

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR TEAM: THE ART OF TEAM BUILDING

by Coach Steve Parker



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Let's Make a Team Out of This!

What coach doesn't want to have some good teamwork and with each of the players on the team working towards a common goal? Yet, it might be one of the most difficult things to do – especially when you have kids from all different backgrounds and upbringings coming together to form a team.

It is important, if not essential to get your team on the same page as far as the direction they are headed. You probably know from experience that if you have someone going one direction and someone going another, then you aren't going to get anywhere.

In this bonus guide, we are going to provide you with a number of different tools you can use to get everyone on your team going in the same direction – and paddling with the current instead of against it.

We will show you the following:

- How to get your team motivated for games and practices
- Team-building exercises and drills
- How to get bad attitudes back in line
- Getting the most out of your team without yelling

The challenges above are met by every coach that has ever drew up x's and o's on a chalkboard or a whiteboard. Every team has its personalities and every team has what we will call 'charm'.

This guide is going to put a few more coaching tools in the toolbox so you can get the most out of your players, and ultimately more out of your team...

Best of luck!

Finding Motivation for Practices and Games

Some of us will come home from practices and wonder, “Why on earth did little Johnny decide to come out for the team if he doesn’t want to try?” We spend so much time and energy on the frustration and the struggle to get players to perform at their optimum level during games.

I think it can be summed up in one common sports phrase:

“The way you practice is the way you play the game.”

Too many of our players don’t take practices seriously and they are joking around and not focusing on the task at hand. They don’t pay attention in practice and it is reflected in the way they play on the field, court, or arena. What makes the problem even worse is the fact that these players often have a detrimental effect on the attitude and coachability of others.

So, how do you motivate all of the players on the team to start practicing hard? First, **accept that you will always have at least one bad apple**. The key is limiting the amount of influence that player can have on the rest of his or her teammates.

Here are some of the other methods you can use to get your team motivated to practice hard and play hard:

- **Reward the team for ‘team’ efforts** – Often times peers are the best motivators. You don’t need to crack the whip on any particular player, singling that player out more than the rest. You simply need to motivate the majority of the team by rewarding them when the entire team comes out to work hard during practices and games.

If their teammates don’t want to work and the rest of the team misses out on rewards, or worse yet have to do more work at practice, you can bet that person is going to hear it from the players. I would suggest that will often be motivation enough to get most players in line with practicing hard.

- **Set a goal with the team before each game** – In hockey, you could set a goal of each team member making a good pass in each period. If the team achieves that goal then they are rewarded.

The goal can be as simple as winning a game, or doing a number of different team skills effectively – even in a loss. As the coach, you can find any number of goals that a team can try to reach during a game or **even a practice**, in order to motivate the players.

- **Explain to them the importance of practice** – You can use all sorts of coaching tactics for this one. Start with the fact that other teams are preparing for them, so they need to prepare hard and well for the other teams. You can tell them that improving skills is crucial in raising the team to the next level.

There are literally dozens of different motivational tactics that can be used by coaches to get their team up by showing them the importance of practice. The only thing that you shouldn't do is be negative. **Always be positive** with the approach that you are taking. Players don't often respond to negative remarks.

- **Have fun at practice** – Set the example early that practices are going to be work, but they are also going to be fun. That way a player knows that they are going to be able to have fun during the practice, but they will also be able to have fun.

This is especially important for the younger players. At that level, you are trying to maintain excitement and enjoyment for players that are probably just learning a game. If they see and hear a coach that is negative and yelling and the practices aren't fun, then you probably aren't going to see them for much longer. If they stay, you likely aren't going to get much out of them.

- **Simple encouragement** – You wouldn't believe how far positive encouragement and telling a player when they are doing well goes. It is unbelievable. Just think back to when you were a player in your sport and you heard your coach say, "That was a great steal Joe," or "how to get the ball out quick Jenny."

All of those comments help. They help a heck of a lot more than degrading or getting angry at players. No one wants to work hard for a coach that yells at his or her players during a practice or during a game. Players like coaches that lead them to victory through positive reinforcement, good coaching and setting a good example.

It isn't always easy getting a team motivated for practices, but that is the place to start – especially if you also want to get them motivated for games. Helping to build that motivation by giving players and the team some positive goals to work for – with a positive coaching mentality is the best way to get the most motivation out of your team.

Team Building Exercises and Drills

All right, we are going to give you a handful of great teamwork drill that will work in most, if not all, sports teams. They might work better with some over others, but as coach you can find creative ways to tailor these drills to each of your teams and your respective sports.

1.) Number one rule – Play Games

This is one of the keys to building team skills. It doesn't matter what sport you are in, and how old the players are – everybody loves to play games. And we're not talking scrimmages – I'm talking about games that are good old fashioned fun.

If you think back to some of your best sports memories it was probably during some of the crazy antics that went on during certain games that you played in your sports.

It doesn't matter if you play tag, leap frog, have relays – whatever the case, you can build the team mentality and a 'brother or sisterhood' of sorts if you play games that build a fun and enjoyable atmosphere where players take away the competitive nature of their game and are out there just for a bit of fun.

Take the players away from the game

With parents permission (and help with supervision) take the players to somewhere outside of the game. You might go and watch a film, or you might just go have pizza and watch the baseball game. As a coach, you may even invite the players and their parents over for a barbecue.

It doesn't matter so much what it is that you are going to do, just that you get the players away from the game, so you, and they, can learn more about each other. Often time in bigger schools, the people that come out for teams might be from different groups or have other interests outside of the sport. It is a perfect opportunity for the players to have a little bit of growth as people and to get to know each other a little better.

Another key to this one is to have fun. This is also very important. Fun makes things go round. You will hardly ever find a team that grows together in the face of anger, disparity and frustration. It never works. You might go through tough situations that help you grow together as a team, but those are the natural team ups and downs.

Take them away from the game for a bit, and watch them grow together.

Do exercises that require one to rely on another

A basic example of this would be a three-legged race. I'm not sure what sport would be able to use this (maybe soccer), but situations that force players to rely on each other for the outcome can build teamwork.

You will find that the best team players are the ones that excel at exercises like this. They are able to motivate their partner to greater heights, and both people thrive off of the partnership.

Some exercises of this type might be:

- Three-legged race (for soccer maybe...)
- Dodge ball (rely on teammates to set them free)
- Build a pyramid (compete against other teammates)
- Have a tug-of-war

As you can see, anything that builds fun and enjoyment among team members, while having them rely on one another is a great way to build team spirit and teamwork.

Sit down with the team and identify each player's strengths

It might be a good idea to do this with a team that has the maturity to not turn it into a big joke. But, imagine the power of having one of the team's star players say that they think Angela, one of the team rookies, shows great leadership skills for some one that is well... a rookie.

This will show players that other members appreciate the attributes they bring to the team. This could be one of the most important exercises that you do. It is always nice to know who likes what you are doing and who is noticing the things that you do for the team.

You can also do this after the game or the practice and have certain people pick out some of the high points of the practice and recognizing certain players for their achievement during that game.

Here are a group of specific exercises you can do to build the team concept:

- **The blind leading the... blind?** – This is a game where one person is blindfolded and the other person has to lead them around. You can do this with any teammate and in any sport.

The advantage of providing players with this opportunity is that they literally have to rely on someone to be their eyes and ears in a situation that might affect: their safety, their ability to overcome a challenge and their overall ability to get around.

One player is blindfolded and the other not – and the sighted person cannot touch the blindfolded person. Instead, he or she must give verbal direction to the blindfolded person. This builds tremendous teamwork and trust between the two players.

- **Minefield** – This is another blindfold game, but only this time it pits two teams against each other. First, you need to have one person that is the **captain**. The captain directs the players through the following area:
 - 15 x 15 yard marked area
 - 20 to 30 objects of different sizes placed about the marked area

The captain must provide verbal directions to get his players across the minefield as quickly as possible without hitting a 'mine' (object). The two teams will start on opposite sides of the minefield and they will have to negotiate the area with each other in it.

The captain must tell their players where to go in the minefield without hitting the mines. If the player hits a mine, they must go back to the start of the minefield and begin again. The team that gets through the fastest, wins.

- **Bottoms up** – This is a great game that builds teamwork and problem solving as a team. First you have to divide your team into two even sides, up to 12 people per side. The object of the game is to get all of the people to sit up, trying it one by one, at the same time.

For example, you start with two people and they sit facing each other, with their feet flat on the floor, in a sitting up, sit up position. They are connected to each other at the wrist. These two people have to try to lift their bottoms up, using each other as leverage.

Once you have done it with two people, then you move it up to three people. The teammates will soon realize that something that worked for the two person team, doesn't necessarily work for the three person team.

You will eventually work up to all of the players on your team. Each time you add a player, the dynamic becomes different and you will see the players adapt and solve the problem to get the team up.

Getting Bad Attitude Back in Line

Ugh... the player with a bad attitude. It sounds like a serious sports cliché, but it's true – they are like a cancer in the locker room, on the practice field and in a game. They can make things difficult for all of the athletes on the team with their constant problematic behavior.

But, believe it or not it is possible to put stop to it – or at least curb it by laying down a few ground rules to begin with. And it doesn't hurt to get player's parents involved with this as well. It takes a lot of energy to deal with players that have poor attitudes, but they can be turned around, and the impact they have on the rest of the team can be significantly lessened.

Here are a few tools for dealing with problem athletes:

Lay the ground rules for players and parents – This is the first thing I would tell any coach – especially if they are running a community team as opposed to a school team. I'd even do it if it were a school team I was coaching. Plan a parent's meeting and expect everyone to be there.

At this meeting you will explain to parents and players the conduct that is expected of players and the way they are to carry themselves on the practice field and when you play games. This is very **Coach Carter**, but it is preached in many current athletic club guidelines – coaches need to take control of the team immediately.

It is important to lay the foundation for: behavior, expectations, practices, games, and the role of the parents.

Deal with the player as an equal – If you try to act condescending, or worse yet, call out a player in front of their peers, you might not get the response you want. Talk to the player behind closed doors and get them to take an active role in their team. Don't talk down to them.

Talk to team leaders – If you approach team leaders, they may be able to persuade or have an effect on the behavior of the player(s) with attitude problems. Peer pressure is often the best pressure to put on people.

Give the player responsibility – Take advantage of the player's influence and turn it into a positive. Get them involved with a major part of the team to try and generate positive interest in what the team is doing. You might be surprised with what they come up with.

Stay calm – Part of the attitude is to generate a response. Don't let the player see that you are affected by what they are doing.

Getting the Most from Your Team – Without Yelling

This isn't easy. Coaches struggle with it constantly. They have players from all walks of life and they are trying to handle the varying personalities and the variety of skills and abilities.

While it isn't easy – it can be done. And, it should be done. The most successful teams are constantly team building so that players can be comfortable that the person next to them is trying just as hard as they are to meet the goals the team has set. They need to know that a person is giving everything they have, just as they are.

We have already provided a few tips, tools and activities that you can do to build some team spirit and to develop the motivation and leadership that you want, and that you need. But, we are going to provide you just a few more of those tips, drills and tools.

Here they are...

- **Knock, knock** – This is a fun and probably hilarious exercise that you can use for two things: to have players get to know each other, and for a few laughs and some competition.

Coaches will hold up a sheet or tarp between two equal teams. Each team will have one player stand up with in front of the sheet, facing a person from the other team, with only the sheet in between.

The coaches will drop the sheet and then the players have to call each other's name out. The player who calls out the proper name first, wins. The loser goes over to the winner's side. The winning team is the one that gains all of the players to their side.

- **Let players design a practice or two** – This could be a great way to help develop leadership, and some interest that a few players may have in helping to direct the team.

What you might consider doing is having a 'player' practice once a month, or once a week, giving each player the chance to plan one of the practices that the team has. The players will have to abide by what the player / coach wants.

The coach can provide guidance to make sure that the practice isn't all fun and games, and that there are some skill being learned during practice. The best leaders will combine elements of learning along with some good old-fashioned fun for their teammates.

- **All knotted up** – This is one exercise that has been done in sports and non-sports groups. It builds specific teamwork and problem solving skills.

What is needed is a rope that is about ½" thick and about 25 to 30' long. The rope is going to be in knots and players are going to have to grab a hold of the rope and then they are going to have to continue to make knots among themselves.

The object of this exercise is to develop teamwork and problem solving by getting the rope completely knotless. The players cannot let go of the rope with one hand (must stay the same through the entire exercise) and they can use their other hand to open knots that they must step through to get the rope straight.

- **Encourage the players to have meetings without coaches** – This builds a team that is self-disciplined. If they are mature enough (you won't do this with 6 and 7-year-olds), they will talk about some of the things that are going on with the team.

They will probably discuss some of the things that are bothering them (it might even be about the coaching), and maybe talk about some of the major achievements they have made during the season.

As long as the meetings are constructive and do not turn into sessions when the players are fooling around, then it isn't really a major problem. They can just sit there and plan their week-ends for that matter. As long as they are spending time together and starting to build those important team bonds, then it doesn't really matter.

- **Coach with young people in mind** – This might be a no-brainer, but you wouldn't believe how many times coaches can act as though they are coaching top level elite athletes. Then, they see the collection of players that they have and realize that they might be a little hard on them.

Keep in mind that you don't have little professionals on your team. Although they may talk the same trash, and walk with the same swagger, they don't have the same work ethic, the same salaries, and the same experience behind them.

Bottom line is – they are going to make mistakes. It is better to be a good coach and help them when mistakes happen than be a bad coach and yell and scream at them when they make a mistake. If you want a team that is going to work hard for you, then you need to respect them for the players that they are.

You Can Get the Most Out of Them!

It just takes a little bit of time and effort. They may even be a little surprised when you decide that you are going to put some effort into bringing all of the players together for team building. Just be prepared to get everyone involved.

You are going to have the players that think it is a great idea, the ones that think it is stupid, and the ones that don't care, but in the end, they will all probably be on board when you take part in the exercises, and soon they will be excited and enthusiastic about them, too.

If you want your team to work together, get motivated and to have a 'team' mentality, then you need to take steps to make that happen. Some rare teams just have a chemistry with the players that are there, but it doesn't happen that often. With so many different people on the team, so many personalities, such a variety of social standings, upbringings, etc., it can be challenging just to get some people to play on the same team.

This guide gives you several ideas on how you can bring your team together to build the team chemistry and the togetherness that you want.

The most successful teams have a chemistry and willingness to work together as a team.

You have probably seen dozens of teams that have all of the talent in the world, but they just don't seem to work together, and consequently they don't succeed. Further, you have likely seen a team of lesser likes work together with a common goal in mind – and they **are huge successes**.

That is what you need to do – you are tasked with the mission of bringing your team together. Use the strategies and tips inside this guide and you will definitely bring your team closer together. They will win together, lose together – and best of all, they will learn together.

Best of luck!