Introduction

Does having the best players mean you have the best team? Is collective performance equal to the sum of each squad member's individual performance? Is a group the same as a team? Are there any formulas to detect high performance components in sports teams? Is it chance or causality that makes a team perform best? Does the coach, the leader of the sports process, actually influence the team's performance, or is just having the right personnel enough for the task? What does the mind have to do with team performance? If it does, what variables constitute the mental strength of a sports team?

These and many other questions are closely related to this module. Throughout the 20th century, much has been written in the history of sports about the physical, technical, tactical, strategic, and even nutritional contributions that were made in order to achieve ideal training for athletes and teams. While it is true that sports psychology and the psychology of physical activity have also contributed significantly to our knowledge of sports (there are an increasing number of theoretical schools and geographical locations around the world with formal institutions responsible for producing content and implementing methodologies according to disciplines, age, gender, and competitive levels), it is nonetheless important to highlight the existence of sports communities that lack continuous and formal support from sports psychology.

Fortunately, more and more clubs and federations are being advised by psychology professionals. However, this cornerstone of preparation for athletes and teams is not commonplace in all cases and at all levels of sports. Thus, while it may come as a surprise, at the start of the 21st century, as the realm of the mind continues to be a universe that holds great importance for sports teams, when it comes to training this area in particular there is insufficient knowledge and, more importantly, a lack of tools to perform such training.

Scientific knowledge has a lot to say with regard to these aspects. The mental strength of a sports team consists of all those psychosocial mental variables that operate at an individual level, albeit impacting the overall collective, and that produce optimal performance in relation to the tasks to be performed. These tasks function collectively by necessity and require that all the members of the group contribute if they are to reach ideal levels. The typical Gestalt phrase, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts", has never been truer.
Earlier we emphasized the importance of the scientific contribution to group dynamics and its relationship to sports performance. To better

understand this, we refer to Ivan Steiner (1972, as cited in Weinberg and Gould, 1996, pp. 197-198), who claimed that a team's real productivity is the ratio between the team's ideal productivity and the flawed processes of the group, where these processes consist of coordination and motivation failures.

We highlight this concept because it is closely linked to the mental strength of high performance teams, within which are included the three main dimensions of leadership, whose main goal is precisely to achieve the highest level of collective performance. These dimensions are:

- Productivity.
- Group climate.
- Individual development.

Why are these concepts put forward as central to leadership and high performance teams? Because they provide the rationale for the intervention of sports psychologists in teams. There are several reasons why these professionals are involved, but the most important reasons are those related to conflicts mentioned in the table below.

Table 1: Main Team Conflicts and their Corresponding Dimensions

Conflict	Dimension of conflict
"the team is not performing as it should"	Productivity
"There are problems among team members"	Group climate
"Some team members are unmotivated"	Individual development

Source: Prepared by the author.

This definition supplied by Steiner contains several of the main components found in mental strength in high performance teams:

- Productivity and its direct relationship with objectives and roles.
- Group climate and its relationship with collective stability, understood in light of the rules for internal harmony, cohesion, and the reinforcement of policies.
- Individual development and its link to motivation, enjoyment, and communication.

Each of these concepts is situated within the context of a development process that influences collective human behavior and that constitutes the transition from a group to a team, as we shall see later.

2.1 The evolutionary Development from Group to Team

Numerous authors and theories agree that isolated individual behavior differs from the behavior of individuals in relation with other people. In other words, we are not the same people when we form groups.

It is precisely this dynamic that inspires the interest in understanding the mechanisms that produce high performance levels, particularly where teams are concerned, where several members have to make their contribution in order to reach a common goal.

In team sports, it is very interesting to observe how the same team often performs differently with different players from one moment to the next (which is logical), but likewise how a team with the same players (and even the same coach) behaves in absolutely different ways. Undoubtedly, the collective framework has particular features that, when activated appropriately, produce expected social behaviors.

For this to happen, it is important to define what a group is and how it differs from the idea of a team.

The first thing to fully understand is that "a set of individuals does not necessarily constitute a group" (Weinberg y Gould, 1996, p. 188).

The key element that defines a group has to do with the characteristics of the interaction among its members. And this interaction, in turn, has certain features that define the group as such, which we shall list below:

Table 2: Characteristics of the Interaction that Make Up a Group

1	Sharing common objectives.
2	Interpersonal chemistry in relation to the task at hand.
3	Open channels of communication.
4	Interdependence and interaction in relation to the task.
5	Feelings of collective identity.

Source: Adapted from Weinberg and Gould, 1996.

This last feature is emphasized as it is the fundamental element that defines a group: that feeling of identity "which make its members consider the group to be a unit in itself, distinguishable from other groups" (Weinberg and Gould, 1996, p. 188).

Research has shown that some of the most important factors for the development of a group, and not just a collection of individuals, are proximity, distinction, similarity, and establishing group objectives and rewards. Below are the definitions of the important factors for group development:

- Proximity: Subjects that find themselves in close proximity, who are physically close to each other, have a strong tendency to establish bonds. Physical proximity is not itself sufficient, but remaining in close contact and having the chance to interact, when combined with distinction, similarity and establishing group objectives and rewards, all help to encourage group development.

- Distinction: As a group of individuals differentiate themselves from others, feelings of identity and unity also increase. Stressing the tradition and history of team identity can contribute to creating a feeling of distinction.

- Similarity: similarity of attitudes, aspirations, commitments, capacity. The coach or professor has to strive to produce a similar attitude regarding factors such as accomplishing group objectives, the expectations for individual behavior, and a code of conduct for practices and non-sporting environments.

- Group objectives and rewards: To guarantee team unity, the coach must emphatically stress the group's goals and the rewards that await them if they meet their objectives. Individual goals and rewards must be rejected.

Following this line of reasoning, the following question arises: Is a group the same as a team? The answer is no.
We shall therefore look at the difference between the notion of a group and that of a team.

A group of athletes does not necessarily make for a sports team. "Forming a team is really an evolving process. Indeed, groups go through a development sequence of four phases, which starts with the simple grouping together of people and ends with the team itself", Tuckman (1965, as cited by Weinberg and Gould, 1996, p. 188).

While from one team to another there may be different maturation times for these phases, they are all invariably part of an evolving process. The phases are as follows:

- Forming.
- Storming.
- Norming.

- Performing.

Before moving on to the specifics of each one of the four phases of this evolving process, it is necessary to elaborate on some concepts related to the diachronic and synchronic aspects of a team, namely:

- Team structure.
- Team dynamics.

These two dimensions are crucial because the ideas that sustain them are the same ideas that will overlap in the following sections and that will help to elucidate each of the phases.

Team Structure

The structure of a group depends to a great extent on the interaction of its members: how they perceive each other and what they expect of themselves and each other. For a group of athletes to become a successful team, certain structural features must develop. Two of the most important are (from Diego and Sagredo, 1992, p.225):

- Group roles.
- Group norms.

Group roles: a role is a set of behaviors expected from those who occupy specific positions within the sports team. In all groups there are two role categories: formal and informal roles.

Formal roles are explicitly assigned by the coach or by the group. Athletes are enlisted to fulfill and perform such roles, and their behavior responds to specific expectations.

On the other hand, informal roles emerge as a result of the interaction between group members.

Research has repeatedly shown that when the individual members of a group understand their roles, they attempt to carry them out to the best of their capacity and the group becomes more efficient.

In addition, the clarity of the role, its acceptance, and the perception of performance are associated, in turn, with a large number of group processes such as communication, cohesion, and commitment to an objective, all behavior directed towards the attainment of goals.

Group norms: a norm is a behavior guideline whose compliance is required by the team members. The task itself may be relevant or

irrelevant. In any case, a norm reflects the group's consensus on the behaviors it considers acceptable.

One of the best known and most thoroughly researched facts in relation to norms established for relevant tasks is productivity regulation.

It is fundamental to highlight certain aspects to keep in mind in order to improve the group's structure. The subject's roles and the expectation that those roles will be performed must be clearly identified. In other words, the behavioral requirements of a role must be made as explicit as possible. Those who perform a role habitually have a different perspective of the role's requirements from that of the rest of the team members.

In terms of role acceptance, it is also beneficial to present the contingencies associated with the performance of the role. Both the clarity of the role and its acceptance can be improved through a program that effectively establishes objectives. Establishing goals is useful for different functions: it directs individual attention and actions towards the development of strategies towards fulfilling the goal; it contributes to increasing interest for the activity; and it leads to a prolonged effect. All of this contributes to the acceptance and clarity of the role.

Role acceptance is also greater when the coach minimizes differences in importance between roles. Thus, the success of the team as a whole and the importance of all the roles are required for the team to reach its goal, which is why all the roles must be similarly emphasized.

Establishing positive group norms is extremely important in team sports. Recruiting formal leaders and making them responsible for the team's operation as active agents represents one technique that has been used with great success. If the group leaders accept and adhere to specific guidelines, other team members will soon follow suit.

Team Dynamics

With a view to ultimately developing the highest productivity in each of the athletes and the team, we shall now analyze one of the most specific and significant variables in group management: cohesion.

Cohesion is understood as:

> ...the entire field of forces acting upon the members of a group so that they remain as part of said group. It is also understood as the dynamic process that reflects the group tendency to keep together and remain united in pursuing their goals and objectives. (From Diego and Sagredo, 1992, p.229).

> The sports team should be considered as a group whose performance depends not only on individual capacities and skills, but also on the interactions and relationships established between the different individuals that compose the team (Hernández Mendo, 2005, p. 119).

The term "dynamics" that appears in the definition recognizes how individual group members feel about the rest of the participants, the perception of the group as a whole, and how the effects of time and experience change the goals.

Other definitions were proposed, but common to all of them are the two basic constitutive dimensions: task cohesion and social cohesion.
Task cohesion reflects the degree to which group members work together to reach common objectives.

Social cohesion, on the other hand, reflects the degree to which team members have an affinity with each other on a personal level and enjoy the group's camaraderie.

A large number of important group properties are associated with group cohesion, such as communication. The level of communication relative to the task and to social affairs increases as the group achieves greater cohesion. Group members appear more open with one another and are more willing to socialize, conversing more and listening better. In short, sharing information creates sympathy and increases cohesion.

There is also greater conformity to group behavior and performance guidelines in cohesive groups. Recently formed groups exert a minimal influence on their members. But as the group evolves and acquires greater cohesion, adhesion to explicit norms of behavior increases.

As the group's cohesion increases, its members begin to place higher value on social approval and the opportunity to interact with other group members. As a result, they show an increased tendency to adhere to group norms and come under the group's influence, even when that influence leads directly to the performance of deviant behavior or to maintaining a low operational work rate.

A group's self-perception, as well as the perception of other groups and/or members not their own, also becomes distorted as the group's cohesion increases. On the one hand, the group tends to hold its own members in high esteem and overrate their own contributions, importance, and performance. On the other hand, it tends to underrate the importance and performance of other groups or members of other groups.

Another property associated with cohesion is productivity. Traditionally, a direct, positive relationship has been assumed to exist between these two; as cohesion increases, so too does productivity. Research into sports has shown that it is not so easy to chart the data. If group cohesion is high and the productivity norm is as well, then performance will be positively affected. Reciprocally, if cohesion is high and the productivity norm is low, then performance will be low or negatively affected. When cohesion is low, groups with a high productivity norm will, in terms of performance, supersede those with low norms (from Diego and Sagredo, 1992, pp. 230-234).

The following four sections shall deal exclusively with listing the characteristics and particularities of each phase, with the aim of fully understanding the process all groups of athletes have to go through in order to become real high performance teams, and how the variables affecting mental strength have a lot to contribute to this collective endeavor.

2.1.1 The Forming Phase. Characteristics and Particularities

This phase corresponds to the initial state, the first moments in which the group of athletes come together.

Below is a description of the specific characteristics of this phase, after which we shall remark on some particularities regarding the structure and dynamics of the process whereby groups become teams.

Table 4: Specific Characteristics of the Forming Phase

In this first phase of developing a team, its members become familiar with each other.
People try to determine whether they belong to the group and, if so, the role assigned to them.
After each athlete has found their place in the team structure, interpersonal relationships are built and put to the test, including those formed between the leaders (coaches, for example) and the remaining members.
Those members who do not identify strongly with the group will find it difficult to build positive relationships with other partners.
Coaches must help to build these solid bonds in all cases during this foundational moment by developing strategies to facilitate team interaction.

Source: adapted from Weinberg and Gould, 1996.

Generally, some of the particularities of this initial phase have to do with the high level of expectation that each of the members of the newly formed group has concerning the roles that each one will assume (in short, what role each individual will play in the future team). Likewise the initially high level of eagerness to contribute to the whole, where members have little substantial information regarding how and from where to make said contribution.

The above situation means that the group leader now starts to establish clarity regarding individual roles and to assign tasks that will be specific to each member and that will constitute their contribution.

On the other hand, the leader is recommended to avoid the most frequent and serious leadership errors, namely:

- Ignoring their team.
- Seeking to be liked rather than respected.

To avoid both of these, direct channels of communication (both collective and individual) become the leader's central tool, for the purposes of understanding the needs, motivations and fears of each of the members, as well as the collective expectations of the group.

Lastly, it is necessary to mention that the leader, right from the initial stages, must begin to build an optimal operational distance between themselves and those they lead. Neither distant nor above, but near to those they will lead. Neither aversion nor friendliness, but predominantly empathy.

2.1.2 The Storming Phase. Characteristics and Particularities

This second phase is reached when the leader has surveyed each of the team members' characteristics and, as concerns the members, when they have a basic idea of the role they will be performing within the team structure.

The word "conflict" has had and still has bad press in most communities in general, and in sports communities in particular. As if the possibility of abolishing conflict were preferable, and, in the event of conflict arising, hiding it rather than facing it.

Thus, the following assertion: as can be clearly seen in this model of progression from group to team, conflict is inherent to the growth of any human collective. The problem has nothing to do with the presence of conflict (conflict is normal), but with the lack of a clear, explicit means of dealing with it.

This phase, characterized by anger towards the leader, as well as horizontal interpersonal conflict among the group members, has to do with the distance between the role each member is designated and the role they actually assume. Non-preference in the roles allotted and the position's perceived lack of status means that anger towards the leader and frustration with oneself are common currency during this phase.

It is here, when interpersonal relationships enter a delicate situation, that norms of internal harmony should make their appearance in order to guarantee that the behavior of the team members remains stable. Among these, it would be wise for there to exist some norm specifically related to conflict management procedures.

It is hard to overstate the importance of direct, frank communication on the part of the leader; "insofar as the information relayed is coherent, the message will be clearer" (Valdés Casal, 1998, p.161). The aim here is to justify the role assigned to each member and argue for the benefits in terms of the collective response, where each person's specific contribution has to do precisely with those roles. Essentially, it is a matter of justifying the differential status of each of the tasks, since athletes often do not see as attractive certain roles that are no thought to be at the level of what they believe they ought to be doing.

In this phase it is fundamental to work with managing interpersonal bonds based on clear and explicit coexistence norms and more direct channels of communication, so that each member's role forms a solid foundation for forthcoming performances.

Table 5: Storming Phase: Specific Characteristics

- The second phase in forming the team consists of the group rebelling against the leader, resisting control, and interpersonal confrontation.
- Once leaders and group members have established their roles and status within the group, internal struggles appear.
- There may even be bodily conflict resulting from members competing for particular places within the group and positions on the playing field.
- Many of these struggles are of an interpersonal and social nature.
- In this phase, coaches need to communicate with the athletes directly, objectively, and frankly: the evaluations they make of each member's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the part they play in the team, will help to mitigate the uncertainty, which is the athletes' main source of stress. Stress viewed as an organism's adaptive, non-specific response to a particular situation (Dosil, 2004, p. 158).
- Stress relief should reduce hostilities.

Source: Adapted from Weinberg and Gould, 1996.

2.1.3 The Norming Phase. Characteristics and Particularities

Table 6: Specific Characteristics of the Norming Phase

During "norming", solidarity and cooperation replace hostility.

Instead of being concerned about their own personal well-being, the athletes work together to achieve common objectives.

Source: Adapted from Weinberg and Gould, 1996.

"Group cohesion" is produced in this phase, when the members join forces and build team unity.

This joining of energies may be a catalyst that improves satisfaction among team members and also establishes the foundation for future success.

The corresponding roles provide stability, on which basis each player's specific contribution is taken into consideration.

Instead of competing for status or some kind of recognition, the players' goal becomes economizing effort and task efficiency.

Having described the most important features of this phase, we shall now emphasize a key concept: team cohesion.

It is necessary to take advantage of the cooperation and solidarity that appear at this state, added to the fact that team structure has been largely consolidated (clear roles assumed, more norms of internal harmony taking effect). This is the moment for the leader to boost the team by carrying out social cohesion actions as well as, and this is inescapable, task cohesion actions.

With collective objectives taking precedence over individual protagonism, this phase is optimal for regulating productive guidelines by gradually reviewing objectives.

Sports performance is reaching ideal levels at this point and the path towards full team consolidation is being satisfactorily met.

2.1.4 The Performing Phase. Characteristics and Particularities

As we shall see below in the description of the characteristics of this phase, this state represents the culmination of the process of evolving from group to team. The team members become at this stage, along with their leader and collaborators, a high performance team.

Logically, the challenge in reaching this stage has to do with remaining there. In this sense, it is particularly important to care for the squad's emotional energy. Bearing in mind that performance levels are virtually optimal and that the team structure and dynamics have been consolidated, team members' psychic fatigue can be expected to be high. A good strategy might be to cut down on training sessions and competition with stimuli that relax and ease squad tension, and thus manage the existing energy.

On the other hand, the idea of emotional regeneration assumes great importance, understood as a moment in the psychic energy cycle where the individual must replenish the flow of psychological fuel needed to perform their functions satisfactorily.

As enjoyment is one of the main mental substrates, it is fundamental to work with athletes with actions that promote both sports enjoyment and non-sport related enjoyment. Knowing how to "switch off the mind" from sports refers to being able to think about and connect with other activities, promoting greater contact with one's own person and character (regarding the function within the sports community). The aforementioned becomes more significant during this specific phase.

Table 7: Specific Characteristics of the Performing Phase

- The final phase of the progression from group to team. The ideal state regarding optimal levels of sports performance.
- In this phase, the team members come together to channel their energy for the team's success.
- Structural issues have been resolved and interpersonal relationships have stabilized.
- Roles are clearly specified and the players help one another to win collectively: the team's success is the main objective.
- The coach provides each player with feedback on their specific contributions and makes sure no one feels left out.

Source: Adapted from Weinberg and Gould, 1996.

It is very important to highlight that this evolving process is not rigid and unidirectional; quite the contrary, it is dynamic and bidirectional. A team can reach the much-desired performing phase and, at another moment, be in the storming phase; in this case, norming must be reconstructed in order to approach the ideal state once again, and so forth, with the variations involved in each case.

This is why the team leader (understood as the coach) becomes relevant, for the purpose of detecting what phase the team is in and thus knowing what lever to pull so that the process can be oriented in the desired direction.

By way of conclusion, combining the three main variables described in terms of team structure and dynamic (productivity, norms, and cohesion), below we show how the resulting performance (maximum objective of the collective response) is directly related to how these concepts are linked.

Table 8: Summary of Team Structure and Dynamics and Resulting

Level of social cohesion	Guidelines of norms and productivity	Resulting performance
High	High	Positive
Low	High	Positive
High	Low	Negative
Low	Low	Negative

Source: Prepared by the author.

Performance

Some final considerations in view of the foregoing table:

- The resulting performance is closely related to the level of the team's productive norm.
- Nevertheless, the levels of social cohesion may be low while the team's performance may be high. This indicates that if there are high levels of social cohesion, so much the better, but there must always be a high level of task cohesion.
- When levels of social cohesion are high and the productive norm guideline is low, there is a risk of cliques forming within the team, resulting in low performances.

Throughout the topics dealt with here, we have attempted to describe the elements of mental strength for sports teams, in this case based on the concepts related to the phases of progressive development from a group to a team. Intersecting with these ideas, we have introduced the relevance of the coach in this construction, based on the tools that sports leadership provides for him.

In the following sections, the reader shall be made to understand the leader's significance in developing the athletes' mental strength and sports performance.