2.2 Peer group and social support

Introduction

Peer groups are a very important guiding framework in sports. Their importance increases during adolescence, when reliance on friends surpasses reliance on family. Peers also function as models of social influence, which will be more influential the closer and more alike a person feels they are to him or her. Therefore, it should be expected that an adolescent's group of friends, who are similar to them in age, personal characteristics, and even gender, will serve as a model for athletic activities. Likewise, the fact that they play a competitive sport will influence what peer group they choose and who will be their reference group.

When talking about elite athletes, we can assume that, as with families, the influence of peers extends far beyond the teenage years. As adults, athletes find an important source of social support in their network of friends and affective relationships. As with the family, emotional support provided by peers is a source of reinforcement, motivation and confidence for athletes.

Relationships with peers who also participate in sports have specific characteristics that differentiate them from those formed with peers who do not play sports. We are referring to teammates. Teams play a major role in socialization for their members, whether at a young age during the initiation stage or at a high level. The members of a team spend a large amount of time together, share common objectives and motivations. At certain times the importance of the team can be equal to or even exceed that of other agents such as school or family.

Let's look more closely at peers and cohesion in a sports context. As a point of reference, we will use Carron's model (1982) which defines cohesion as "the dynamic process that reflects the group tendency to keep together and remain united in pursuing their goals and objectives." Based on this definition, we can say that the cohesiveness of a group impacts its level of performance. However, although it may not always bolster performance, cohesion leads to a positive environment which fosters relationships within the group. A cohesive team has more satisfied members and more efficient members.

The coach has an important role in determining the degree of cohesion within the team, but players can also increase cohesion through the

influence they have on one another. Some guidelines that an athlete can follow in order to help maintain group cohesion are: seamless communication between athletes and coach; offer positive reinforcement to teammates; cooperate; be aware of what each member of the team needs from others in order to achieve established goals.

2.2.1 Variables that influence participation in sports

Kenyon & McPherson (1973) are the authors who proposed a model where sport is understood as a learning process, in which the athlete's long-term participation is influenced by three variables: the sportsperson's physical and psychological capabilities, the incentive offered by playing sports and the influence of socializing agents.

Family, coaches as well as peer groups (friends) are considered socializing agents during the subject's process or career in sports. The stage to be discussed in the following section is the moment in which families and coaches take a back seat to peer groups.

This occurs during adolescence. At this time, the peer group, especially those of the same gender, begins to serve as a model for athletic participation among subjects.

When identifying the differences between peer groups, family, and coaches, we can say that the first is made up of people chosen by subjects because of what they have in common with one another. In reality, the term "group of like-minded peers" best represents what they mean to the subject. Subjects may belong to one or more groups: a group of athletes, a group of musicians, a group of neighborhood friends. As individuals develop, the number of peer groups they have may increase in accordance with the activities they participate in.

As mentioned, adolescence is the period in which subjects spend more time with their peer group than any other group; they share secrets, tastes, habits, and even training sessions.

Bandura (1987), in his social cognitive theory, showed that adolescents, regardless of place or culture, need like-minded peer groups. He believes that in this stage of life, this type of relationship is necessary. Adolescents who are not able to share this stage of life with a like-minded peer group therefore experience a greater feeling of loneliness than their peers.

Escartí, Guzmán & Cervelló (1993) contend that group closeness is based on age, interests, and status. Bearing this in mind, it can be said that close friends will be a source of motivation and support throughout an athletic career.

Participating in sports at a high level is an important part of a person's life, and even more so for an adolescent. This has implications for an adolescent's life in that it will influence the type of friendships they choose. The nature of high performance in the aforementioned stages means that the athlete's lifestyle will differ significantly from that of a another adolescent who is not part of the athletic process. They must balance training schedules, special diets, rest routines, drills for improvement, competitions on weekends or during the week, etc. This determines the type of friendships that an athlete at this stage of life will seek.

Coakley (1993) asserts that athletic socialization creates values, and at the same time is a dynamic process between the socializing agent and the socialized subject. In this paradigm, it is understood that subjects will choose friends who are participating in similar processes.

For example, let's look at the case of a synchronized swimmer: each morning she goes to school, and in the afternoons she spends up to 4 hours daily at practice, sometimes more if she is preparing for an important competition. On weekends, she normally cannot go out with classmates since she is competing or training and needs to rest so that she maintains good physical fitness. This lifestyle means that her closest friends will be part of her swimming club, with whom she shares similar experiences and who have similar habits and routines.

2.2.2 Athletes and peer groups

Carbonell and Ferriol (2003) studied 351 adolescent athletes in an attempt to identify a relationship between peer groups and athletic activities during adolescence. They found that this relationship was due to athletic activities, social recognition, and social relationships. According to this paper, subjects choose friends who are involved with sports. The choice of friends is also related to emotional needs and the desire to belong. Adolescents find these characteristics within groups of other adolescents who also play sports. The sense of belonging in a group increases if the group has similar characteristics and goals.

This is not a descriptive analysis of adolescence as a phase of growth and maturation, but rather it refers to a specific moment in which subjects make peer relationships a priority, while parents and coaches take a back seat.

In childhood, on the other hand, parents and coaches are protagonists in a subject's socialization and education.

Regarding the profiles of peer groups that the subjects look for – as previously mentioned – there is a real orientation toward subjects linked

to the practice of the sport. Sport brings together a series of characteristics that determine the orientation of the athlete's friendships. In high performance sports, the variables are:

- Group cohesion.
- Motivation.
- Self-efficacy.
- Leadership.
- Anxiety.
- Stereotypes.

The variables mentioned along with the context have an influence on the subjects' personal construction and their socio-affective development, and as such, they serve to guide the profile of peer groups. Peer groups have such a strong influence on subjects that they can even motivate them to continue – or not – with athletic activities.

One characteristic of adolescence is the need to find meaning in why they do something. With regard to athletes, if they belong to groups that share their needs, goals, interests, tastes, feelings, etc., there will be stability with regard to continuing to train. Many adolescents quit or retire from sports at this stage. If they have relationships with groups that do not participate in sport and who do not share similar interest in physical activity, it is more likely that they will quit. Shared goals within a peer group are precisely what motivates them to continue playing sports.

A study by Moya, Moreno, Rivera, Ramos, Iglesias (2011) of 9821 Spanish teenage student-athletes gathered important data with regard to these issues.

This study showed that 48% of the adolescents regularly participated in a sport. Among their reasons for doing so, they emphasized their families involvement in the sport, and more importantly, that of their peer groups, as the main motivation that led them to continue to participate in sport. Gender is another variable that influences continuity of training: women are less involved in athletic activities during adolescence, due to the fact that sports are regarded to be unfeminine. Women's departure from sports during adolescence is related to outdated beliefs about developing musculature and their impact on female body image (Slater and Tiggermann, 2010). Females tend to quit sports before males.

The study shows that peer groups begin to influence women around the age of 15 with regard to their relationship to physical activity. Before that age, family is the main source of emotional support. If, when they are 15 years old, their peer group and family do not participate in sports, there is a high probability that they will quit.

With regards to income levels, it has been shown that adolescents (both male and female) whose families have a high income level stay in sports longer. In summary, of the variables mentioned, a high income level, and a peer group and family who participate in sports increase the likelihood of continued participation.

This data should be taken into consideration by coaches and sports psychologists. Once adolescence is understood to be a special period in life, strategies for involvement can be developed by psychologists and coaches can establish training models that take into account the sensitivity of this age group. Not only with regard to how training is organized, but also to understand the young athlete who, during this stage, will undoubtedly experience moments of instability.

From the institution's point of view, the goal should be to ascertain and understand the athlete's relationships and possible influences, not as a method of control but rather as a source of information about a subject's possible instability. The more information we have on an athlete, the more support we can provide them. In many athletic institutions, coaches are unfamiliar with their athlete's social development and therefore do not understand certain behaviors. This is due to them not monitoring variables that are not strictly related to sports. Athletes often acquire behaviors from outside the family or athletic sphere, and even more so during adolescence. These behaviors are usually learned from a peer group outside the sporting institution.

Today, social media increases connectedness between members of a group. Adolescents are experts on social media and are often more skilled than their coaches and family members. This phenomenon broadens their group of like-minded peers (whether or not they are part of the sports world). In this sense, since athletic institutions shape behavior and values, they must take this issue seriously and handle it professionally.

Peer groups have a twofold influence over subjects: they can either encourage or endanger participation in athletic activities. Scientific literature shows that social support is key for continued involvement in sports among young people; this is where the importance of groups (as socialization agents) come into play in athletes' lives. If the athlete is involved in a serious athletic program, the influence exercised by peer groups must be taken seriously.

2.2.3 Social support

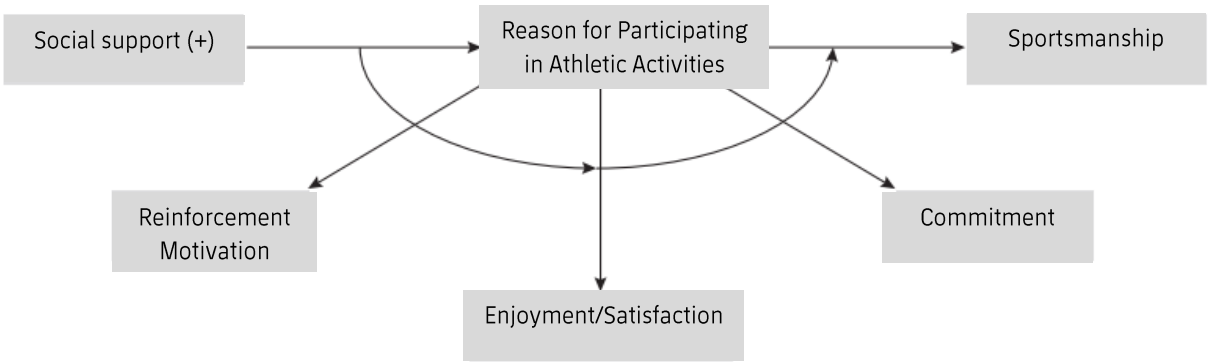
Rees and Hardy (2000) assert that athletes can achieve their goals as long as they have social support, that is family and friends. Social support is the fundamental determinant and the chief driver of motivation and

enjoyment which result in the behavior necessary to continue with the sport. This means that family, friends, and coaches are the driving forces that will lead athletes to train.

When that social support pressures the athlete and leads them to develop certain behaviors, it will lead to a decrease in motivation and sport will not be enjoyed or seen as a positive experience. The athlete experiences pressure as an obligation, which takes away the sense that they are doing something because they want to.

The literature reviewed posits that of the three types of social support (emotional, instrumental, and informational), the most important with regard to the athlete's continued participation is emotional support. Social support during training or competition is a source of sustenance for the athlete (Duncan S.C., et al., 2005).

Figure 5: Social Support



Source: Gabriele et al., 2005, p. 213.

Social support during an athlete's career is ever-changing and is not always the same at any given moment. Emotional support is most important during the developmental stages from childhood through adolescence. Informational support of a verbal nature, related to advice and understanding processes, appears at a later stage (Armstrong and Weisman, 1997).

The type of social support needed when participating in sport varies according to gender. For example, women often have needs related to transportation, and receive more social support during their athletic career when compared to men.

With regard to the role played by the family unit, we know that it is vital. However, studies show that for women, both their father and their mother are influential when it comes to playing sports; for men, their father is typically identified as the only influence. The father shows more

enjoyment and becomes more competitive about sport. In this sense, the issue is anthropological and cultural; as the world is changing, this equation is changing significantly. Women are taking on leading roles in areas of society where they previously did not, not because of a lack of ability but because of cultural issues.

Peer groups have an influence over enrollment in, continued involvement in, and quitting athletic activities. Athletes make decisions based on what the group does. Family members encourage a child to enroll in athletic activities, but when they reach adolescence, they need to make friends. Acceptance by their peer group is highly valued by the athlete, and they will work hard to win their affection.

A form of social acceptance is by showing one's skills to the peer group. Insofar as peer groups value the capabilities of a subject, the subject will feel like they are being recognized socially. Therefore, being good at sports is something for which the subject will be recognized at a social level. In fact, this is exactly what occurs in our society, and it leads to a sort of adoration of athletes who achieve a high level of performance in their sport (Roberts, 1995). The author also stresses an athlete's increased self-esteem when they are recognized socially and respected by their peer group.

Below we will discuss another study by Sanchez (2015) of 383 young athletes, which aims to understand if being surrounded by friends who place a high value on the sport does or does not influence participation in said sport.

In this study, 49.1% of those interviewed affirmed that sport is valued by their peer group. There is a statistically significant relationship between peers' recognition of a sport and the subjects' level of participation in that sport.

61% stated that their friends valued the sport, and seven out of ten youth who belonged to groups that did not play sports claimed that sports were not relevant to their friendships. There is a clear pattern among groups who play sports versus groups who do not.

62.4% of athletes who play regularly do so with friends. 47% of athletes think that their sport is important to their friends when they play together. The relationship between playing sports with friends and the importance of the sport to the group is statistically significant. Young people believe that playing sports is important to their peer group, and at the same time, they undertake the activity with that group. Everything has to do with the group; that is why its degree of influence is so closely studied and tracked by coaches, families, and managers.

As regards the direct impact of the peer group, 52.7% assert that they are influenced by the tastes and interests of their friends. 62% say that their friends directly brought them closer to sport. On the other hand, seven out of ten subjects who do not engage in physical activity say that it is not a product of their friends' influence. We can see that a large percentage of subjects who play sports are motivated by their friends.

79% say that their friends' athletic abilities are a source of inspiration and motivation to continue playing. 72% of the young people who do not play sports say that their friends, who do not engage in physical activity, choose a sedentary lifestyle, which becomes normal for the entire group. It is an indirect influence. This is how social groups function at a micro level, with a sample of teenagers from a specific city and country. The masses act based on the behavior of those around them, their customs and their interests. Sports and adolescence are detached from this collective behavior: young people who play sports associate with others who share that interest.

The peer group, according to the results of the study, determines whether subjects participate in an athletic activity or not. Friendships in the lives of young people have great potential for further study. When commitment to an athletic activity increases, the influence of the peer group is easier to observe. It is like an electric current that recharges at the same time that it provides power; in the same way, young people's behavior feeds off of one another.

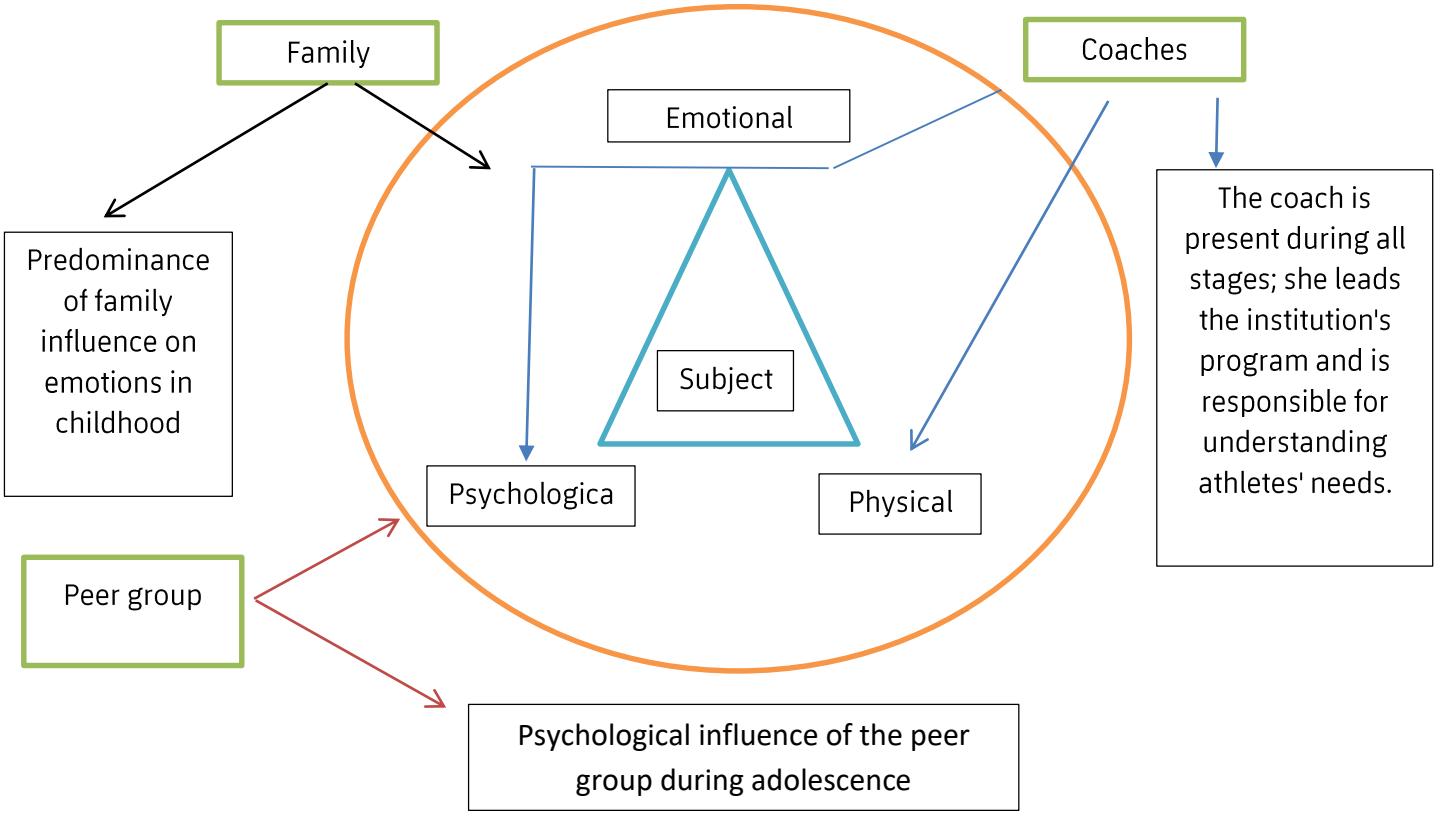
Social trends

In 21st century societies, there has been an increase in sedentary lifestyles in young people (Oviedo, Sánchez, Castro, Calvo, Sevilla, Iglesias and Guerra, 2013). This is more evident in large cities where the social dynamic exploded due to massive population growth. The appeal of new technology, media, video games, violence in society, traffic, etc. all mean that fewer children can be found playing outdoors, and instead more children are stuck inside houses or apartments.

Socio-ecological studies are needed to determine how these new societal trends do or do not encourage participation in sports. These studies should include multidimensional research taking into account multiple factors, such as organizational aspects, interpersonal relationships, population density, market tendencies, etc. This cluster of variables, in today's complex societies, gives rise to trends that determine a subject's lifestyle.

In order to analyze the importance of the group with regard to adolescents and their relationship to sports, studies must focus on the interpersonal realm.

Figure 6: Groups and variables



Source: Prepared by the author

It is interesting to look at the physically active adolescent population, given the influence that they have as a group who rub off on one another. A study was performed in Almeria, Granada, and Murcia, in which 6170 adolescents (both male and female) were interviewed to determine what percentage of them regularly engaged in physical activity.

The study showed that 75.7% of boys were involved in athletic activities in their free time. For girls, the percentage was 50.1%. Additionally, the percentage of females who had never participated in physical activity was higher than that of males.

Figure 7: Percentage of youth involved in sport

ESO[1]				
	Males	Females	**Total**	x^2
Participation in Physical/Athletic Activities				
Never	8,0	13,7	10,7	231,37***
Quit	16,3	36,2	25,8	
Active	75,7	50,1	63,5	
Finnish Index of Physical-Athletic Activities Among Active Individuals				
Light+ Insufficient	21,1	46,6	30,7	194,07***
Moderate	40,5	38,5	39,7	
Vigorous	38,4	14,8	29,5	
Finnish Index of Physical-Athletic Activities Among Individuals Who Quit				
Light+ Insufficient	35,3	56,6	49,5	43,95***
Moderate	47,5	37,0	40,5	
Vigorous	17,3	6,4	10,0	

*ESO (mandatory high school education).

Source: Pierón & Ruiz-Juan, 2013.

The percentage of active adolescents among both boys and girls was shown to be related to whether or not their parents were also active. When parents did not partake in physical activity, they supported, motivated, and encouraged these activities. This shows again that familial preferences are a key factor. 78.6% of parents encouraged their children to participate in these activities. In the case of friends, the percentage decreased to 68.1%, although it remained high. When parents were uninvolved and uninterested, the percentage was 14.3%. Friendships reached 25.6% among those who were not interested in physical activity. We can clearly see that the percentage of friends uninterested in physical activity is greater than that of parents, taking into account the influence adolescents have over one another, which leads to a concerning percentage of inactive, indifferent youth.

Combining active young people with those who were active at one point in time, the percentage reaches 82.6%. This is a high percentage for a population, which is useful information. One key piece of information shows the influence of coaches or physical education teachers in promoting athletic activities; in this case, it reached 11%. Given the importance of teachers within these groups, their degree of influence is

very low. The teacher is responsible for educating students about the importance of engaging in physical activity. The two touchstones with regards to continuing with training are family and friends. Friends have a greater influence in cases of abandonment, while families have a greater influence in cases where the athlete continues to play.

Based on these results, we can see that the family involvement factor (fathers, mothers, and siblings) predicts how the young adolescent will behave. The same occurs with behavior among parents and friends. During mandatory secondary education, inactive adolescents typically have family members and friends who are not engaged in athletic activities. The likelihood of abandoning athletic activities increases when father, mother, siblings, and friends have never participated in physical activity. Another predictor of abandonment is when parents force children to undertake physical activity instead of encouraging and supporting them. Friends that are disinterested also influence and increase the likelihood of abandonment.

This information allows for a close examination of the athlete's context (family, peer group, coach) and the degree of their participation in athletic activities. If athletic programs have this data, then support for players and assistance for families can take this information into account. It should be a red flag when players have family members who have never engaged in physical activity, or are surrounded by peer groups who do not engage in physical activity. If only so that we can develop preventative strategies and understand that peer groups have significant influence over others.

Oftentimes, we underestimate adolescent behavior and do not consider what could eventuate. This is due exclusively to a lack of education among coaches as well as a lack of counseling for families.

Adolescents who have never been linked to participating in physical activity belong to a group at high risk of a sedentary lifestyle. This also applies to those who have quit an athletic activity. Parental inactivity level is a predictor of abandonment and disinterest among young people.

Within athletic programs, psychologists and the coaching staff need to familiarize themselves with these issues. The development of an athlete who aims to become a high performer must include multidimensional support which takes into account all of the variables which might hinder their development. Counseling and education for parents is a key factor as the athlete enters adolescence. After that, the family must work carefully with the athlete based on the characteristics of her peer group. When programs include trained professionals, they must provide the family unit with the necessary information to support subjects during the aforementioned periods.

Athletic institutions must have programs for family participation and involvement. In this case, they can provide periodic trainings with groups of psychologists and coaches while athletes are training. On many occasions, parents drop off their children and pick them up without any sort of contact with the institution. The organization must undertake to identify this type of family.

2.2.4 Group Dynamics

Shaw (1981) is one of the most influential psychologists due to his theories about groups. He studied and researched group dynamics and how they create conduct and behaviors that are adopted by all of their members. He sets out a series of reasons for which groups form:

- Groups help meet psychosocial needs.
- They work together to obtain goals that could not be met by an individual.
- Groups do not provide knowledge and information.
- They help to meet our needs and provide security.
- They lead to a social identity and a sense of belonging.

The author introduces the concept of interdependence as a characteristic of each individual who forms part of a group. By being interdependent, they form groups to achieve goals that could not be obtained alone. Other individuals are needed to help satisfy needs and to validate norms, attitudes, and values shared by members. These variables engender influence amongst group members.

Cohesion is another concept used to define group behavior. It is not as simple as just being a **member of a group or a** social category, but rather it provides a sense of belonging. It is associated with the idea of interdependence. It can be defined as the forces that act on group members to ensure they stay united, despite external agents who try to disrupt cohesion.

Group cohesion theories suggest that individuals look for others who share their attitudes and values in order to feel emotionally supported with regard to their point of view. This process of validating similarities is what props up the group and binds them together.

The concept of group cohesion has been studied extensively by social psychologists. This concept is not foreign to the field of sports psychology.

Carron (1991) defines cohesion as "the dynamic process that reflects the group tendency to keep together and remain united in pursuing their goals and objectives" (p. 124).

Sports psychologists must work to optimize team cohesion, with the goal of improving athletic performance. Should group cohesion not bring with it good results on the field, it will nonetheless improve relationships.

Peer Group Activities

As already discussed, peer groups are critical for the athlete; consequently, it is important to organize activities specifically within this group. Particularly in the case of peers who are involved in sports (teammates), activities can be done through group workshops that are focused on the topics we want to address. Below we offer a series of topics of interest and some techniques for addressing them.

Cohesion

As discussed, cohesion is one of the aspects that comes into play among peers who are part of the athletic environment. Through the use of team-building activities, we can address these variables in order to optimize the team environment. This method provides many advantages since, in addition to addressing a variety of skills which can be applied on the field of play, the activities have been designed with fun in mind so that the participants have a good time.

Below we suggest some exercises for developing cohesion. Each of these activities requires the group to identify a strategy in order to be able to complete the task they have been given, which will require good cohesion between its members.

Activity Name	Materials	Methodology
Sinking Boats	Rope, cones, stakes, etc.	Form two or more teams and use rope or cones to indicate spaces on the floor that are big enough for the teams to fit into (the "boats"). Around the boats, mark out smaller spaces. Team members must move into these spaces without falling into the "water" (the space between boats). The group has to devise a way to fit in spaces that become smaller and smaller without stepping outside of the boundaries.
Human Knot		The group joins hands and forms a circle. Without changing position or letting go of any hands, they have to move around until they are intertwined with one another. Afterward, without letting go, they have to try to return to their initial positions in the circle.
Broken Bridge	Chalk, cardboard, 3 different colored balls	Explain to the group that they must transport a wolf, a sheep, and a lettuce (represented by the three balls) across a river (drawn on the floor with chalk) whose bridge is broken. In order to do so, they must cross from one bank to another using rocks (pieces of cardboard) that they must also pick up in case they need them to cross again. Each group has one less rock than the number of members in the group, and only one person can fit on each rock. The balls cannot be thrown from one side to the other, and they cannot be left unsupervised (the wolf could eat the sheep, or the sheep could eat the lettuce). When the group manages to cross the river, they must have all 3 balls as well as all rocks.

Communication

Communication is another skill which needs to be worked on within a peer group, since smooth and regular communication encourages better relationships between members. We will focus here on activities and exercises to be used by teams in the sports environment. We are working on a make-or-break skill in some sports, where performance and results depend on communication between players. Beyond just communication, it is also important for the group to work on assertiveness, their ability to express themselves and respectfully defend their own opinions.
Group activities have been chosen as a method here as well, for the reasons previously mentioned.

Activity Name	Materials	Methodology
Guided Drawing	Paper or chalkboard, marker	One person describes the drawing to the rest of the group. During the first round, only the person describing the drawing can speak. They give short and concrete instructions (one or two words). During the second round, the group can ask questions to the person giving the instructions, provided that they are yes or no questions. Finally, there is a third round without any limits on communication. In this exercise, different forms of communication can be identified and extrapolated for use in daily life.
Escalation	Pen and paper.	The group thinks of a real or imagined situation that would cause tension. Some members of the group will be debaters; they will form a line in which the degree of conflict goes from mild to severe. At the front of this line will be a volunteer and a partner, who will have to explain the situation and respond assertively to teammates who are expressing different degrees of conflict. Afterward, the group as a whole will discuss what made communication challenging and what strategies they used.

Self-Knowledge

Self-knowledge and self-awareness are a process through which an individual becomes aware of their capabilities, qualities, personal characteristics, preferences, goals, strong and weak points, etc. It is especially relevant to athletes. For this reason, we suggest that teams do a group activity in order to foster reflection on and awareness of a variety of areas.

Life Plan

While working on self-awareness, a life plan is an interesting aspect to work on with athletes. This type of activity is an opportunity for the athlete to reflect on personal knowledge and allows them to become aware of where they are in different spheres of their lives and where they want to go.

The first step when establishing a life project is to identify the athlete's personal characteristics, their strengths and weaknesses. In this initial stage the SWOT analysis can be used, which allows for an analysis of where the subject is and propose objectives for the future (the technique is used to describe a subject's internal characteristics - strengths and

weaknesses - and external situations - opportunities and threats). Then each athlete will identify goals and targets that they want to meet in the different areas of their life (athletic, personal, academic or occupational, etc.) and outline short-, medium-, and long-term action plans that will allow them to achieve these goals. Just as the athlete's strengths and weaknesses were explored, it is also useful to examine the opportunities and threats in their environment and how they will influence whether they achieve their stated goals or not. For example, if we ask a team of young soccer players where they see themselves in 10 years, many of them may tell us that they see themselves playing professionally, but it is unlikely that all of them will achieve that. With a group activity based on life projects, we can help them identify what personal attributes could assist them in achieving that goal (effort, perseverance, etc.), what aspects of their environment would foster that (playing for a major club), and which would put it at risk (competition, many players in their same position). This visualization exercise, will make it easier to set realistic, reachable goals that are adapted to each athlete.

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