

4.1 Managing medical information

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Sports medicine, as with anything relating to people's health, requires considerable sensitivity and professionalism when conveying or communicating certain medical details.

In the case of athletes, when health details such as sports injuries are communicated within the environment of major events or professional teams, more attention and care is required.

The purpose of this unit is to give clear points about what we believe this communication should be like.

Firstly, we should ask who is communicating the information. At important clubs or events there is typically someone in charge of communication. Let's take a look at this communicator's profile, typically known as a press officer or communications director.

4.1.1 Profile of the Communications Specialist

A professional team's communications specialist should meet several basic requirements. The first, and undoubtedly one of the most important, is discretion, but there are others.

- Discretion is fundamental in any job, but even more so when working alongside a professional club's medical services.

Why? The answer is very simple: because they deal with information, and information is power.

Misused information shared at the wrong time can weaken one's own team (if it is in the hands of others), or can be directly damaging if not used in due course.

In short, one the most important characteristics that a professional team's communications specialist should know how to handle is discretion.

- Professionalism. They must always know where they are, who they are working for and what organization they are a part of. The

impact of being, say, with FC Barcelona is not the same as being with Melilla.

- Respect and cordiality. Respect towards the institution and its superiors as well as cordiality in daily dealings with players and the rest of the staff is essential for the smooth functioning of the team.
- Trust. This needs to be earned on a daily basis. Without mutual trust there is no success. The players and staff need to trust the communications specialist: they are the best in their field and the players and staff should think so as well. There is a reason they are with Barça. In order for everything to work perfectly, there must be mutual trust.
- Anticipating situations. Let's say, for example, that one of the team's very important players is celebrating the anniversary of his debut as a first team player on the date specified for the start of the season. Using this knowledge, the Communication, Marketing and Protocol departments could plan a heartfelt tribute. These types of actions need to be undertaken with appropriate timing and insight, or they tend not to turn out well.

Other characteristics:

- Speaking other languages.
- Mastering social networks.
- Interacting smoothly with the media and competitions (ACB, Euroleague, Catalan Federation ('Federación Catalana'), Spanish Federation ('Federación Española')).
- Managing the team on a daily basis (interviews, reports, statistics, various requests).

The relationship of the communications specialist with the staff and team

The relationship between the communications specialist and the staff and/or players should always be based on **respect** and **professionalism**. This does not mean that there should not be cordiality (it is better if there is), but professionalism and respect for everyone's work are essential.

The relationship between the physician and the staff

The relationship between the team sports physician and the team communications specialist is especially important. They should **coordinate principles regarding** communication or non-communication about an injury, **for example**. Sometimes **knowing when to communicate is just as important as knowing when not to communicate**.

The communications specialist should be informed about the physical state of the players at all times. It is important that the communication be smooth and unbiased. The **player**, the **coach** and the **physician** each play an important role in this regard; all three should be informed about what is planned to be communicated when the need arises.

It is important to maintain a close relationship with the staff; help should be offered whenever necessary. It is very easy to be there *through the good times*, but one must also be there during rough patches. **All these things count**, and this is one of the prerequisites of a good staff member.

The relationship with the team

When it comes to the relationship with players, it is important that this be cordial and respectful, although it is best not to mix the professional and personal sides.

There are some players that one might have a greater affinity with, or would go out to eat with (if the opportunity were to arise); but, by way of a straightforward example, and as a matter of professional ethics, one should never mix with those going out to party.

The relationship of the communications specialist with the club

The structure

In the professional structure of a large club the communications specialist is not an independent figure, but rather depends on the **Communication Department**.

Example: In our example, although the basketball division does function independently, the team communications specialist reports to two senior managers: **the head of Professional Sports Communications** and **the division's general manager**.

What does this mean in practice? This means that despite enjoying certain freedom of movement, if there are important decisions that need to be made during daily management (interviews, reports, announcements on the website or social media networks) these will **always** need to be **agreed upon**.

Weekly Meeting

If we are talking about a club with various divisions, the interaction with the other communication specialists should be smooth and constant. In order to achieve this, a **weekly meeting** is advisable in which everyone is present under the supervision of the club's Communications Department head.

Relationship with other departments

A professional team's communications specialist should have almost daily interaction with the head of marketing. Promotions for all games, radio and television announcements, general campaigns or photo shoots, etc., should all be agreed upon by both sides.

There is also interaction with other departments such as accreditation or protocol, which create strategies together when it comes time to call former players or former coaches to the team's box to attend games.

4.1.2 Relationship with the Media

Interaction with the various media organizations should always be **smooth** and take place **daily**.

Here is a good example of a work tool that improves communication with the media: A few seasons ago, it was decided to initiate a **WhatsApp mailing list** that facilitated the reinforcement of information that had previously been given in a press release. It has also been helpful for sharing announcements prior to protagonist meetings (coaches or players) that the communications specialist selects for that purpose.

The media, both national and international, often contact communication departments via calls, emails or WhatsApp.

Most daily communication relates to:

- **queries:** for example, why is a player absent?
- **specific questions:** for example, when is the deadline for appealing the sentence in the case of a player's accusation against the club?
- **clarifications:** the answers can be immediate if there are no complications, otherwise always agree with superiors.

Rights holders

There is an important distinction between the treatment that must be given, **as an obligation**, to media rights holders, and media without rights.

What does this mean? Simply, that rights holders receive preferential treatment and have pre-agreed interviews with protagonists before games and post-game. In addition to this, if they request specific interviews they must be accommodated wherever possible.

The rest of the Media

The rest of the media always receives cordial and personable treatment. This plays a part, or should play a part, in the way communication specialists work. They try to make the media's job easier because they are sustained by what the team produces, and the team needs them in order to further promote their brand.

One thing to keep in mind is social networking. The emergence of social networks caused a lot of damage to traditional journalism, since any person with a cell phone in their hand can capture a moment and turn something that does not seem to be newsworthy into news.

4.1.3 Internal communication with the head of medical services

As we mentioned in **section 2**, there should be a very close relationship between the communications specialist and the head of a team's medical services.

The utmost trust is required, because sometimes **knowing when to communicate is just as important as knowing when not to communicate.**

Various factors should be considered in terms of communicating or not communicating news of an injury:

- The influence the player has on the team.
- The interest the next opponent may have in knowing that a player is injured.
- Whether or not it is necessary to share the recovery time. If it is not necessary to communicate it, the phrase **"their progress will determine their readiness"** is often used. If communication is desired because they will undergo surgery, for example, an approximate recovery time should be given.

- The interests of the player or their representative. For example: Communicating news about a player that has a future with the NBA is not the same as communicating news about one who is in the final stages of his or her career and who is less important to the coach. It should be pointed out that **medical press releases always take place with the player's consent.**

4.1.4 Communicating with other teams and institutions

Communication with other teams

It is important to know the communications policies of other teams. Frequent meetings should be held with the communication specialists of other clubs in order to understand how they work. The biggest leagues in the world of soccer or basketball, for example, usually do this.

Communication with Major Leagues

The Example of Professional European Basketball

As also happens in other sports (soccer, handball, among others), at the end of every season there is a meeting between all of the **Euroleague** communication specialists to establish criteria and debate new league regulations. In the case of **Liga Endesa**, this meeting happens at the beginning of the year and is called a **communication seminar**.

In both cases the meetings are very beneficial because they essentially serve to debate the bylaws, or standards, of each league. These bylaws, in the case of both leagues, directly affect the television companies with whom there are always details to be addressed and worked on every season.

Examples:

- **In the Euroleague** the game day guidelines are set in which typically, based on the bylaws, a camera enters the locker room while the coach is having the pre-game pep talk with the players.

Euroleague bylaws also require a player from each team to respond to a flash-interview question during the rest period of each game; each coach must answer as well, also in question format, when returning to the court after the players' rest period. Once the game has finished, the coach and one player from the winning team will engage with the press in a press conference; this event takes place in English.

Likewise, according to the bylaws, the **rights holders** (television companies with rights) can request the attention of the coach

before the game using an interview format (3-4 questions), as well as after the game, and with the presence of a player. In this case, if the request is made we are obligated to comply. If not, it is not mandatory.

- **In Liga Endesa** the only television company with rights, in this case Movistar Plus, sets the guidelines for request levels during a game. In this case we find ourselves with the classic pre-game interview with both coaches, a flash-interview during the rest period with one player from each team - the same format used by the international Euroleague - as well as an interview with the coach and one player from the winning team.
- Other examples of requests are the famous **Euroleague** and **Liga Endesa Media-Days** before the start of the regular season: these involve the leagues' own media attention (video recordings, interviews and marketing actions to supply the leagues themselves with endless content) as well as rights holders from both leagues. In this case, we are talking about Movistar Plus and Televisión de Cataluña.

Throughout the season, there are also constant requests for interviews or reports from the Euroleague itself - in this case, from FMI, the powerful company which manages its audiovisual rights, and from Liga Endesa itself via their audiovisual department. In both cases they generally coincide with the lead-up to important games or in the event of exceptional achievements. One example from this season (2017/18) is the 20-year celebration of Juan Carlos Navarro's debut with the FC Barcelona Lassa first team.

In Summary:

Players are always exposed to the media and to their own competitions, which request their image to sell their product. It is the communication specialist's job to advise them so they "sell the product well", make it attractive, convince them of how good it could be for their image and that of the Club and, if needed, to protect them and advise them prior to possible questions that could affect their position within the team.

4.1.5 The 'Return to Play'

The **return to play** is one of the most important moments in the final stretch of a player's injury recovery.

At the end of any recovery there are two fundamental details to stress while communicating with the team sports physician in charge.

- **When do they want to communicate?**
- **How do they want to communicate?**

The When

It should be when the coaching staff decides, based on the guidelines of the medical staff.

The medical staff are the only ones who really know the progress of the player in question, whether they have met their target recovery times and how the recovery has gone. Afterwards, the coaching staff, with the head trainer, decides the best timing for communication in agreement with the team sports physician and **the player** and, finally, they inform the press officer so they can prepare the medical release statement.

The “When” times are also important. One option could be after a winning game, after a team's losing streak to encourage them with the news, or after a long recovery period to motivate the player and boost their interest in returning. There are many options for when to communicate this information, although they should all be explored and addressed alongside the medical services involved (they know the psychological conditions of the affected player and whether the information that they are about to receive could affect them), the coaching staff (mainly the trainer) and the team communication specialist (as the one who will receive input from outside via the press and social networks).

The How

There are many factors that could alter the way a player's return to play is communicated.

Example 1: Imagine a team of 13 players in which one important player is injured. The other 12 players are healthy and playing very well. The decision about how to communicate this return should be very measured, considering every word of the press release so as not to hurt any other teammate or pressure the player who is returning after some time out of competition.

Example 2: Imagine, on the other hand, that the team is stuck in an ongoing results crisis and the player who needs to make their return to

the team is a star. In this case, requiring the athlete to return to play after a recovery period to make them look like the team's savior should be avoided.

It is important to remember that any medical press releases should happen under the supervision of the team's head of medical services, as well as the assistance of the Club's medical services manager if necessary, together with the consent of the player in question. The model for the press release is always the same, although when a return to play is expected then there will be a greater impact at the level of the Club's own media.