Team Sports and Project Management
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If you spend a reasonable amount of time working on projects, you are likely to hear team members use sports metaphors. This is a positive trait. Sports metaphors can be great motivators and examples of "how to do things." Beyond the metaphors, can methodologies in team sports suggest core practices for project management? We think the answer to this question is yes.

There are many similarities between project management and team sports. For the purpose of this article, we focus on eight areas that we feel are particularly relevant.

1. **Individual talent does not guarantee a successful team or outcome**. Individual talent does not guarantee team success in any situation. It is the way the team performs as a unit that matters the most. Team selection and how team members "gel together" are key to ensuring that individual skills brought to the team merge to produce a successful outcome. To realize the best result, this might include inciting some deliberate "creative tension" amongst team members.

   Sports teams have opportunities to play and learn together over a season or longer. Project teams are usually one-off in nature, so members must quickly learn to work together. In project management, we typically create a Resource Plan that details the skills required for the project, and at what point they will be required. It is crucial to consider the impact of the way in which each individual who is selected will mesh with the whole team. This is as true in sports teams (e.g., when a new player joins) as it is for project teams.

   Next, consider the impact of having a "superstar" player on your team. Very few of us would say "No" to having a "high impact player" or players. However, we must decide if the superstar or, for that matter, any team member, is the right fit for both the project and the team– that is, does their personality mesh with others, will they be a fully integrated part of the team, and will they work towards the common goal? You need to be certain that their impact is positive (exemplary performances that help the team), not negative (behavior that causes team friction).

   Whether staffing a project or a sports team, take the time to fully explore personnel resources and determine how each person will relate with their teammates. In some cases, either basic or more extensive personality profiling before team selection may be appropriate. Careful team selection (within the constraints you will have for available resources) is about managing the risks that, if they occur, can prevent your group of individuals from becoming a high-performing team.

2. Negative influences do exist. Within most projects, there are stakeholders with conflicting agendas. It is difficult to avoid, because different stakeholders have different roles and views. We must account for all stakeholders in our planning and consider their needs appropriately. This is certainly true in team sports. For example, most spectators watching a team sports event will be supporting "their team;" they will not be impartial. The psychological advantage to a team playing "at home" is well known. At key moments, some people will hope that a player misses an opportunity, and others will hope they use it.

It is important to gauge the influence and impact of each stakeholder group. For example, during spectator sports, how loud will fans of the visiting team be during the game? What impact will this have on team performance? Are there ways to mitigate an adverse effect on performance? Most projects will have "spectators." You need to work out a way in which they can support and encourage your success. Teams that undertake a full analysis of all stakeholders and take appropriate planning steps, such as simulating the "playing environment," are better equipped to handle their stakeholders and improve their chances of success.

3. **Set people up for success by thinking as a team.** Sports teams need to have good quality equipment (such as the right shoes/boots, appropriate bats or racquets) to maximize their chances of success. They also need appropriate training facilities. Regarding "thinking as a team," most sports teams play in a "team kit;" this can be a powerful visual motivator and an "identifier" for team members. Sports teams often have a motto or logo signifying their commitment to working together to achieve success. Some project teams have T-shirts with a project logo and the like created for team members.

4. **Create and execute the game plan.** Analysis and research supports the view that a project is likely to have a better outcome when there is a carefully conceived plan in place. Successful sports teams work to a Game Plan. They decide how they will approach each game – the tactics they will deploy, what will happen if they need to change tack, their resource plan (perhaps based on who is fit for the game). There needs to be a means of measuring progress against the plan and to be prepared to change mid-flight if necessary. In sports, metrics for measurement during a game could be whether "Plan A" is working or not – and if not, do they change to "Plan B"?

   Over a series of games or a season, the metrics may be the win/lose percentage, the number of points scored/allowed, the number of tickets sold and revenue generated, or others. The metrics chosen may represent the different "core interests" of stakeholders. The coach is primarily interested in winning games. Team owners want to see good crowds and revenue generated for their business as well as good team performances. In both projects and sports, leaders need to agree on the plans, the metrics, and the way in which they will report and disseminate information related to the plans. In a team sports game, working to a Game Plan must also include respect for the decisions of the "Umpire" or "Referee." In many ways, this is akin to a project team valuing the opinions of key stakeholders.

5. **Know how to execute the play.** When you have a plan, every team member must know what it is and the means to execute their role. A plan will consist of a number of "plays," agreed to up front. How well these "plays" are executed depends on practice and team familiarity with each other. The 'optimized' team knows the plays and has executed them successfully and repeatedly. Sports "plays" are things like Set Plays, Penalties and the like. Think of project "plays" as your core activities. (Refer to our article "The Nine Steps to Success" as an example.)

   For instance, how well do they execute a risk management plan, or the schedule, or detailing accurate requirements? Creating optimized teams is not easy nor does it occur overnight; it takes practice. Like the sports coach, the Project Manager must work with each team member individually and the team as a group to increase the synergy level of the team. Like a championship sports team, the winning project team stands out and the way in which they work as a team is a role model for others.

6. **Motivation and leadership are crucial**. Plans for project execution rarely go exactly as scripted. That should not be a surprise to anyone – projects by their very nature produce something new, and things change. How project team members respond when their plan is not working or if they suffer from a lack of

motivation is critical to eventual success or failure. In sports, coaches and team captains are akin to Project Managers; the quality of their leadership is crucial for success. What makes elite coaches, general managers and team leaders stand out from others? Those who rise to the top tend to be individuals with genuine leadership skills.

They need to know how to position their team members for success, and how to motivate them to achieve their goals. They know that they need to reward team members for good performance DURING the project, not just at the end. Think of what happens when a team member scores a goal – they are applauded there and then, with an "on the spot" celebration which quickly dissipates as the team focuses on the rest of the game. Take the same approach for your project.

7. **Common goals.** Every member of any team should be working toward a common goal that everyone understands. In projects, we establish this through project success planning (refer to our previous article "Project Success Plans – Planning for Success" for details), just as sports teams always solidify their goals and set expectations during season opening activities and specific games. Whether the goal is to improve on last season, "just finish," or to win a championship, it needs to be established and clearly communicated to the team, with all members working toward that goal. Roles and responsibilities are key to establishing goals in a specific game or project. Just as in sports teams, where each team member performs a particular function, so should project teams have fully delineated and acknowledged roles.

8. **Lessons learned**. Few will dispute the fact that capturing lessons is fundamental to any project and to the growth and maturation of the performing organization. Sports teams are great examples of learning from what happened last time. Watching and dissecting the last game for "what we did right," "what we did wrong" and "what can we do better in the next game" is something all good sports teams do. The sports coach plays a key role here. They connect the team "lessons learned" to their Game Plans, and the integration of their lessons learned into the strategic goals of the team is usually intrinsic to the way things are done. Players need to be willing to learn from their own experiences and the observations of their coach. Project teams need to adopt this same approach. Yet, because we are all busy, it can become all too easy to ignore the lessons during a project, and only focus on them right at the end. As we suggested in our article on learning, try to make time for quick team reviews before, during and after a project, not just at the start and the end. You may want to consider the use of an impartial facilitator to capture and analyze lessons.

In closing, project management processes and concepts are similar in many ways to team sports. All teams, whether for a sport or any other type of pursuit, can benefit from applying a project-orientated approach.

Article Author Bios

About The Article Authors, Their Roles Their Plans, And Their Goals	Gareth Byatt, Gary Hamilton, and Jeff Hodgkinson are experienced PMO, program, and project managers who developed a mutual friendship by realising they shared a common passion to help others and share knowledge about PMO, portfolio, program and project management (collectively termed PM below). In February 2010 they decided to collaborate on a five (5) year goal to write 100 PM subject articles (pro bono) for publication in any/all PM subject websites, newsletters, and professional magazines / journals.
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He lives in Mesa, Arizona, USA and is a member of Phoenix PMI Chapter. Because of his contributions to helping people achieve their goals, he is the third (3rd) most recommended person on LinkedIn with 555+ recommendations, and is ranked 54th most networked LinkedIn person. He gladly accepts all connection invite requests from PM practitioners at: www.linkedin.com/in/jeffhodgkinson. Jeff holds numerous certifications and credentials in program and project management, which are as follows: CAPM®, CCS, CDT, CPC™, CIPM™, CPPM–Level 10, CDRP, CSM™, CSQE, GPM™, IPMA-B®, ITIL-F, MPM™, PME™, PMOC, PMP®, PgMP®, PMI-RMP®, PMI-SP®, PMW, and SSGB.

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