

A Team of Individuals

Knowing the needs of your teammates can help produce better group results

The decision to replace Paul Azinger with Corey Pavin as team captain of the U.S. Ryder Cup is a classic case of “it ain’t broke but we’ll fix it anyway.” Nothing against Pavin, who proved his Ryder Cup bona fides as a player in the early 1990s. But Azinger did something that no other U.S. Ryder Cup captain has been able to do in the previous three tries or in eight of the previous 11: win a Ryder Cup. In so doing, Azinger managed to accomplish a deceptively tricky feat: Take a group of athletes who excel in an individual sport and turn them into a team.

The characteristics that drive individual athletes to success in their particular sport may be the same characteristics that prevent them from being effective members of a team. Nevertheless, Azinger, with an injured Tiger Woods being absent, found the recipe that the previous three captains did not, instituting innovations in his approach to the U.S. Ryder Cup team preparation like splitting the 12 U.S. Ryder Cup players into groups of four for practice (and subsequent competition pairings) based on compatibility.

It isn’t just golf where this alchemy occasionally has to take place. The Olympic gymnastics competition, for instance, brings together six accomplished athletes from each country to compete as a team.

In 2008, despite being favored in the Beijing Olympics, the American women’s team took the silver medal, leaving the 1996 women’s team as the only American Olympic gymnastics team to secure gold in a nonboycotted Olympics (the American men won gold in 1984).

I had a chance to observe the 1996 gold-medal team, the “magnificent seven” as they came to be known, when they assembled this past year at the U.S. Olympic Committee Hall of Fame inductions in Chicago. And I

by Bob Latham

couldn’t help but notice that even 12 years later they are a close-knit group. So I wondered: Did they win the gold medal because they were so close, or did they become so close because they won a gold medal together? I put that question to the captain of the team, Amanda Borden.

“We knew each other very well, and we had great chemistry,” Borden said.

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“Before the Olympics we had been on tour together for one-and-a-half years.” She credits the team’s gold medal in Atlanta to that closeness rather than the other way around.

When I asked Borden why Americans often seem to have a difficult time creating a team concept in an individual sport, she offered an explanation. During the 1996 Olympics, her team was “going against China and Russia and Romania—teams that are together all the time and where they teach you a consistent style and consistent competitive approach.” By contrast, her U.S. team brought “different personality styles, different competitive styles and different approaches. We were not automatons.”

As the team captain in 1996, Borden made sure that she knew what each of her teammates wanted and when they wanted it. “You need to get to know people on your team,” she said. “Some people are the same in the gym as they are out; some people are completely different people outside the gym. You need to know who needs to be hugged, who needs to be kissed, and who doesn’t want either.”

Borden is also quick to point out the pressures that come to bear when competing as a member of a team, and that those pressures may not be the same as when you are competing as an individual.

“I think all of us felt more pressure representing the team,” she said. And she notes that that is why you see more mistakes in the Olympic team competition than in the individual competition, a theory that was borne out by the American women’s performance during the games in Beijing.

“It takes a unique personality to be able to compete as a member of a team and then as an individual,” she said. And on the 1996 team, she pointed out, “everyone had a shot at individual accolades in Atlanta”—making the fact that they were able to gel as a team even more impressive.

Borden is grateful that her coach before the 1996 Olympics, Mary Lee Tracy (who also coached her 1996 teammate Jaycie Phelps), taught her athletes not only gymnastics but also “how to be a great leader and how to be a great teammate,” something that perhaps is lacking today in the training of athletes in individual sports. Borden is passing on those lessons to her charges at the gymnastic academies that she runs in Tempe and Chandler, Arizona.

What advice does Borden have for future captains of U.S. Ryder Cup, Davis Cup or Olympic gymnastics teams? “Get to know your teammates,” she said. “Develop a heart and soul of the team and then focus on it. Be who you are, let your teammates be who they are, and tap into what you know about each other.”

Mr. Pavin, meet Ms. Borden. ■

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