, I think it is simply bringing a group together, establishing some mutual team goals and then getting everybody to commit to the achievement of those goals. The process by which that group of individuals makes the commitment and becomes unified with that commitment is what team building is all about. (28)

Coaches felt that team building was bringing a group of people together, establishing mutual goals and unifying individuals towards those goals.

Table 2
Frequency of Responses in Relation to Perceptions of Team Building

Category	Total Responses	Frequency (%)
Fundamental Elements of Team Building	42	14.1
Team Environment	35	11.7
Coach's Role and Characteristics	73	24.5
Team Building Activities	83	27.9
Lessons Learned	35	11.7
Relationship Between Team Building / Cohesion / Performance	30	10.1
<i>N</i>	298	100

Team Environment

After the coaches defined team building, they emphasized the importance of creating an environment for it to develop. This was first accomplished through the coach's planning and organization of the season. One coach described the structure of the season in the following manner:

They know from day one to the last practice of the year what type of workout they'll be doing and the objectives of the day, of the week, of the month. They even know the time they have to take off. (2)

According to many of the coaches, organization and planning were important because they provided consistency and stability for the athletes that contributed to a more positive environment in which team building could take place.

Coaches often mentioned the importance of recruiting. They believed that the team building process began the moment they considered new members for their team; of importance, was whether the athlete would "buy into" into the coaches' vision of the team. One coach described creating a positive team environment through recruiting in this way:

My most important team building process is to start with a foundation that is as consistent as possible. That's the thing that builds my team the fastest. It allows me to get the furthest in my opinion. It's preventative medicine. (24)

Despite the attention paid to recruiting, several coaches cited examples of one or two players that because of their attitude or behavior, were hurting the team. In situations like those, the coaches felt that the individual must be removed from the team. One coach reflects the ideas expressed by many participants:

Sometimes team building is renovations. Sometimes you've got to make that hard decision to take a detractor and take them [sic] out of the equation in order for the team to become stronger and more cohesive. That sometimes is the key to whether you're going to have success with it or not. (7)

Also in line with team environment was the fact that several coaches mentioned the assistant coaches and support staff as influential in the team building process. Assistant coaches contributed to team building by reiterating the goals and vision of the head coach. Conversely, they could hurt the team by contradicting the head coach and sending the athletes mixed messages. One coach said

You're developing more than just the athlete; you're developing a team of support people that are around those athletes. You could have a coaching staff of five or six individuals and a support staff of your medical team and your equipment guys and they all have to be on the same wavelength for you to have success. One breakdown in that machine could lead to a series of events that have an effect on the playing field. (7)

Coach's Role and Characteristics

A considerable amount of time in the focus groups was spent on discussing the role of the coach in team building. The coaches conveyed that it was their job to facilitate, moderate and supervise the team in order to keep them functioning in a desired direction. All of

the coaches believed that their leadership style was a strategy and that they played a central role in the development of the team; although their role changed at different points of the season.

The coaching staff sets the tone in terms of behavior, in terms of expectations, in terms of all sorts of things. The athletes ultimately behave just the way they're programmed to and the longer you spend with them the more accurate a reflection it is. (27)

Several of the coaches stressed that although they felt they were central, they did not want to be perceived as a dictator. They used various analogies such as "building a machine that ran on its own" or "steering its own ship" to highlight this philosophy. One coach echoed the views in the following quote:

I think I'm the absolute most central part. However, if I'm doing my job well, nobody would actually know that until ten years after they have left. (24)

A commonly mentioned point was that the coach set the tone at the beginning of the season; then, they preferred to step back and allow other leaders to emerge. One coach offered the following statement:

If you can get it so you're providing a little bit of steerage to the ship but letting someone else actually handle it, then I think that's where your best team building comes in, because they are self-directing it. Being the consistent model, you're subtly making sure they're on the right path and hopefully you may not have to do anything. (18)

Along with this, another important role the coaches felt they had was to get the individual athlete to buy into the team concept. This was first accomplished by working with team captains and veteran players, as individuals in those roles have a powerful influence on team building, either positively or negatively. The coaches felt it was important that the team has a sense of ownership and responsibility beyond the coach's control and this was best accomplished when the veterans on the team set an example for the other players. The following is a representative quote:

I make it clear from the beginning of the year to my core group. Some of them may be great players, some of them may be fringe players, but they're the guys who in the locker room everybody listens to. If they've bought in, I have a great chance for success. I think that with your core players, peer pressure goes a long way. (8)

Several coaches felt they needed these other team leaders to communicate with the players and hold them accountable. If the coaches are the only ones intervening, they lose their effectiveness; thus, sharing responsibilities was a good way to offset this.

Sharing responsibilities with players did more than contribute to team building. The coaches agreed that one of the main goals of team building was not only to develop successful athletes and winning teams, but also to develop the individuals. Many coaches saw their role as that of a teacher, especially because they coached at institutions that emphasized academics before athletics. The coaches also expressed the importance of helping players understand and develop their own roles on the team. In sum, they clearly emphasized the importance of the coaches' role in team building.

Team Building Activities

The coaches in the focus groups spent more time discussing team building activities than any other theme. The coaches were asked to identify what types of activities they did, at what times they were done, as well as where their ideas came from. Based on the responses, it was evident that team building activities could be divided into social (e.g., team dinners), physical (e.g., 10 km runs), and psychological (e.g., identifying and discussing the variables needed to achieve team success) dimensions.

The coaches mentioned a variety of activities that were done to enhance team cohesion. Many of them mentioned social activities such as initiations, potluck dinners, barbecues, and other purely social activities. A frequently mentioned activity that involved both a social and physical element was the training camp. Most of the coaches had a training camp retreat where the players were taken out of the university environment to a place where they could focus solely on the sport and the team. Many of the coaches felt these times were very effective for team building. One coach said

To us, the team really gels at the training camp. We hold a five-day training camp at the beginning of January and until then it seems that whatever efforts I use work a little bit, but it's not until that camp that everything comes together. (11)

As such, it was identified that coaches use strategies to enhance social cohesion early in their teams' development even though the motivation behind group formation is more task oriented.

The coaches also mentioned organized drills, tactical activities, sport-specific games, and having sport psychologists talk to their teams as beneficial elements of team building. The different institutions also had traditions that the coaches felt encouraged team building, such as pride night, presentations on the history of the program, team jackets, etc. The coaches talked about many specific activities they did to promote group cohesion, but one thing many of them emphasized was that it was something that often cannot be forced and just happened as a result of what they were doing. For example, one coach said

I think the thing that naturally brings the rowing crew together is the sacrifices they all make to get up out of their warm bed at five o'clock in the morning and come down to the cold water. It brings them all together because they know each one of them is doing the same sacrifice. (29)

Based on the coaches' answers, there was not one activity that could immediately bond a group together. This coach expressed the view felt by many:

It's a process. I don't think it is any one activity, like having a barbecue together. I think it's a number of certain things that you're doing during the year that you hope are bringing them together so that the trust between coaches and players and between players and players, develops. I don't think it is one thing—I think it is a process. (21)

A number of the coaches said that the time of the season when the team building activities occurred had an impact. As well, many of them commented that the length of their season (i.e., 3.5 months for football compared to 6 months for hockey) played a part in when and how many activities took place. All of them felt that team building activities were important at the beginning of the season. Many of the activities they mentioned, such as training camps and initiations, occurred at this time of the season. The coaches also felt it was important to imple-

ment team building activities before major competitions or games, after the teams confidence had been shaken, after breaks or vacations (e.g., Christmas), and prior to the post season. At these times, the coaches used team building activities that provided an extra rise in the feelings of the team and facilitated a bonding experience that may have had a shorter life span due to its emotional nature. One coach said

You want to make sure you pick your spots in a season when you really need to get some emotion into it. You can't give your Knute Rockne speech before every game, as it loses its affect after a while. (21)

The coaches mentioned a variety of sources for their team building ideas. They included books, articles, the Internet, seminars, and conferences, as helpful means for acquiring this information. Several also mentioned trial-and-error experiences as beneficial, as well as getting ideas from other coaches in the same or different sports. Many of the coaches also stated that some of their team building ideas came from athletes. One coach said

Some of the ideas actually come from the athletes themselves. There is a lot of rich background in the group and it changes. Every year there is a different kind of mood to the team and sometimes you have to just see what the needs are. (9)

In sum, there did not appear to be a simple formula regarding team building activities. What was done and when it was implemented often depended on the feelings of the coach and his/her ability to gauge the atmosphere of the team. It is safe to surmise that the coach played a significant role in team building, as he/she had to decide the best time to implement team building ideas, and more important, which ideas to use. The choice of activities could be divided into social (e.g., team meals), physical (e.g., ropes course) or psychological (e.g., personal sacrifices, learning about your teammates as people) elements.

Lessons Learned

The majority of the coaches' input in the focus groups was based on their positive experiences and insights regarding team building. However, they were asked to discuss occasions when their team building efforts were less than successful; therefore, a category on their lessons learned emerged. The examples of unsuccessful team building activities were quite specific and ranged from bad weather at training camps, to athletes getting lost during runs in the woods, to initiations gone awry.

The thing I am most adamant about is the most traditional type of athlete team building activity—rookie hazing. We spent a lot of years redesigning, for lack of a better word, first year initiation procedures and policies, because no matter how much they think it builds their team, we have proven to them how much we spend the entire year recovering from it, even if it is something small. (9)

The common thread through all of the lessons learned was that they were well-intentioned team building activities that just happened to not work out the way the coaches had hoped they would. Several coaches stated that what worked well with one group, may not necessarily work well with another one:

I think you can repeat the same activities over the years and sometimes they will be successful and other times they will not. I don't know if you could say this will work every time or that

won't work every time. Sometimes you just have to get together with a plan and then just let things happen. Sometimes they happen and other times they don't. (3)

Another commonly cited lesson learned was that adversity, such as an injury to a star player or a personal tragedy, often brought players closer together. They said it was not something you could plan for.

Relationship Between Talent, Cohesion, and Performance

The way in which talent, cohesion, and performance interrelate was an area where no definitive conclusions were reached. All of the coaches felt a relationship existed between the three, but their answers did not reach a conclusive equation for that relationship. As one coach put it, "chicken before the egg or egg before the chicken" (4). The coaches agreed that both talent and cohesion make important contributions to performance, but they debated between which has the greatest effect.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study both verify and extend existing literature in cohesion, team building, and coaching psychology. Specifically, it was apparent that expert Canadian university coaches understood, believed in, and implemented team building activities throughout the course of their season. For most, if not all, team building was a season-long process designed to improve team cohesion. Rather than arbitrarily implementing team building activities, these coaches carefully planned a number of different team building activities at crucial times of the season that could be classified as social, physical, or psychological. These findings complement those of Gould et al. (1999) who highlighted the importance of incorporating team building activities into the training of Olympic athletes and teams. They also extend their results by identifying the types of team building activities, who implemented them, how the team building ideas were chosen, and when they were implemented.

Organization has been identified as an important dimension in coaching pedagogy and athlete development and includes developing a team vision, seasonal planning, administrative matters, and working with staff (Bloom, 2002; Côté et al., 1995; Desjardins, 1996). The present investigation found that developing team cohesion could be classified as an organizational skill. These coaches were meticulous individuals who planned much of season before it began, including when particular team building activities would be implemented, both during seasonal training sessions as well as activities outside of the training environment (e.g., team dinners, social gatherings, etc). While these results on the importance of team building activities are in agreement with research on expert team sport coaches (i.e., Bloom 2002; Desjardins, 1996), they differ from Côté and colleagues work on Olympic gymnastic coaches, where it was found that coaches did not spend a great deal of time discussing ways of building team cohesion. This difference may be attributed to the different dynamics between individual and team sports. It could also be said that Olympic coaches are appointed and their "team" is based on national tryouts. In this domain, talent may be a stronger predictor of cohesion. Intercollegiate coaches (as we are dealing with) do not have the opportunity to work with the best in the country, but must competitively recruit athletes and are more likely to work with the talent they get. In other words, cohesion may be more important to success at this level of competition!

The other two primary categories in the coaching model are training and competition. According to Bloom (2002), the training component involves technical, tactical, physical, and

mental training. The results of our study demonstrated aspects of team building across all of these dimensions. For example, practices were planned so that drills were run as a group; scrimmages, physical conditioning, and the use of sport psychologists were all seen as helping to build a cohesive unit. The primary purpose of each activity may not have been team building, but it was acknowledged that improved team cohesion might be an outcome of the activity. For example, while the primary purpose of a team run may be to improve physical endurance, it might also strengthen athlete bonds to each other.

The competition component involves all team aspects occurring on the day of competition. This dimension was never specifically addressed in the present investigation, nor did the coaches offer insight into this dimension. It may be that team meetings, focusing on specific goals, team meals, and pep talks may also serve as a team building function. Future research may consider expanding on this dimension to determine whether team building is perceived to be an important element on game day.

The theme called coach's role and characteristics revealed the thoughts and feelings of the coaches in relation to their role on implementing team building activities. An interesting finding was that our coaches wanted to have control over all of the team activities, although they did not want to be perceived as the person who dictated all of the activities. Many of the coaches hoped that they could impart their ideas on team leaders, who would then assume this role. This last point is in agreement with Gould et al. (1999), who found that peer leaders were a very important component of developing team cohesion and achieving team success for US Olympic athletes. The results of our analysis suggest that future research is needed on this element of the peak performance literature. As well, future research is suggested to determine whether athletes agree or disagree with their coaches' beliefs and ideas. This is especially true given the coaches' preference to "steer their ship" yet remain in the background while doing so. Are the athletes aware that their coaches are manipulating the situation? Do the athletes feel empowered in this instance?

The results of the current study also revealed a detailed description on the use of team building activities. Interestingly, our coaches unanimously said there was not one place where they could acquire team building ideas. Rather, they exhausted as many sources as possible, including the Internet, books, talking to other coaches, athletes, or sport psychologists. It was also noted that not all of their ideas/activities were successful. Many coaches learned some difficult lessons by trial and error.

The coaches agreed that both talent and cohesion were important to performance, but no conclusive evidence could be found to support the benefit of one over the other. This is somewhat in line with Carron et al. (2002), who demonstrated no difference between the cohesion to performance relationship and the performance to cohesion relationship. If given the option, it is likely that coaches would prefer a talented group of athletes to compose their team. However, most coaches, especially in the Canadian university environment, do not have this option as they are restricted by turnout, eligibility, injury, recruiting, etc. In these cases, coaches have recognized that successful performance can still be achieved — in part through the development of a cohesive team. The slogan "hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard" echoes this belief.

The current study has practical implications for those individuals working in high-level sport. Coaches need to understand the importance of implementing team building activities into their seasonal plans, including during team training sessions and outside of the university/team environment. More precisely, coaches need to make sure they are implementing their ideas correctly. Coaches also need to uncover as many different team building activities as possible. It might be interesting to determine if building cohesion through team building activities is a major difference between highly successful and less successful coaches.

An important practical implication to consider is whether coaches can be trained to better implement team building activities into their programs. As well, the discussion will continue as to whether the coach or sport psychologist is the most qualified person to implement team building activities with elite teams. Those supporting the indirect method intervention method (i.e., Carron et al., 1997) feel the coach (or exercise leader) is best equipped to lead these activities, while those supporting the direct intervention method (e.g., Yukelson, 1997) believe a sport psychologist is better equipped. The answer might be that it depends on the type of team building activity being implemented. A sport psychologist may best implement team building activities that focus on complex psychological/mental factors. However, the coach or athlete leader may better implement team building activities which center on physical or social dimensions. This question also complements the thoughts of the coach; it is clear from the results that they want to remain in control, but they do not want to be perceived as a dictator. Despite this, it seemed that most of the coaches in the current study were directly implementing their team building activities. The reason is unclear; is it personal preference or is not having the resources (i.e., money or access to qualified professionals)? Another related question is whether the results of this study are applicable to professional sport, where there is a much greater turnover in team personnel and where it is believed that more emphasis is placed on winning compared to team harmony or cohesion than in a nonprofessional setting.

In sum, this study has addressed an important oversight in the literature on peak performance. Given the importance that the coach plays in all facets of team operations, it is imperative to understand their views on building team cohesion. As one coach noted:

I think team building has to be the foundation. For myself, I take a lot of time, especially at the beginning of the year to develop rapport with all of my players and to talk about some issues of respect. You don't necessarily have to be best friends out there, but you need to respect each other and those kinds of things, and try and develop some team building concepts initially to build that foundation. Everything else goes from there. (25)

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