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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

“A PANE IN THE GLASS”

Performance Before Friendship

by Bill Tschirhart (and friends)

It’s the reality in elite curling today. Teams need to have the best players possible and if someone isn’t fitting in, pulling the load, making the grade, causing a distraction (insert reason here) then regardless of the relationship among the teammates, performance must sooner or later take precedence over friendship! And that means making a player change.

In a recent essay in this series, I referred to the “Team Dynamics Wheel”. It indicated that all groups of people move through four basic stages of development. I urged all groups (teams) to be aware of this developmental progression, know the stages and how to avoid falling victim to the mistakes that can easily be made throughout the process. But, that said, there is a fifth stage and that’s adjournment! No group remains together forever! So let’s take a closer look at how a player change might occur.

Clearly it’s different for a recreational team than it will be for an elite, high performance team with provincial/territorial/state, national and international aspirations. The stage of development of the athletes is also a key consideration.

The process or protocol for a player change is so much easier if the premise for a team’s original formation was based on a business model as opposed to a friendship model. In a business model there would have been pre-established performance standards established including those that relate to individual commitment and “bringing your best to the team dynamic” as opposed to simple shooting percentages. There is a fundamental set of performance related statistics that need to be met on a player by player basis in order for the team to achieve its ultimate objective[s]. In the absence of those performance related standards being met....the initial question is.....does the player in fact have the potential.....and does the team have the time/energy and inclination to invest in that individuals journey toward excellence. The majority of men’s teams have been built on a business model and over the years

we have all bore witness to the “fire and hire” approach to team building as opposed to “invest and develop”. We are beginning to see a few more women’s teams create or reformat a “new look” team based on achieving their performance objectives....and in the process, relationships and friendships are put at risk as the team attempts to strengthen itself in pursuit of the podium.

Player replacement based on performance standards is a much easier discussion to have than player replacement based on a personality based conflict. There is no easy way to write a “Dear John” letter.....other than to state a team’s need to go in a different direction.

My friend from Calgary, Ernie Comerford (we should all have the energy of this man) authored an article for me on this topic while I was the National Development Coach for the Canadian Curling Association. I reprint it for you below and urge you to give it “the hairy eyeball” and return here! I’ll be repeating some of Ernie’s points but from an adult perspective.

Ernie’s sample group is early adolescents but he makes points that transcend age. Notably, we all have feelings and making a team roster change is not a “warm & fuzzy” situation for anyone involved, especially the player who is the center of attention in this matter.

Hopefully, for adults, if the situation gets to the point that a player change is required, the player will sense this long before the action takes place and in all likelihood will voluntarily move on. I have experienced teams that have made player changes and the friendships have remained intact. My participant observation is that teams expect the worst when a long time teammate needs to be asked to leave when in reality it’s not the “big deal” they thought it to be when all is said and done.

It is also my experience that before a player change is contemplated an examination of the roles each player assumes on the team might be in order. I have seen many teams perform much better with the same roster after a change in playing positions!

Professional sports teams shuffle players on a regular basis and more times than not, it’s a win/win situation. The team gets a welcome addition and the player who moves on, finds a better situation for him/her. That’s what we would all like to see happen and it usually does even though that might be a hard sell at the time.

We tell young athletes at summer camp that even though the team on which they currently play is wonderful, they won’t play with the same people forever. It’s great that they will meet so many teammates over the course of their careers and the friendships will endure!

Look, before I press one more key on my computer keyboard, I know some of you who read my words regularly are thinking, “Heh, what happened to ***learn to play together?***” So, let me make one of my key coaching points once again for clarity. Before you even think about changing players, remember, if you do, you will either stagnate for a period of time or move backwards. All the while, your competitors are moving ahead. Is the price worth it? Have you done everything in your collective power to learn to play together? If the answer is yes, then go ahead make the player change but only as a last resort!

Germane to this essay is the question, how do you do it? Let's get to it!

BE HONEST

Don't make up quasi-legitimate reasons. Tell it like it is! The player needs to know the truth so he/she can learn from the experience and use those truths to be a better teammate down the road.

DO IT TOGETHER

If it's a team decision, and it should be, the team should deliver the message. Don't leave it up to one player unless he/she eagerly volunteers to do so (and in a particular instance it may be better coming from one player due to a special relationship that exists). But, don't make it like an inquisition with the team lined up against the player. That can be intimidating! This task may be accomplished better by the team coach who can take more of an objective, arm's length position.

TIMING

This is critical for both the team and the player moving on. At the highest level, the team likely has a replacement player in mind which begs the question, "Do we have a player waiting in the wings before we deliver the message or do we search for one after?" Approaching a new player beforehand can be dangerous because you can set in motion a whole series of unfortunate events which can fall like so many dominoes. What happens if the player to be replaced learns that the team has approached someone before being told about the pending move? Yikes! And, what about the team for whom the replacement player is currently playing? Double yikes! The team may have some replacement players in mind but my knee jerk reaction, to avoid the damaging situations outlined above is to take your chances and make the player change before you actually approach a replacement player. But it's your call!

I'm dancing around the time-of-the-season issue aren't I? If you make the change during the season, you are usually severely limiting both your chances of getting the player you want and the chances that the player asked to leave will find a team to complete the season. I feel you need to be respectful and allow the player in question to have as much time to find a new team as possible but again, every situation is different and once again, it's your call!

And one more note regarding timing. Don't do it in an emotional state (i.e. after a critical loss near the end of the season). Allow some time to pass so everyone involved can see the situation in the proper context.

WHERE

I suggest the message be delivered away from any semblance of a curling venue but not such that the player feels as though he/she cannot exit the scene easily and unobtrusively. The player might react more emotionally than anyone anticipates and may need to remove him/herself for a period of time to "take it all in" before continuing the dialogue. Therefore, a crowded restaurant might not be the best place! I can't tell you where that best place might be, only to give it some consideration.

RULES & REGULATIONS

I caution all teams, before you enter into any type of agreement with you teammates, check the rules and regulations that govern the competition(s) you plan to enter. Making a player change may be more connected to them (the rules & regulations) than what you feel is best for the team. I'll give you an example in my own coaching career. The names will be omitted for anonymity.

The team was an elite team in its country. When I came on as coach the team had already qualified for its country's curling trials leading to a Winter Olympic Games and were certainly a "contender". What I didn't know was that one of the players who had been on the team for the qualifying events for the curling trials, had literally shut down (in the words of that player's teammates). The player had decided, for a reason still not clear to me, to not practise. The player simply wanted to go the curling trials and play. The team did what it could to try to convince the player to change his/her attitude but to no avail. The team ultimately made the player change. But, and here's the lesson learned, the rules & regulations at the time stipulated that a player who played in qualifying events was considered a member of the team for the trials. In essence, the team did not have the "legal" right to make the change to another individual even though the remaining three felt fully justified. The removed player filed a grievance, a hearing was scheduled (at which I represented the team, but that's another story), the rules applied and the player won the grievance. The good news was that the player simply wanted to make a point and was content to allow the replacement player to play as long as the team, should it have been successful in the trials, take him/her to the Olympics as the team's fifth (Toby McDonald, are you still sitting down?). I won't leave you dangling. The team finished third and so from the standpoint mentioned in the previous sentence, it was a non-issue but I sure learned a lot about distractions!

To conclude let me summarize by repeating the importance of making sure that you have really tried to learn how to play together before you contemplate a change in the team's roster. I can't stress that enough. But if a change is what is best for the team, remember, at the elite level it is performance before friendship!

A word of caution! The player you release may resurface as a member of your opposition. Perhaps professional sports teams have it right when they rarely if ever trade a player to a team within their own division. There's a good reason for that!

How Do I Drop Players or the Whole Team?

Wednesday, January 04, 2006 | Source: by Ernie Comerford, Coach, Calgary 2004

WOWwhat a topic..... If there is a more "delicate" topic amongst coaches or parents, I don't know one. There are so many factors that need to be brought into play here and NONE of them can be ignored. As you read you may recognize a situation you personally faced or someone else has.

Before we get into specifics.... one thing ALWAYS takes PRECEDENCE..... what is best for the child (or children)? As a Coach, you are dealing with young athletes. They are not adults and don't have the

wealth of life experiences to enable them to really deal with major disappointments or the true reality of "winners and losers" in life. If the welfare of your kids is not foremost in your mind...perhaps you need to re-think your role or involvement in coaching. They must always be more important than you are!

You can't ignore the situations...they need to be dealt with. What requires more thought is HOW to deal with the issues? Do some of these questions or situations sound familiar?

- A Player just is not getting along with another player or players. You tried to deal with what you think are the problems between them but no success. What now....a team needs to be unified...drop one player for the sake of others? Drop off the team yourself?
- A Parent is becoming a bit too much to handle and affects the play of all the players. You have raised the matter in a parental meeting but the situation has persisted. What now...drop the team so you get rid of the parent? Have a split amongst the parents and team?
- What if a Player does not fit in a certain position on a COMPETITIVE and SKILLED team? How do we drop a player to be able to recruit someone else for the position? Are your players such an age that they really are at that level? 19 and 20 years...ok but do 14 and 15 year olds fit into this category? Are you recruiting a player away from another coach's team without his/her knowledge? Must be ok since all the pro teams do it.
- Is there EVER a correct time to drop a player? (Or a whole team?) Two weeks before playdowns? Immediately after? At the end of the season only?
- Are there any "special" reasons which make you do it so you feel "justified in leaving or dropping a player? Hey I am the Coach so it is my way or else! They talked back.
- Is there EVER a "Nice" way to do it? Should I be blunt or beat around the bush?
- Should the parents EVER be involved? If so, exactly when? All of them?
- Should parents have ANY say in the matter? All of them or just one or two?
- Should parents hear first or after you have talked to the player(s)? Does warning them make them feel any better that their child is now viewed as a "failure" to be on the team?
- Does LOYALTY come into play? Should teams stay together after they have been knocked out of the playdown route? Can you really drop the team in the middle of the year? What about the remaining league games or the other planned bonspiels? Did you all agree to stay for the whole year or could anyone drop out anytime to join another team?

Are there simple answers? Bluntly NO! Yet there is no sense pretending the situations don't exist. They have and will again,. So learn how to deal with them. Every situation is different yet there are many similarities so perhaps some simple pieces of advice can get you thinking a bit more. This may help you deal more EFFECTIVELY and FAIRLY with the situation and the players.

The following basic tips may help you plan your thoughts and prepare yourself to deal with the situations. As a Coach you want the players to prepare really well for their tasks ahead. Do the same yourself since this task may be more important to your young athlete than any matches they will ever play in.

BASIC TIPS TO DEAL WITH THE BAD SITUATIONS

TIP # 1. TAKE YOUR TIME Never rush into it. Take the time to discuss the matter with others first. Experienced coaches may be invaluable to you. To go off into the minefield without seeking advice is at your own peril.

TIP # 2. **NEVER BLURT THINGS OUT** Decisions should NEVER be taken in the "heat" of the moment. If you have just lost out on a major competition, now is NOT the time to discuss changes to the team! Don't spout off something to another coach, a parent, a friend or even a spouse! "Just between you and I" scenarios usually backfire.

TIP # 3. **PLAN WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO SAY** Be sure you have the correct words ready. Write them out on cue cards if need be. Think about how much information you need to "justify" your cutting of the player. Will they really understand the reasons?

TIP # 4. **THINK ABOUT WHERE TO HOLD THIS MEETING** Does not the issue deserve privacy? A crowded viewing area is not a good location. Nor is a Burger joint? Choose carefully.

TIP # 5. **HOW YOU SAY THINGS CAN BE AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT YOU SAY**

Diplomacy.....Tact.....Niceness..... BluntnessHonesty or Cruel Honesty are just a few of the things that need to be examined. The "Golden Rule" is not a joke! Think about it when speaking. This may prove to be the most important aspect of your planning.

TIP #6. **THINK ABOUT THE MESSAGE YOU ARE SENDING** Will a 14 year old really understand that they have just not demonstrated the skills necessary to play lead on the team (because their draw weight has been lousy all along)? They are 14! Are you beating around the bush and really not telling them that they are not liked by the other three players so they really have failed the personality contest? Are you just not being honest and saying that the player and you have a personality clash but you have ignored it all along and getting rid of the player lets you ignore and discussion to try and clear up the irritants!

THE OLD RULE – "ENGAGE BRAIN BEFORE MOUTH". Funny how it makes more sense now!!

Addendum:

What you see below are the five guiding principles to which one of my highly respected colleagues adheres. Sage advice!

1. Do it **immediately** after the decision has been taken - do not let the chance for gossip to get into the public domain. The athlete(s) has the right to be the first to hear the decision.
2. Do it **face to face** - no phone call, NO email - extend to the player the dignity of a very personal contact.
3. Do it in a very **private** place - do not meet at a restaurant, at a club, with others around. You cannot anticipate the reactions and as a courtesy, allow the athlete to receive the news in privacy.
4. Do it **one on one** - in our case, I, as the Coach, took on that role on behalf of the team, to create a little space and to avoid confrontation. In my opinion, do not have all team-mates present, no appearance of "gang tactics", however unintended, unless there is a need to demonstrate the team resolve on the issue. If there is no coach, regrettably then the team should meet to impart the news, so no one person stands alone to front the issue.

5. Be ***non-judgemental*** - relay the team decision, express understanding that the athlete may be surprised/upset/angry/ and allow the inevitable reaction its own space. I do NOT try to explain the decision, regardless of how many times I am asked "why".....I simply repeat my mantra...." I am very sorry, this is simply the team's choice in how it wishes to move forward." In the moment, feelings are aroused, it is not a time to try an invoke logic. That can come at some later point. And never say, "really, it is for the best"it doesn't feel that way in the moment, it comes off as hollow rhetoric.

Say what needs to be said, clearly, so no misunderstanding is possible but not with any brutal frankness, extend comfort but no explanations and then give some space.

Eleanor Roosevelt got it exactly right in my view.....

"Never explain, never apologize, never retreat.....just get the job done and let 'em howl !!"