

Seven tips for developing and maintaining a high performance sports medicine team

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WHAT SHOULD A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE SPORTS MEDICINE TEAM LOOK LIKE?

In 1989, Stephen Covey published his highly acclaimed book *The 7 Habits of*

Highly Effective People.¹ This book, with sales exceeding 25 million copies, describes how individuals contribute to successful organisations, in part by fostering interdependence among staff. The multidisciplinary² and interdependent³ nature of high-performance sporting teams have been highlighted in *BJSM* editorials. Central in these commentaries has been the importance of collective decision-making and shared responsibilities.² With sports medicine teams growing rapidly, sport has become somewhat of an ‘arms race’, with team owners often convinced that the secret to developing a winning franchise lies in the quality of the backroom staff. When assembling a sports medicine team to support the coaches and athletes, what should owners be looking for? What are the characteristics of a highly effective sports medicine team? Here, we provide a perspective from 12 different high-performance organisations based in four countries.

DO THE BASICS WELL

‘Doing the 1%-ers’ is a phrase used ad nauseam in sport. However, it takes a lot of ‘1%-ers’ to make 100%! The foundations of successful performance and injury prevention are based on a well-designed and implemented training programme⁴; good nutrition, physically and mentally appropriate training, and adequate recovery. In this respect, teams should focus on ‘doing the 99%-ers’; if staff cannot perform the basics well, how can they be expected to perform ‘higher-level’ tasks?

INNOVATE WITHIN BEST PRACTICE

Across sport, the recruitment strategies, tactics and training practices are often based on tradition. Most practitioners who have tried to effect organisational change can relate to the statement: *‘This is the way we have always done it’*. However, just because a practice is steeped in tradition, does not mean it is ‘best practice’. Equally, ‘change for change sake’, might be highly innovative, but produce few positive outcomes. Ideally, interventions should be based on well-documented best practice guidelines, with practitioners also investigating innovative methods of achieving better outcomes (figure 1).

KEEP TALKING (AND LAUGHING)

Just like athletes, not all practitioners within a team will be best friends.

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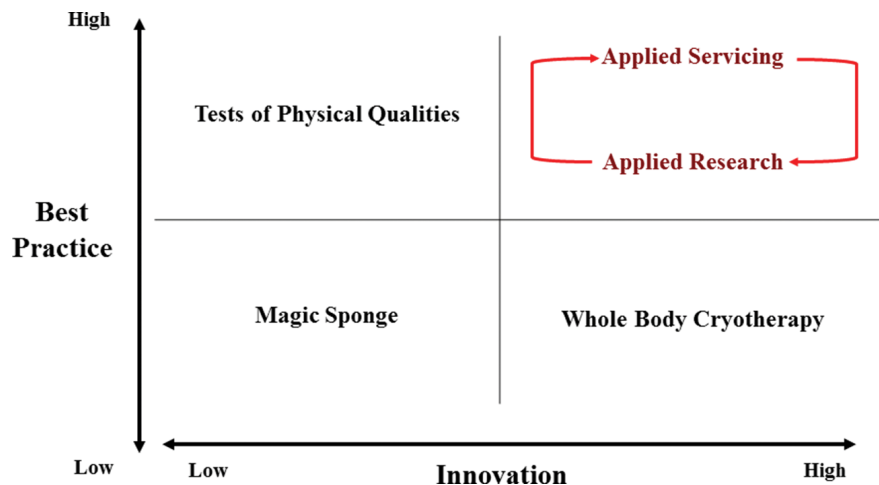


Figure 1 The best practice—innovation matrix.

However, successful organisations put personality differences aside for the betterment of the team. Effective relationships need to be built between practitioners, as well as with skill coaches. Regular communication, openness and a collaborative philosophy across departments allow staff to easily address athlete management and performance issues when they inevitably arise. If staff cannot have easy conversations, how can they be expected to have difficult ones?

DEFINE YOUR CULTURE

Successful sports medicine teams require a strong culture—a recognition that no individual is more important than the whole and that each individual relies on another to successfully perform their role. How would you describe your sports medicine team? What does it mean to be part of this team? The answers illuminate the ‘culture’ of your sports medicine team. In a highly effective sports medicine team, it is crucial to get the right people ‘on the bus’ and bind them with a common purpose. This drives the ‘why’ behind the practitioner’s actions.⁵ They must then decide the best practice behind ‘what’ they do and ‘how’ they do it. Good practitioners not only do the right thing in the right way, they do it for the right reasons.

OPERATE IN UNISON

Athletes in a rowing crew who row out of time slow the boat down; only rowing in unison results in a faster boat! Likewise, sports medicine teams require strong

leadership with all members of the team working together; *working hard* is not enough. Working as part of a team towards a common goal requires every member of the team to *know* their job, *accept* their job and *do* their job. With responsibility comes accountability, resulting in everyone ‘owning’ the outcome,^{3 6} and a shared idea of what the success of the performance team should look like.

LEVERAGE THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

Anyone who has worked at the coalface of sport understands the professional tensions that can exist among different practitioners. Although these tensions may stem from ‘turf wars’,⁶ quite often they simply arise due to different perspectives of a given problem or the manifestation of stresses that exist in the elite sport environment. *The Wisdom of Crowds*⁷ describes how successful businesses use multiple sources of information to contextualise a problem in order to improve the accuracy of the decision-making process. Seeking feedback from individuals with different perspectives and skill sets may ultimately lead to a better outcome. In this respect, in a sports medicine team, diversity should be considered a strength.

MAINTAIN PROPER PERSPECTIVE

Former Liverpool Football Club manager, Bill Shankly famously stated that ‘*Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I assure you, it’s much more serious than that!*’ High performance sport is high stakes. Practitioners will often be recruited based on the success of their athletes and

lose their positions if performances do not meet expectations. With such an emphasis on winning, it is important to keep our role in perspective. While important, the sports medicine team are there to support athletes and coaches, not vice versa. These are sports clubs, not laboratories.

Sports medicine staff require a greater skill set than what can be learnt from a textbook. They must be emotionally aware, have attention to detail and create an environment that allows the sport coaches to do their job. Our ‘Seven Tips’ provide a starting point for sports medicine staff to assess and discuss their own high-performance environment and whether the interventions they employ are likely to improve the result ‘on the scoreboard’.

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