

## 2.2 Threats to the Sports Team

At first sight, one might think that the factors threatening a team come from the outside. In this sense, the environment would be responsible for a particular team not developing, not evolving from a group to a team, not reaching optimal performance levels and not achieving the required mental strength. Rivals, referees, inadequate competitive formats, deficient infrastructure, vindictive press, among other factors might be examples of determining factors exogenous to the team. While it is true that such items may influence a team's development, they are not the main factors preventing optimal progress.

It is therefore internal aspects of the sports team that often condition and threaten its development. Both leaders and athletes are permanently involved in these issues, in one way or another, hence the particular importance of conceptualizing them and elucidating what can be done about them.

As an introduction, we shall mention the contributions made by Schell Schmid and De Andrés Rivero in their book *Basquetoboru*, where they discuss the causes for the success of the Spanish national basketball team, which became world champion in Japan in 2006.

The authors conducted a survey based on a sample of 150 basketball players and 150 Spanish business executives. They set out to determine the commonalities and disagreements regarding the factors that made up the perfect team, and what factors were hostile to the perfect team. To the great surprise of the testers and readers, the results yielded absolute coincidences regarding the main factor responsible for building the perfect team, as well as its main enemy, both in the realm of sports (basketball) and in business organizations: commitment was what both audiences praised the most, while both selfishness and individualism were the main enemy mentioned.

Table 9: The Characteristics of the Perfect Team

No	BASKETBALL	COMPANIES
1	Commitment	Commitment
2	Work Ethic	Aspirations
3	Capacity for sacrifice	Loyalty
4	Discipline	Confidence
5	Competitiveness	Generosity
6	Support	Professionalism

7	Humility	Support
8	Aspirations	Leadership
9	Dedication	Positive attitude
10	Confidence	Discipline
11	Generosity	Humility
12	Positive attitude	Dedication
13	Professionalism	Capacity for sacrifice
14	Loyalty	Competitiveness
15	Leadership	Work Ethic
<i>Survey n=150 basketball athletes in ACB – LEB league; 150 employees in Spanish companies. March 2008</i>		

Source: Schell Schmid and De Andrés Rivero, 2008 p 28

Table 10: The Enemies of the Perfect Team

No	BASKETBALL	COMPANIES
1	Selfishness, individualism	Selfishness, individualism
2	Laziness, lack of dedication	Unclear objectives
3	Arrogance, lack of humility	Lack of solidarity
4	Lack of commitment	Arrogance, lack of humility
5	Lack of solidarity	Negative attitude
6	Negative attitude	Lack of communication
7	Excessive confidence, relaxation	Lack of leadership
8	Disrespect	Lack of commitment
9	Indiscipline	Disorganization
10	Lack of communication	Disloyalty
11	Disloyalty	Indiscipline
12	Envy	Laziness, lack of dedication
<i>Survey n=150 basketball athletes in ACB – LEB league; 150 executives in Spanish companies. March 2008</i>		

Source: Schell Schmid and De Andrés Rivero, 2008 p. 37

In the face of such conclusions, we might invert the logic of the presentation and begin by mentioning what should be regarded as an antidote to threats and enemies of the perfect team: the development, right from the teaching-learning process, of true team players.

Individualistic athletes who favor selfishness tend to:

- Be immature.
- Demand permanent and continuous recognition.
- Are afraid of making mistakes.
- Have a low amount of emotional energy available.
- Have biased assessments, of themselves and of others.

On the other hand, developing team players, for all those for whom this is their specific role within sports communities, involves favoring athletes who really internalize the value of commitment, displaying the following behavior:

- Choosing to grow rather than win.
- Facing up to personal fears.
- Seeking appropriate instruction.
- Seeking out the best trainers.
- Seeing challenges in opportunities.
- Learning to accept mistakes.
- Enjoying the journey as much as the destination.

These items are capable of shaping commitment in a sustained manner, and are the groundwork for building players who prioritize the collective over the individual. Focusing on the key points to achieve this athletic profile, the following training guidelines stand out:

- Constantly pursue the team's objective.
- Create skills that collaborate with the team.
- Value each team member's contribution.
- Learn to listen.
- Increase internal competitiveness.
- Avoid the complacency of achieving results.
- Playing for results and glory.

Below we describe the characteristics and particularities of the two main threats to the sports team: social loafing and anonymity.

### 2.2.1 Social Loafing

The main objective of any coach and team leader is largely to reveal the mechanisms at work, in order that every one of the members of the squad in question does their utmost in favor of the collective goal. They must be willing to deliver 100% effort and skills for the team's sake.

It would be reasonable to think that all those who have voluntarily joined a team would act as expected, based on everything mentioned above. However, there is evidence that shows the contrary is often the case.

There is a particular phenomenon worth studying that, unfortunately, is active in many contemporary sports teams, regardless of the level of competition or the sports genre or discipline in question. This phenomenon is social loafing, a real threat that jeopardizes a team's mental strength and its sports performance.

Taking the reviews from Weinberg and Gould (1996), the main characteristics of this concept are described below, as well as the harm it does.

Table 13: Social Loafing: Definition and Suggestions for Coaches

The phenomenon responsible for people in group or team settings giving less than 100% (from loss of motivation) has been dubbed social loafing by psychologists.

### Why Does Social Loafing Happen and What Can Coaches Do About It?

#### 1- Stress the Importance of Personal Pride

When stressing the idea of the team, some players may not recognize the importance of their own contribution to the group. They should be encouraged to examine their responsibility to the team and how they can improve for the team's sake.

#### 2- Increase Individualization

When team members believe their individual performances are identifiable (that is to say, recognized by others), the sensation of social loafing may be eliminated, since athletes no longer have a feeling of anonymity (Williams, Harkins and Latane, 1981). Coaches and physical educators should continually monitor their athletes' individual effort and give "feedback," both in training and in competition. By assessing individual effort, coaches make athletes aware that their performance is perceived with interest and that they are not lost in the crowd.

#### 3- Determining Specific Situations of Social Loafing

By means of direct observation and using all the channels available, coaches should keep track of what specific sports situations produce social loafing in some or all of the team members.

#### 4- Conduct Individual Interviews to Discuss Social Loafing

Fluid individual communication is pivotal in determining the reasons why the athlete feels unmotivated, confused, and even scared with regard to specific demands.

Source: Adapted from Weinberg and Gould 1996.



Table 14: What Causes Social Loafing?

1	Athletes might believe that their teammates are less motivated than they are, leading them to put in less effort.
2	They may feel that the hard work they are doing is not duly recognized, given they feel "lost in the crowd".
3	They may feel there is no need to make an effort because their teammates will make up for their deficiency.
4	They may feel they can hide within the group and avoid the negative consequences of not putting in sufficient effort.

Source: Weinberg and Gould (1996, p. 202)

## 2.2.2 Anonymity

Closely linked to the threat described above, anonymity constitutes an instrument through which social loafing tends to appear. One threat depends on the other and vice versa, combining to hinder the sports performance and the process of progressing from a group to a team.

Anonymity consists of the act of hiding within the group dynamic, and can be done voluntarily by one or several squad members, thus failing to produce the behavior expected of them by their leaders and partners while remaining exposed only latently, enjoying the same rewards as the rest of the team, should they achieve the proposed goals.

Anonymity runs contrary to the contribution each athlete must make in order to build task cohesion. It represents the opposite of the team player profile described above and is the precise figure that the Spanish surveyors identified as the enemy: selfishness and individualism.

The action of anonymity amounts to much more than the loss of productivity resulting from a lack of individual effort, and instead generates an extremely harmful effect that multiplies, product of the collective unease it inspires in the rest of the team when they become aware that "someone somewhere" is not pulling their weight.

The leader's action is very important in dealing with this phenomenon, starting with the effective management of the individual roles and the norms of internal harmony. It is crucial to maximize the individual nature of the contribution (and lack of contribution) of each member of the squad, as well as to have a reinforcement policy (as we shall see later) that is consistent and impartial, based on clear indicators that make it possible to reward those who are deserving and correct the behavior of

whoever fails to understand the significance of being part of a sports team.

The anonymity that some team members surround themselves with constitutes a serious threat to the team's actual performance, as well as to their potential development.

Some reasons why this threat appears include:

1. First, this occurs because for those players demonstrating this attitude, it is used to disguise their lack of commitment with their own role and with the team's performance.
2. Second, the anonymity of some of the members harms the performance of the team as a whole, because not all members will contribute in accordance with what they are capable of.
3. Third, it lends a feeling of inequality to the team's functioning, given the disparity in effort with which each member faces their obligations.
4. Fourth, it may affect the team member's intrinsic motivation and hinder the introduction of systems boosting extrinsic motivation, such as variable remuneration schemes.
5. Fifth, it affects the building of a culture suitable for the development of an organization, since it undermines values that are an essential part of any team's identity.
6. Sixth, it sets a "bad example" for the team that, unless the organization takes it upon itself to apply the proper penalties, might well be adopted by other members whose convictions on the matter are not as firm as they should be.
7. Last, it hinders the management of talent and the development of the team, because not everyone will bring out their potential, nor will synergy be achieved, posing limits to any expansion of the team's performance.

### 2.2.3 General Principles of Rewards

The mechanism by means of which reinforcement policies are carried out in sports teams is meant to alter the athlete's behavior, so as to improve the chance of bringing about the desired behavior (and of suppressing the undesired behavior).

The leader can count on this instrument to prevent such threats from progressing and to consolidate expected behaviors, which taken as a whole makes up the most pivotal concept for the life of a team: its culture. A team's culture is made up of the practices and customs that distinguish it from other teams and that define its identity. Those factors critical for success will be upheld over time with expected performance levels, despite the logical ups and downs of any process.



Rewarding and punishing have always, from time immemorial, been teaching-learning methods, provided there is no outburst, disrespect, or aggression, which have no place within any sports community. It is worth highlighting how applying certain reinforcements, for particular people at certain times, can provide the support necessary to increase the response level where necessary.

Getting rid of social loafing and anonymity, erasing selfishness and individualism, encouraging the development of team players committed to the collective cause over and above their own, consolidating compliance with norms of internal coexistence, increasing levels of social and task cohesion, as well as motivating unmotivated athletes are just some of the benefits brought about by applying reinforcement policies.

Among the central considerations involved in implementing the principle of reinforcement, there is the following:

- It is fundamental for the addressee to know what the reinforcement actually is. It may be that the leader believes he is using something as a reward, when in fact it is a punishment. It is essential to know each member's reinforcement preferences on an individual level.
- Reinforcement can take place by awarding or removing something. Removing something may not always be a punishment; it may also be a reward.
- It is necessary to consider collective rewards, since some members may be left with a feeling of injustice if the same positive or negative reinforcement is applied to everyone, although it may be under the guise of good intentions.
- We should bear in mind that, in all reinforcement policies, the aim is to induce the desired behavior and suppress the undesirable one. Based on this maxim, the reinforcement should at first be continual (desired behavior appears / undesirable behavior disappears = reinforcement) and then, it should be discontinued, with the aim of avoiding dependency on the reward to achieve the expected behavior.

Below we describe four types of reinforcement, based on a combination of variables: rewards and punishments, and applying stimuli or not:

Table 15: Types of reinforcement

+ Reward Positive stimulus is applied	+ Punishment Stimulus is applied
- Reward Negative stimulus is removed	- Punishment Positive stimulus removed

Source: Adapted from Weinberg and Gould, 1996.

Although sports psychologists claim that rewards and not punishment should be predominantly applied (be they positive or negative rewards), it is critical that the leader should know each of the members. It is important for the leader to know which group dynamics work and which do not, to be clear about the impact of each of these types of reinforcement in light of the proximity of the competitive situation in question, or the specific sports demand involved, so as to determine which to apply in each situation.

Frederick Herzberg's (1968) *The Theory of the Two Factors* can be connected here with the reinforcement principle, where it refers to two types of factors that could modify the team members' behavior in one way or another, in accordance with the objectives pursued. To understand this concept, consult the following table.

Table 16: Theory of the Two Factors

Hygienic factors	Motivational factors
If they are present, there is no extra motivation, but if they are not, there is demotivation.	If they are absent, there is demotivation, but if they are present, there is extra motivation.

Source: Herzberg (1968 as cited by De Diego and Sagredo, 1992, p.72).

The link between the reinforcement policy and this theory can be found in one particular circumstance that tends to appear in sports teams. This situation is a threat to the team's mental strength and its corresponding performance levels. It is the team members' perception that the motivational factors are, in fact, hygienic factors.

If this were so, it would be necessary to modify the reinforcement policy, since the objectives pursued are not those being reached: any reinforcement factor should motivate the members, not lead them to believe they are acquired rights.

## 2.2.4 Results-Focused Culture

The last section in this module has been reserved for some words about the main threat to a sports team: becoming permanently consumed by the results-focused culture.

Although it is true that every team pursues results (since they are part of the nature of rule-bound games in general, and of sports disciplines in particular), the postmodern era has brought to the fore an excessive obsession with this dimension of human behavior. Today it would seem that everything boils down to "get it or leave it".

The realm of sports is not alien to this phenomenon. One fundamental clarification: sports psychology and psychology of physical activity do not consider "results" a bad word. On the contrary, it is the ulterior objective pursued based on everything else that is being worked on, but it is very important to determine the exact amount of weight it deserves. Let us remember some of the characteristics of sports results:

- It is the interaction between one's own performance and the environment.
- It is the consequence of what is performed.
- It is a variable subordinated to external factors.

As concerns performance variables – the true thrust of the athlete's and leaders' management–, the principal features have to do with the following:

- It represents the sports behavior's performance level.
- It represents the reason for the performance.
- It is a variable independent of external factors.

If the differences between these two concepts as well as how they complement one another, is understood, it follows that: increasing the likelihood of obtaining the desired results necessarily has to do with always placing the focus on performance management.

Athletes' and coaches' experience in counseling can often be summarized in expressions such as the following: "I don't know what's the matter with me, when it comes to competing I lose confidence"; "I'm afraid of making mistakes"; "I used to enjoy this, now I suffer"; "I get nervous before playing"; "After the matches I can't stop thinking about what happened"" "I lose concentration on the field"; "I'm thinking of giving up".

The only psychological common denominator that all of these share is an excessive obsession with results-focused culture. If everything comes down to winning or losing, chances are that the sports experience becomes limited to the pressure of winning and the fear of losing, but never the desire to play.

Taking into consideration that enjoyment is one of the main fuels of the human psyche, the equation should read: enjoy to win, and not win to enjoy, as currently preached by the excessive obsession with results-

focused culture. We should be guided by the idea of growth with regard to the abilities, aptitudes and attitudes that make up our inner capital, rather than by continual comparison with the outside.

Those who focus excessively on the desired destination necessarily lose focus of how to climb each step along the way.

Paving the way may very well be the best way to shape this desired destination, rather than becoming obsessed from day one with the finishing line, without ever perceiving or experiencing each moment of the path leading us to the destination.



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