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DEVELOPING PLAYERS



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by Ted Newland, UC Irvine

Being a reader of history, I do not believe in secrets or that there are new innovative tactics. Man has been fighting wars since the beginning of civilization so the chances are that about everything possible has been done before.

In a sport like water polo where one has a given number of players in the water at one time how many different or innovative things can one really do that have not been done before? Was Ulysses Grant for example a great tactician? No, he just understood that the North had more resources and if he could motivate his men to fight hard over and over again, the South would not be able to hold out forever. Did the US win World War II with great tactics and tricky foot work? No, again we won World War II because we could produce more ships, tanks, trucks, guns and whatever was needed to fight with Germany and Japan put together.

With time, men and material were going to make the big difference. It has always been my opinion that when armies of equal size and equal talent step up against one another the one that wins is the one that has the greatest motivation to win.

A good psychologist, who understands human beings, is going to be a more effective motivator, therefore he will beat a good tactician. Remember, this only holds true if everything is equal. In sports as in war, there are other outside factors, like talent of soldiers, or players, and talent can cover many mistakes in tactics and even in motivation. Obviously the closer all the variables are the more important the coach or leader becomes in the ultimate outcome of the team or army.

The qualities that a good coach should have are the same as a good manager in business or a leader of an army. In his book "The Effective Executive" Peter F. Drucker states that the key to success is learning to be effective, just like being a coach. This can be learned but it can't be taught. The major reason that being effective cannot be taught is because you have to know yourself and then have the self-discipline and self-motivation to do a few things that are required to make you an effective

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coach or an effective manager. Drucker spells these out and they are really very simple:

1. Know where your time goes and use time effectively.
2. What can I do to help the contributions of those above and below me.
3. Build on the strengths of the individuals in the team or organization.
4. Concentrate on a few major areas where superior knowledge and technique will pay off and the do first things first.
5. Make effective decisions.

Everything we do is done in time and how effectively we use that time is going to be key to how each player performs. If you as a coach expect your players to use their time effectively in workouts and in their classes, then you should strive to make sure in each workout you are not wasting players' time. Every drill should have a purpose and the players should know what that purpose is in relation to the big picture and to their learning in that workout. One of the biggest problems I see among coaches is that they believe players are listening to what they say. It is easy to waste a lot of time talking each day when it is know that most human beings only pick up on about nine percent of what we say. Far better to write it out and have them read it and then ask for questions.

This should only take 5-10 minutes vs. 20 minutes plus you are requiring them to ask questions so they are directly involved in the learning process. The only one who really listens and learns when the coach is talking is the coach himself. I also never write down the exact time we will do a given drill. I write it down on my copy, but I feel free to change the time according to how well I feel the players are concentrating and learning on that particular part of the workout. No human being can hold serious concentration for a two-hour period. Fatigue makes coward of us all and destroys the ability to concentrate. Therefore, when the level of concentration fall off, change to something different.

Change of drills gives them a short break and something different to deal with, and this helps them concentrate on something new. Rest is just as important as work if you expect to deal with stress and learning. I NEVER extend a workout but I may shorten it. I believe in getting to workout 1/2 hour before it starts to make sure I am never late plus it gives me time to get things ready both physically and mentally, and I always tell players just when it will be over. This is showing them that I believe in not wasting their time. You must respect their time. I believe strongly that

human beings only learn by what we do, not what we say.

Planning your time with your athletes and motivating them to use this time effectively is key to getting players to perform. Being late is a cardinal sin because it wastes the time of every one who was there on time. Letting them out at a given time allows them to be on time for whatever they have planned to do with their time after practice.

To use your time effectively really only takes self-motivation and self-discipline. However neither I nor anyone can force players to use the time given effectively but if you are not setting the correct example there is no way they will learn this. How much you get out of the time you spend coaching depends on how well you plan and use the time you have. Trying to teach players the value of good time management is a never-ending fight but it is on that you, the coach, must continually strive for. Without good time management neither you nor your players will ever be very successful at sports, school or business.

Within a team each member must understand what his contribution should be both toward the coach and the institution and toward all team members. Each must learn that what he/she does is going to have a profound effect in both directions, and for the group to perform effectively each must work on his/her contributions in both directions. Too often players feel that when they miss or fail to do things properly that they are only cheating the coach while in reality they are hurting their performance and the performance of the entire team.

A coach must know what your contribution must be to the team and to the individual player so you can perform your function correctly. If your major purpose for coaching is to enhance your personal prestige by having a winning record, count on your players feeling they are cheating you if they miss practice or goof off. However, if you are trying to teach them what it takes to perform at a high level so they can learn how to perform at a higher level again in many different parts of their lives, they may understand that when they don't perform well for any reason that they are hurting their team and themselves. Thus, contribution has been put in the correct perspective.

There is saying in business and in sports that there is never a good man but only a good man to do a job. On a team there are never universal players or players who are the very best at every thing. All human beings have weaknesses. The purpose of a team is to hid individual weaknesses and enhance individual strengths. You as a coach must know what strengths players have and allow those strengths to surface and you must cover up individual weaknesses as best you can with strengths of other individuals within the team.

The system you run should be set up to enhance your team's

strengths and to make it easier to cover up your weaknesses. You can never completely eliminate human weakness but you can cover them up with strengths you have developed or been given in other players.

Do first things first. The first thing always in any team sport is going to be to increase knowledge and then improve individuals and then team technique. To say this in a different way, concentrate your efforts on increasing knowledge and individual technique in the areas of individual strengths. This means working hard on fundamental and increasing knowledge of what is really going on during a game. The first step in increasing knowledge is for players to learn to see the entire field. Knowledge will only come by processing the correct information, and unless you can teach players to see the entire field, they will never know what is really going on in the game because they will not have enough information. Players and the ball are continually changing positions so players must always be looking and adjusting their body positions and what they should be doing according to the changes they see in the positions of other players and the ball. All the teaching one does will have little meaning unless players bring the correct information into their brains so they can process it to help solve their problems.

One must recognize that a problem exists before one can use any information to solve it. If you don't know the problem exists, there is no way you can solve it. You can teach the solution to problems to others but only they can recognize through the information that they process that a problem does exist. Recognition then solution.

Within the game of water polo, ball-handling, i.e.: catching, passing and shooting are the key techniques and of these three-passing and catching are probably the most important. Shooting is a little less important because it is an extension of passing. The reason passing and catching are so important in water polo is because the speed the ball travels at, versus the speed of a moving player. Without these skills, it is impossible to perform any offensive system effectively. Following the rule of doing first things first, one must be able to pass and catch the ball effectively before trying to run an offensive.

Every coach and every executive must learn to make effective decisions. Man has been dealing with this problem since the beginning of time. Many of the profound thinkers in history have set down rules to follow. Drucker says, "A decision is a judgment. It is a choice between alternatives. It is rarely a choice between right and wrong. It is at best a choice between "almost right" and "probably wrong". In most cases one is not dealing with facts but opinions. Therefore one has to set up what is the criterion of relevance. To make an effective decision, one must first know the appropriate measurement. The only way to get appropriate measurement is from "feedback". To find the appropriate measurement is a risk-taking judgment because there must be alternatives. Only time will tell if you picked the right measurement and came up with the correct

decision. At best, a decision is a risk-taking judgment. This comes with the territory.

There are some simple rules I feel will help a coach make better decisions in regards to personnel problems. Ask the right players questions. If you want to know who are the best defenders on your team, ask your goalies. If you want to know who is the best goalie ask your shooters. If you believe the pass into two-meters is the key pass in any offensive series, ask your two-meter men who they think passes them the ball the best. Who do they work well with? If you want to know who are the best releases on the counter attack, ask your goalies. Check with your two-meter guards and they will tell you right off who they feel are the toughest two-meter men to guard.

To make good decisions you need as much feed back as possible from players. Where else can a coach really get worthwhile feed back from except from those involved in the program? Everywhere in business they are talking about getting everyone involved in the decision making process because without this they won't buy into what is being done and water polo is no exception to this concept.

Only the weak are afraid to ask questions and adjust or change, because they don't believe in themselves or what they are doing. The strong, and the coach who believes in himself/herself, will always be open to listening, learning and changing.

Why have I always been successful at developing players? Simple. I make them part of the process. I get them to buy into what we are doing because they perform (or when they fail to perform) they are part of the process they get part of the credit and they assume part of the risk for failure. Failure is not winning or losing but performing well versus performing poorly because that is all anyone of us has a direct control over. As James E. Loehr says "Winning and losing is for the fans, all I can do is perform".

Any coach can learn to be more effective; there are no hidden secrets. All it takes is self motivation and self discipline, plus taking the time to understand yourself so you have good introspection. If you don't know where you are trying to go, you will never reach it.

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