



CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE TEAM COHESION IMPACT ON HANDBALL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Introduction. From the perspective of our paper, we consider that creating an optimum cohesion in the handball team can have favorable influences on performances.

Purpose. The present study describes the theoretical premises related to the concept of “cohesion” within the handball team.

Content. The cohesion influence on the group productivity has been intensely studied. High cohesion groups can easily establish performance standards and offer a wider range of awards to its members. M.E. Shaw (1981) discovered that highly cohesive groups are cooperative, friendly and they use a democratic form for the behavior control. In low cohesion groups, members are hostile and aggressive, they are pleased when their colleagues make mistakes and they adopt a decision-making autocratic style.

Conclusions. Relationships among teammates are decisive to ensure the group cohesion and the efficiency of a team activity depends on the quality of these relationships.

Keywords: cohesion, handball, performance.

Introduction

Nowadays, high performance Romanian handball has results under the level of those obtained in the glorious period of the years 1960-1970. The titles of World champions, together with the Olympic medals and the winning of European Cups, have turned the Romanian handball school into an example for numerous countries. In the present big international competitions, teams such as France, Spain and Brazil, weaker by far than the Romanian teams of those times, have become nations more and more redoubtable.

How did they manage to ascend to the world elite? With whom? Through what? Such questions are often raised by the Romanian coaches, players and even by the specialists in different sports branches.

Numerous experts from many countries of the world have been seriously concerned with the handball training optimization. These preoccupations lead to the conclusion that it would be necessary for them to adopt the best orientation, from the methodological, psychopedagogic and didactic points of view, so that people practice the handball game regardless of their purpose and skill level.

Handball and everything it involves is continuously changing, is evolving, certainly with a permanently progressive dynamics. As for the dynamics specific to the group of athletes composing “a team”, changes are also permanent, due to the heterogeneity generated by age, nationality, religion, motivation, temper, personal interests (D. Colibaba-Evuleț, I. Bota, 1998).

From the perspective of our paper, we consider that creating an optimum cohesion in the handball team can have favorable influences on performances.

Purpose of the study

From our working experience with different sports groups and teams, inclusively in handball, we can assert there are teams that, although made up of extremely valuable athletes, don't obtain the expected results, by meeting difficulties when they have to create the group cohesion and reach the intended performances.

That is why the topic of our study refers to the team cohesion impact on the group performance/achievement.

This topic is part of an ampler research that aims at studying the practical-methodical modalities to develop cohesion in junior handball teams.

The present study describes the theoretical premises related to the concept of “cohesion” within the handball team.

Content

“Cohesion can be considered the most important group variable, because just due to it the group exists, persists and works as a relatively independent coherent entity” (P. Golu, 1974). The cohesion phenomenon reflects the degree to which the group is attractive to its members; for instance, people like one another and want to remain members of the group.

Group cohesion, described by D. Cartwright and A. Zander (1968) as the feeling of belonging or of mutual attraction, involves the self-sacrifice in order to complete the group objectives. This cohesion generates *conformism, stability and the group behavior control*.

M.E. Shaw (1981) underlines that, throughout the years, cohesion had three different meanings:

- intra-group attraction relies on the individuals' similarities related to the group collective configuration. The social aspect was emphasized by sociometric measurements, the

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Received : 28.02.2012 / Accepted 02.05.2012

pair's nominalization and the partner's choices. The personality aspect was highlighted by the effects of the homogeneity of needs: authority or dominance;

- group's self-confidence or motivation level;
- basis of the group effort coordination.

The cohesion influence on the group productivity has been intensely studied. High cohesion groups can easily establish performance standards and offer a wider range of awards to its members. M.E. Shaw (1981) discovered that highly cohesive groups are cooperative, friendly and they use a democratic form for the behavior control. In low cohesion groups, members are hostile and aggressive, they are pleased when their colleagues make mistakes and they adopt a decision-making autocratic style.

We can certainly state that the sports group activity efficiency depends on the quality of the relationships among its members (M. Epuran et al., 2001).

Moreno is that who proposed the sociometric technique, destined to measure the group relationships. Each group member has, toward each one of the others, an acceptance, indifference or antipathy attitude. The way of actually expressing these attitudes determines both the group cohesion degree and its internal organization (around one or two leaders, on small sub-groups, on isolated individuals). In sports activity (Rioux and Chappuis, quoted by M. Epuran et al.,

2001), there are two types of preferential relationships: affective and operational ones.

Affective preferential relationships have a subjective character and express sympathy, rejection or indifference (they being either unilateral or mutual) among the team members.

Operational preferential relationships have a practical character and reveal with whom each one wants to cooperate in order to complete the group specific purpose. In sports, the action efficiency and the common goal must be beyond sympathy or antipathy.

To know the quality and quantity of the preferential relationships within a team is essential to coach's work and, implicitly, to performance reaching. Quality is given by the character of the relationships: choices, rejections or indifferences, while quantity is given by the number of choices: the more the expressed choices are numerous, the higher the group expansiveness degree; the greater the number of composed pairs, the higher the cohesion index; the more the athlete's expressed choices are numerous, the higher his sports expansiveness and social integration index.

Cohesion, which is born from and built on the positive preferential relationships, depends on a series of factors characteristic to each team (M. Epuran et al., 2001, A. Mureșan, 2005).

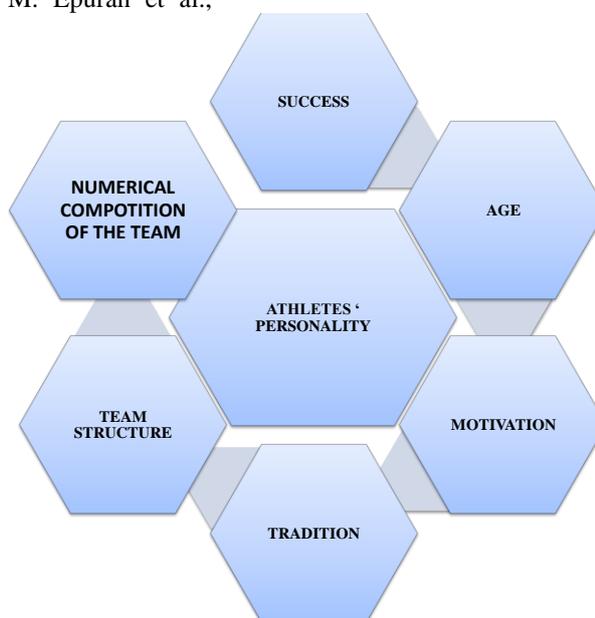


Fig. 1. Team's cohesion factors (adapted after M. Epuran et al., 2001; A. Mureșan, 2005)

Numerical factor. In general, a smaller number of persons (6 to 10 or 12 at the most) can be easily united; in a larger group, information are more difficultly spread (they are partially lost or distorted) and the bond strength is weaker. The handball team is framed in the medium group category, with an approximate number of 18 to 20 players. If we refer to the basic group of players, their number is comprised

between 9 and 10. Under these conditions, the raised question is how to ensure an optimum cooperation among all the team members, both full and substitute players, so that we avoid conflicts and create harmonious relationships among them.

The team members should be close to the same *age*, because the too big differences are sometimes expressed through different attitudes and aspirations. In

handball, the big age differences are characteristic to seniors. These ones are given by the presence in the team of the some very skilled seniors, together with the very gifted juniors. The junior age has, from this point of view, an advantage, because the game regulations stipulate the athletes' distribution on age categories. The admitted differences are of 2 years at the most.

Athletes' *character* represents an important factor, together with their temperamental traits and their personality. This aspect is applicable to any sports discipline.

Personality of the sports group members. Some athletes, through their negative traits, can divide the group, by creating thus sub-groups and generating disagreement and suspicion. The coach must know well each athlete's personality. By taking into account the fact that certain athletes are aggressive, dominating and destructive, while others, on the contrary, are timid, passive, isolated and obedient, he must use the instructive-educative methods the most suitable to his athletes' personality specificity, in order to ensure their integration into the group and, implicitly, the group cohesion.

The *team structure* refers to the members' way of organization within the group. Handball teams are organized by respecting the regulations and the positions on the field, but they are much dependent on players' individual value. The specialization on positions occurs by the end of the junior age, according to each athlete's qualities.

Sports tradition. It represents the supporting "armature" for the group. Tradition is that which impregnates the atmosphere, the work, life and leading styles, the habits, all of them being imposed to the members when they join the group and determining a better group stability. In Romania, handball has always been a team sports with many fans, a sports discipline with an important tradition, which had periods of European, World and Olympic glory, at any competitive level. Traditional clubs that have teams for all the sports classification levels, also have the best results in relation to the group stability.

Motivation is one of the cohesion central factors, because it reunites the teams around a common goal called performance, which meets the athletes' different trends.

According to D. Colibaba-Evuleț and I. Bota (1998), "we must know that the team's general motivation is sports performance".

Sports success is, in its turn, a factor reinforcing both motivation and group cohesion. We all know that if a team loses too frequently, the dissensions among athletes and between athletes and their coach are inevitable.

The sports group performance (M. Epuran et al., 2001) depends on the way of harmonizing the two functional requirements of the group, namely the goal completing and the cohesion preservation.

Table 1. Functional requirements of the group (M. Epuran et al., 2001)

Factors that ensure the goal completing	Factors that ensure the cohesion preservation
Competitiveness	Cooperation
Sports discipline	Spontaneous participation
Role rigidity	Affective relationships
Utilitarian relationships	Spontaneous communication
Formal communication	Group decisions
Vertical decisions	Group
Hierarchy	Democracy
Authoritarianism	

The coach is confronted to a situation requiring him not necessarily to choose one of the variants, but to study the concrete conditions related to time, space, the group interpersonal relationships and to act so that he obtains at any moment the group maximum efficiency under the given conditions.

One of the models that can guide the coach when diagnosing a team's moment or stage is the Team Performance Model (Drexler, Sibbet and Forrester,

1988). This model can be used by coaches to delimit the stage of the relationships among players and it can also facilitate their opportune intervention in each specific situation.

The first three stages are called "creation stages" and the other four are called "support stages":

Table 2. Team Performance Model (acc. To Team Performance Model - Drexler, Sibbet and Forrester, 1988)

STAGE	PROBLEM	RESOLVED	UNRESOLVED
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1. Orientation	“why am I here?”; tacit worry: “do I want to be here?”. Does this group makes something that incitates everyone to be part of it and that has a sense (goal) for each individual in the group?	Purpose, team identity and membership	Fear and disorientation
2. Trust building	“who are you?”; tacit worry: “what will you expect from me?”. Group members must give answers to key-questions that will show if they are competent and open.	Mutual regard, forthrightness and reliability	Mistrust, caution and facade
3. Goal clarification	“what are we doing?”; tacit worry: “reviewing all the options, identifying all the problems”.	Explicit assumptions, clear integrated goals and shared vision	Apathy and irrelevant competition
4. Commitment	“how will we do it?” This decision-making is the most difficult issue any team is confronted to. The team must define to what direction it will go and the main methods to share the responsibilities among its members.	Assigned roles, allocated resources and decisions made	Dependence and resistance
5. Implementation	“who does what, when, where?” the challenge consists of integrating an amount of different tasks into a fluent operation.	Clear purposes, alignment and disciplined execution	Conflict/ confusion, non-alignment, missed deadlines
6. High performance	“wow, we’ve made it!” High performance is relatively difficult to attain, but this can be done when the team members are capable to reach this synergy level. Team members are able to communicate in a really balanced system, with no frictions.	Spontaneous interaction, synergy and surpassing results	Overload and disharmony
7. Renewal	“why continue?” Revision of stage 1, in order to evaluate if the work deserves the effort, if it still needs to be continued and if it still provides a personal value and sense for each of the team members.	Recognition and celebration, change mastery and staying power	Boredom and burnout

Conclusions

Relationships among teammates are decisive to ensure the group cohesion and the efficiency of a team activity depends on the quality of these relationships.

Athletes’ education since the early junior age to the direction of the team spirit building has positive influences on the obtained performances.

The use of some tools to assess the team stage (for instance, the Team Performance Model) can provide the coaches an objective modality to diagnose the stage of the relationships among players and it can also facilitate their opportune intervention in each specific situation.

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