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“A PANE IN THE GLASS”

What Makes a Team a Champion?

by Bill Tschirhart and Lindsay Sparkes
(1988 Olympic gold medalist, instructor, coach and friend)

Those of you who have previously read my words will know that the role of the coach, in the proverbial twenty-five words or less, is *to make the team greater than the sum of its parts*. Indeed, four players, banding together to achieve a level of accomplishment must do exactly the same thing. It's not just a case of making eight shots per end for 8 or 10 ends. We have all seen "four skips" crash and burn. In fact, four skips forming a team is like four generals trying to lead the same army. It takes troops in the trenches and highly specialized personnel to get the job done. So it is true with a championship team. I am going to turn to the observations of Lindsay Sparkes, who throughout her distinguished career in the game might have been the first to actually document what, in her opinion, are the characteristics of championship teams. To hear Lindsay say it, no team has ever won a major championship without them.

As those of you who know me well will attest, I like to make the printed word as interactive as possible so before reading on, try to list what you feel are the characteristics of championship teams.

Championship teams:

- **have a steadfast belief in each other**
- **promote honest communication**
- **have a satisfaction with the position on the team**
- **have an openness toward coaching input**
- **establish clear goals**
- **adhere to established routines**
- **adopt the attitude that the team comes first**

- **show unity and fearlessness**
- **pay attention to detail**
- **enjoy the journey**

Let's deal with these briefly one at a time.

Believing in each other is what really makes a team greater than the sum of its parts. A teacher in his classroom had the saying posted at the back of the room, "The hardest thing about reaching your goal is to start"! It's believing that you **can** that makes it possible and in team sports, each player must have that belief not only in him/herself, but in his/her teammates as well. When things go badly and losses start to build, teams begin to lose faith and then look to assign blame. When you are at the blame stage, the wheels will soon come off. When things begin to go badly is precisely the time to restore faith and trust, not to abandon them.

So often in curling, the word communication surfaces as either the cornerstone of a team's success or its Achilles heel. Notice that according to Lindsay's observations, the adjective honest describes the quality of the communication. Heh, if you mess up, admit it! Trying to cover your sins by blaming them on bad brush placement or a fall in the ice that you know is not there only hurts the team! It's only when the communication is based upon what everyone feels is the truth, can the communication become that cornerstone of your success! But, that being said, be sure that you don't inadvertently make the communication "brutally" honest. I sometimes quote the words of the theologian who said, "The trick of the devil is to get you to do the right thing in the most obnoxious way possible." Remember that the way you say something is part of the message!

Successful teams exhibit daily the treatise that the team can have only one skip and must have a third ("mate" for my many friends in Atlantic Canada), second and lead who know how to play the position, understand its significance, want to be the best there ever was at that position and believe that each of their teammates feels the same way.

Being open to coaching input is a quality that is near and dear to my heart. Ladies, take a bow here! You are light years ahead of the guys in this respect! Enough said. (That'll get e-mail.)

Goals are what so many teams DON'T have. Goals must be **specific, achievable, measurable** and **mutual**. A team must have long and short term goals as well. These goals must be recorded and revisited frequently and in the case of the truly committed team, verified with a signature by each team player.

Routines, established for team effectiveness are the pathways to success. I had the pleasure of coaching the Patti Lank team at the U.S. Olympic Trials. On their own, with very little urging from me, they established a routine that began one hour before game time. It was choreographed to the second. The mental toughness and role definition it established was clearly evident to anyone who observed the team in its pre-game preparation.

And now for the spot where the rubber meets the road! Team comes first! We're talking commitment here guys! This is where the five of you (don't forget that coach) sit across a table, look one another in the eye, and state your case. Remember those goals that Lindsay referred to earlier. Now is the time to test the "mutual" part! Not only that, it's time to state the degree of commitment. I believe I hear the word sacrifice in the background. Notice how closely "team first" is allied with the initial characteristic, a "belief in each other".

Have you ever played a truly elite team? Did you notice how confident they were? They're not, cocky or arrogant, but confident! This confidence is especially displayed in time of crisis in a game or competition or when something adverse happens as when a crucial shot picks. There's no gnashing of teeth or flailing of brushes or cursing, not among the truly championship teams, just the also-rans! Champions have an inner conceit. They truly believe they can win every game. The secret is the word inner. The conceit stays there while the confident presence shows!

Every championship team pays attention to detail. This is my coaching series so I get to say this, "They leave no stone unturned"! We say that to teams who attend high performance camps, but it applies to all teams, "If you want something you've never had before, you had better be prepared to do some things you've never done before" (words this author first heard uttered by Pat "B" Reid).

Lastly, championship teams enjoy the journey. It's a game. Play it!!!

How did your list compare to Lindsay's? I'll wager some of you had at least one or two technical items on that list. That's what impressed me most when I saw Lindsay's list the first time. It was all "warm side of the glass" stuff. There was no: excellent draw weight or greater brushing strength and judgment. That's something to remember when you're choosing teammates!

Enjoy working with your athletes! I'll see you soon behind "A Pane in the Glass".