

# Team Building for Youth Sport

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*Coaches play a vital role in making or breaking the cohesion of a sport team.*

A major component of physical activity for children is participation in team sports at both the recreational and the competitive levels. In Canada, over half (54%) of children ages five to 14 are involved in sports on a yearly basis (Sport Canada, 2000). Similarly, in the United States, 39 percent of children ages nine to 13 participate in organized physical activity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002). Weinberg and Gould (2007) indicated that the primary reason children become involved and stay active in sport is to have fun. More precisely, a review of more than 1,000 male and female youth-sport participants' reasons for athletic involvement ranked having fun first, followed by skill improvement, challenge, and being physically fit (Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1983).

Unfortunately, youth sport participation begins declining after the age of 12. This finding is especially worrisome because that age is also a crucial time for the development of children's social skills and self-esteem. A number of reasons have been proposed to account for this dropout behavior. These include personal aspects such as lack of desire, as well as social aspects such as negative experiences with coaches (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004; Wankel & Mummery, 1996). One way that coaches can improve the sporting environment is through group activities that promote team building. The purpose of this article is to explain the value, use, and advantages of team building for enhancing the youth sport experience.

## Coaching Youth Sport

The role of youth sport coaches is complex and multidimensional. Coaches at the youth level have been found to assume at least 13 different roles: instructor, teacher, trainer, motivator, disciplinarian, substitute parent, social worker, friend, scientist, student, manager, administrator, and publicity fundraiser (Gummerson, 1992; Smoll & Smith, 1996). To accomplish these various roles, coaches are expected to have both sport-specific knowledge (techniques and strategies of a particular sport) and general coaching knowledge (information used to obtain an optimal learning environment). They must also develop and use knowledge from a wide array of disciplines, including anatomy, biomechanics, pedagogy, nutrition, and sport psychology (Martens, 1990).

Although coaches are expected to have an extensive knowledge base, in reality the majority of youth sport coaches are volunteers with little or no formal training (DeKnop, Engstrom, Skirstad, & Weiss, 1996; Smith & Smoll, 1997). Coaches have repeatedly cited direct experience and observation of other coaches as the primary sources of knowledge for coaching (Cregan, Bloom, & Reid, 2007; Saury & Durand, 1998). Moreover, findings on the characteristics of coaches indicated that most coaches became involved because their children played the sport (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). Because the majority of coaches are involved due to their children's participation, the average coach is active for five years or less (Gould & Martens, 1979). Thus, it can be concluded that most youth sport coaches are not equipped with enough knowledge to enhance the youth sport experience and make it fun for its participants.

## Team Building

It has been clearly demonstrated over time that a team's ability to succeed on the field is rarely determined solely by the physical attributes and the technical skills of its players or the knowledge and leadership of its coaches. Instead a team's environment or atmosphere can also play a role in determining whether or not children enjoy their sport experience. One environmental variable that may be important is team unity or cohesion, which often comes under the label of "team chemistry" and is believed to go a long way toward helping a group of athletes achieve a common goal. Team cohesion is a dynamic process involving issues of team unity, both on task and in social situations (Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1998). One method of developing team cohesion is through team building.

Despite its intuitive appeal, many coaches and athletes are still unclear about the proper use of team-building activities (Bloom, Stevens, & Wickwire, 2003). Many people are unaware that improper team activities can result in the development of cliques and the alienation of individuals for various reasons. Team building is far more complex than going to the movies with teammates or having a team dinner (Senécal, Loughhead, & Bloom, 2008).

Team-building strategies have been used in sport and exercise to help the group increase its effectiveness and satisfy the needs of its members (Beer, 1980). Moreover, Woodcock and Francis (1994) identified six benefits of team building: (1) the production of coherent, visionary, acceptable leadership; (2) the acceptance of roles and responsibilities by team members; (3) the dedication of member efforts toward collective achievement; (4) the development of a positive and energetic environment; (5) efficient group meetings and practices; and (6) the reduction or elimination of negative team influences. Thus, team-building programs have been designed to enhance the perceptions of cohesiveness through team improvement (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998). Some individuals have suggested that effective team-building activities often involve intellectual, physical, and emotional problem-solving tasks, as well as a focus on teamwork, organization, communication, and cooperation (Gibbons & Black, 1997). Glover and Midura have published several books that include a variety of effective team-building activities (e.g., 1992, 2005). Many of these activities could easily be adapted by youth sport coaches.

## Team-Building Research

Research examining the relationship between team building and cohesion has been conducted in a variety of sport settings. In particular, team-building activities have been implemented in elite sport (e.g., Bloom et al., 2003; Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Stevens & Bloom, 2003), high school sport (Senécal et al., 2008), and recreational sport (e.g., Prapavessis, Carron, & Spink, 1996). Some of these studies will be discussed.

Researchers investigating the influence of team-building interventions with elite sport and high school teams have

found positive results (e.g., Bloom & Stevens, 2002; Senécal et al., 2008; Stevens & Bloom, 2003). For example, Senécal et al. (2008) examined the effects of a team-building intervention program with high school basketball teams. The findings revealed that teams who participated in a season-long team-building program had higher perceptions of cohesion than teams in a control condition. Similar findings were noted by Stevens and Bloom in their investigation of the effectiveness of a multidimensional team-building intervention program with a university softball team. Results indicated that the participants reported significantly higher perceptions of cohesiveness following the intervention compared to the control group. Finally, Bloom and Stevens implemented a team-building intervention program with a university equestrian team. The intervention focused on leadership, team norms, communication, and competition issues, resulting in improved team harmony and closeness and improved coach-athlete and athlete-athlete relationships.

Although team-building interventions with young athletes (age 16 or under) are rare, some nonsport examples exist in physical education settings (e.g., Ebbeck & Gibbons, 1998; Gibbons & Black, 1997). One such program is Team Building through Physical Challenges (TBPC; Glover & Midura, 1992; Midura & Glover, 2005). This program involves intellectual, physical, and emotional problem-solving tasks and challenges, while emphasizing elements of fun and adventure. Gibbons and Black tested the effectiveness of a TBPC program on the self-concepts of seventh- and eighth-grade students. Activities included tasks focused on teamwork, organization, communication, and cooperation. The results revealed that participants in the team-building intervention experienced increased self-perceptions of athletic competence, social acceptance, scholastic competence, and global self-worth compared to the control group. Similar results were found by Ebbeck and Gibbons in their investigation of the effectiveness of a TBPC program on the self-concept of sixth- and seventh-grade students. Their post-intervention results revealed that both male and female students in the team-building group were significantly higher on perceptions of global self-worth, athletic competence, physical appearance, and social acceptance than the control group.

Recently, the authors created and implemented a season-long team-building intervention program for eight Peewee-level (ages 11 and 12) hockey teams (Newin, Bloom, & Loughhead, 2008). Coaches attended an introductory workshop at the beginning of the season, at which the rationale for the program, the team-building activities, and the coaches' roles and responsibilities were described and explained. In addition, the coaches received online support from the researchers between each team-building activity. Each coach implemented five team-building activities (one per month) over the course of the season. All team-building activities took place in a small training facility located inside the arena before on-ice practice. At the completion of each activity, the coaches spent approximately 10 minutes debriefing the athletes on the values and lessons learned from the team-

building activities.

Three different types of data were acquired in this study. First, the behaviors of coaches during the team building sessions were monitored by trained members of the research team. Second, coaches answered questions on a pre- and post-intervention form before and immediately after each team-building activity. Finally, an in-depth interview was conducted with each participating coach at the end of the regular season.

The results of this study provided evidence of the benefits of a season-long team-building intervention program for coaches and their respective teams (Newin et al., 2008). In particular, coaches believed that athletes enjoyed the team-building program and developed a variety of important life skills and abilities (e.g., listening, teamwork) as a result of participation. Likewise, coaches felt their own communication and motivational skills improved as a result of their involvement in the program. Coaches also felt that athletes bonded during activities and improved their ability to work together as a team. Perhaps most important, coaches endorsed the program for athletes of all ages and ability levels, and said they would continue conducting the team-building sessions even if this program were no longer available.

### Establishing a Team-Building Program

So why should youth sport coaches use team-building activities? Knowledgeable and respected coaches may have different answers. Some coaches feel that a strong, cohesive team will increase its chance for success by providing the extra energy that is often needed to win in crucial situations. Others will say that young athletes can put aside any differences as long as they are winning and that winning leads to greater team cohesion. In fact, both perspectives are plausible. Carron, Colman, Wheeler, and Stevens (2002), using meta-analytic techniques, found no difference in cohesion as a *cause of* or as a *result of* sport-team performance. In other words, team success enhances cohesion, and cohesion contributes to better performance. Consequently, sport psychology researchers Weinberg and Gould (2007) offered the following guidelines for coaches in building team cohesion:

- Avoid excessive turnover and social cliques on teams.
- Get to know each team member, especially new ones.
- Encourage group identity by allowing players to identify what makes them unique and distinctive.
- Make sure that all team members understand how they can contribute to team success.
- Arrange group meetings at which players discuss common issues, such as team strategies, stress, or preparing for competition.
- Clarify the role differentiation of each player.
- Establish specific, challenging, long-term goals.
- Create an environment in which all team members are comfortable enough to express their thoughts and feelings and communicate in the most effective manner possible.

So far, this article has outlined the role of the coach in youth sport and, more specifically, the importance of build-

ing team cohesion through team-building activities. Thus, it would be useful to explain some of the activities that have been implemented in existing team-building intervention projects. These were based on some of the works by Glover and Midura (1992, 2005). One activity is the *Birthday Balance Beam*, which only requires a long balance beam (that is not too high off the ground) and a number of tumbling mats. The athletes are instructed to stand on the beam in any order, with no more than 10 on the beam at a time. They are then instructed to position themselves on the beam from youngest to oldest. If any person touches a mat or the legs of the beam, or if anyone in the group uses a put-down, the entire group must get off the beam and get back in their original order to start over. In solving this challenge, group members usually hold tightly to the balance beam while one member carefully steps over them.

Another task that involves little equipment is called *The Maze*. Different shapes (squares, circles, triangles, etc.) are laid out on a large surface in a five-by-five pattern. A coach or team member will be given the correct pattern on a sheet of paper and will monitor each movement. Each team member goes one at a time until he or she steps on the wrong base—as indicated by the coach or team leader. The solution is to figure out the designated path in a certain time period. Players who are not going through the maze can provide feedback to their teammates. A group completes the challenge when every member successfully follows the correct path through the maze.

### Conclusions About Team Building

Previous research on team building has shown that it is a misunderstood and underutilized yet beneficial aspect of team development (Bloom et al., 2003; Bloom & Stevens, 2002; Newin et al., 2008; Sénécal et al., 2008; Stevens & Bloom, 2003). Some interesting conclusions emerged from the authors' recent season-long team-building intervention with youth sport athletes (Newin et al., 2008). For example, at the beginning of the study, the impressions of coaches ranged from skepticism to excitement. Some understood the potential benefits the program would have on their teams, while others were anxious to see players' reactions to the program. At the completion of this program, all of the coaches endorsed the program as a positive experience. Furthermore, all of them recommended the program to teams of younger and older athletes of all ability levels.

The coaches in the Newin et al. (2008) study prepared for team-building activities in the same way they prepared for a game or practice. They examined instructions provided by the research team and gained confidence in implementing the sessions as the season progressed. The activities were age appropriate and were designed to encourage athletes to work together, listen to one another, share ideas, and solve challenges. The results revealed that the athletes enjoyed the program. The athletes were excited to participate and took pleasure in persevering with their peers to complete challenges, and perhaps most important, began working

together more effectively as the season progressed. An interesting outcome from this study was that, in addition to the athletes and teams seeing value in team building, the coaches found that their own motivational and communication skills improved as a result of the program. Specifically, they felt they were better able to break down tasks and explain instructions more clearly. Likewise, they reflected more upon the appropriateness of their feedback and used increased positive reinforcement to encourage athletes.

In conclusion, the various research studies on team building have found that athletes may benefit from coaches who are trained to create a positive team environment via team-building activities. Perhaps creating a more enjoyable and satisfying youth sport environment will increase the likelihood that young athletes will stay physically active as they progress toward adulthood.

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