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COMPETENCE
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NETWORK



MENTALLY FIT IN HANDBALL

Psychological Skills Training
Manual for Coaches

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Author:

Prof. Dr. Sc. Renata Barić, sport psychologist

Language revision:

Marsha Brown / EHF Office

Administration:

Nicole Rabenseifner / EHF Office

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Lena Sperger / EHF Office

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Richard Turner / EHF Office

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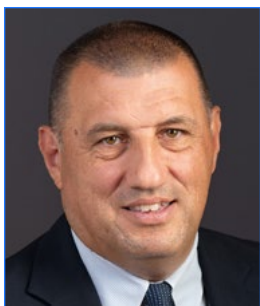
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FOREWORD



Pedro Sequeira
EHF Methods Commission
Chairman

In the dynamic and physically demanding realm of handball, mental fitness emerges as the linchpin that separates triumph from mediocrity. While the attributes of physical prowess - strength, agility, endurance, and skill - are undeniably pivotal, it is the intricate interplay of the psychological dimension that truly distinguishes between good and extraordinary players. The arena of handball thus unveils a captivating tapestry of mental fortitude, encompassing an amalgamation of critical facets that intertwine seamlessly to mould a player's mettle.

Central to the mental acumen of a handball player is the art of focus and concentration. Amidst the frenetic pace of the game, where every moment carries potential game-altering consequences, maintaining an unswerving focus becomes paramount. The capacity to be attuned to the minutiae of the court, foresee opponents' manoeuvres, and execute precision-driven passes or shots hinges upon a player's ability to channel their concentration unflinchingly. Through methods like visualization and mindfulness, players craft an inner sanctum of awareness, honing their focus into a potent tool for navigating the labyrinthine complexities of the match.

Yet, mental fitness transcends mere concentration; it extends its reach into the realm of resilience and adaptability. Handball's capricious nature dictates that players must confront setbacks - missed opportunities, defensive challenges, and turnovers - with unwavering resolve. The journey from adversity to accomplishment is paved with the indomitable spirit to rebound, the agility to recalibrate strategies, and the grace to assimilate lessons from defeat. Thus, mental fitness cultivates an elasticity of character, a potent wellspring of tenacity that propels players forward even in the face of adversity.

Within the crucible of handball's game pressure, the capacity for decision-making takes on heightened significance. Swift, incisive judgment is the hallmark of the mentally fit player. The flurry of the game demands rapid evaluations—when to pass, when to seize a shot, or when to defend with unwavering resolve. Mental fitness breeds a discerning mind, one that can dissect the tumultuous tableau of the court and unravel a course of action with unwavering conviction. The ability to make resolute decisions amid the storm of competition is the cornerstone of a mentally fit player.

However, this mental journey is not solitary; it is inextricably intertwined with the tapestry of confidence and self-belief. A player's sense of self-worth shapes their approach to the game. Mental fitness beckons players to tread the path of self-assuredness, nurturing a belief in their abilities, and summoning the audacity to undertake feats that seem insurmountable. This fortified self-image unfurls its wings, allowing players to soar beyond the confines of self-doubt and into the realm of limitless possibilities.

Furthermore, handball's symphony is orchestrated not by a sole virtuoso but by a harmonious ensemble—a team. Mental fitness extends its influence to the realm of teamwork and communication. The melding of diverse talents, the synchrony of movements, and the harmony of shared goals all hinge upon effective communication and a bedrock of trust. The mentally fit player recognizes their role as a thread in the team's tapestry, fostering open communication, nurturing camaraderie, and synchronizing efforts to orchestrate a symphony of victory.

Even before the first whistle's resonance, mental fitness leaves its indelible mark in the pre-game preparation. Rituals of mental preparation, visualization exercises, and the formulation of strategic goals are all integral components of the prelude to a match. These routines are not mere superstitions; they are the invocation of a mindset sculpted to transcend the limits of anxiety, fortifying the player with a prelude of confidence and clarity.

I hope this manual will help the Coaches (and others who are interested in the topic) to have better information and tools to support handball players to be Mentally Fit in Handball.

PREFACE



**Prof. Dr. Sc.
Renata Barić**
Sport psychologist

Psychology has always been present on the sports scene. The mental side of preparation and sport performance play significant roles, but for too many coaches and athletes it is a unknown and unpredictable area. Despite this everybody intuitively knows that psychological skills matter on and off the sport court. Sport psychologists know that these skills can be nurtured and trained from an early age and, as a sport psychologist with 20 years of scientific and applied experience, I am trying to help coaches and athletes to better understand how the mind works. I strongly believe that understanding and knowledge bring motivation and a capability to act. In the last 25 years, sports psychology has been developed tremendously in research and application of the knowledge of the sport. But still many coaches and athletes are not familiar with psychological concepts and they are not regularly implemented into the training process. Thus, a potential of mental skills is not used enough for the improvement of competitive performance. Also, there is a distinct lack of sport psychology books related to specific sports.

As a sport psychologist, I had the opportunity to work with hundreds of athletes from different sports. As handball is popular sport in Croatia, I am happy I had the opportunity to work with many handball players and handball coaches over the years, some of them were officially announced as the best in the world in certain periods. I also work as a university professor and a researcher; I have educated generations of future coaches and PE teachers and, as a researcher, my areas of interest were team sports, namely leadership, motivation, and the effects of psychological preparation in athletes. I have learned a lot from all these experiences and I wanted to contribute to the field by writing a manual that could help learning about psychological factors and developing the necessary psychological skills that lead to greater enjoyment and better sport performance.

This book is primarily written for handball coaches to help them in delivering the fundamental principles of sport psychology to reflect how to integrate psychological skills into their regular training processes and the everyday work in their teams, and to help them in recognizing, understanding, and satisfying the needs of handball players. The idea of understanding the needs of the players is incorporated into every page of this book. I honestly believe that it is the right way because it leads to satisfied players who will be active participants in their sport life and who will develop their competence and confidence. Also, this book has an important part related to needs of coaches and their psychological preparation.

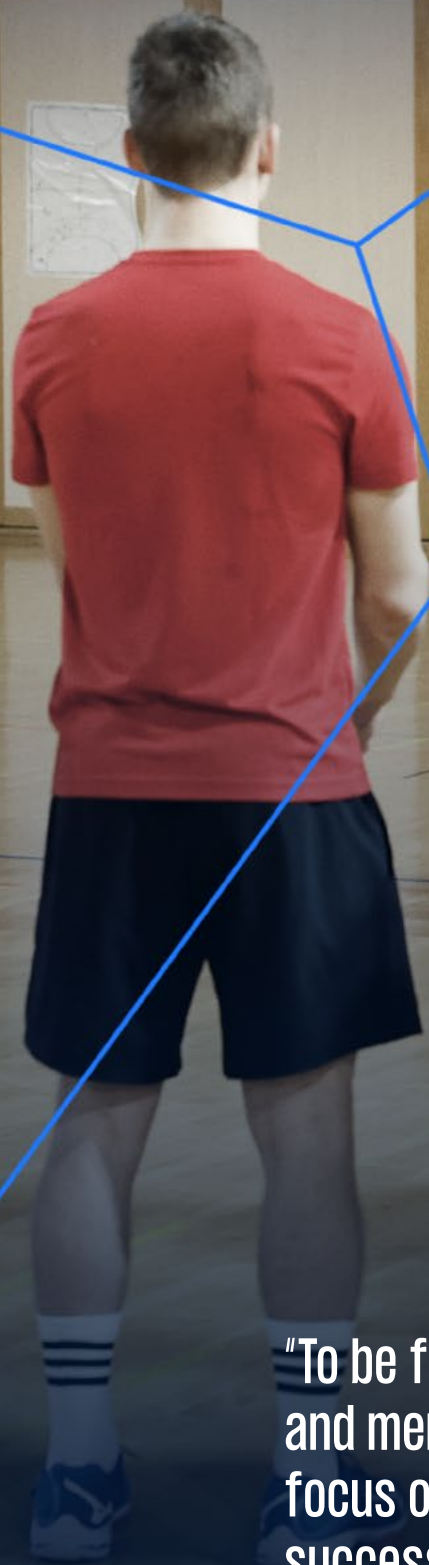
The content of this book provides some techniques and practical recommendations that may help coaches and players to achieve an optimal mental state necessary for using their full sporting potential during training sessions and competitions. As every chapter firstly explains a theoretical concept based on contemporary research and relates it with practical issues and applications, this book can be of interest for athletes, sport psychology, and kinesiology, to others interested in performance psychology or the psychology of excellence.

The book brings a psychology of handball, but also general knowledge of different psychological concepts necessary for coaching handball as a team sport. The first two chapters introduce psychological skills training (PST), and the profession of the sport psychologist and its application to handball. Chapter three presents the optimal competitive framework for a handball player. The fourth chapter brings a detailed review of developmental characteristics of different age categories in handball and practical recommendations on how to work with players of different ages in relation to their cognitive, socio-emotional, and moral development. The fifth and sixth chapters address the optimal performance mindset and different psychological skills training necessary for the successful handball player. The seventh chapter deals with group processes and team building in handball, and the closing chapter explores psychological preparation for handball coaches in detail; it addresses professional knowledge and skills, interpersonal and intrapersonal, necessary for successful coaching.

Psychology is inevitable part of any job related to people. Growing interest for sport psychology is evident among coaches, athletes, and sport parents. I strongly believe that my knowledge and experience should be shared and disseminated to get to those who need it and who can benefit the most from it.

I incorporated 20 years of my scientific and applied work and experience into this book; I worked hard and passionately, as I always do, and I enjoyed this journey from the first till last page. I hope this book will help handball coaches to develop their confidence to fulfil their psychologist's role and help their players to develop psychological and personal qualities and use their fullest potential. I hope you will enjoy the journey through this book as much as I enjoyed this challenge!

1. WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING (PST)?



"To be fit in sport means to be physically and mentally prepared. In training athletes focus on physical aspects but in competition success is mainly mental based, psychology makes the difference!"

1. WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING (PST)?

The main goal in sport is to achieve success; this can be defined in many ways, but in competitive sport it is mainly defined through results, through medals and winning. If you ask any champion athlete, any experienced and elite coach, if psychology is vital to success, the answer will be undoubtedly positive. We can discuss how much of the success can be attributed to physical, and how much to psychological, factors but, during the tournaments, just prior the competition and during the game, especially during the major and challenging moments, the ratio prevails in favour of psychology. We can be sure that the mental side of preparation and performance has played a vital role from the first moments the human began to compete within organised sport, but since then till today psychological skills are often unregulated, haphazard, and without any system dealing with this part of preparation.

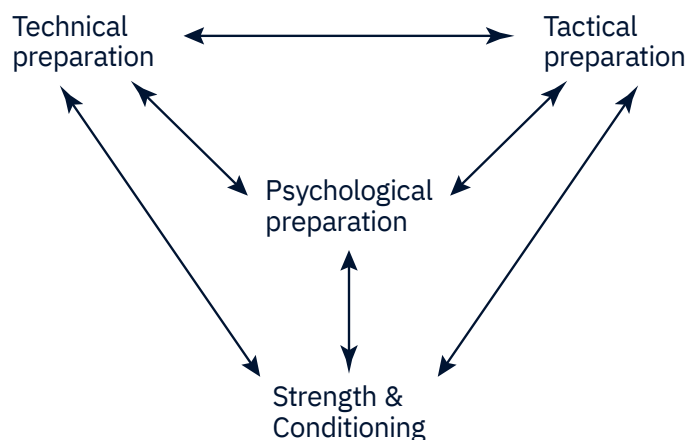
On the other hand, when things are not going well on the court, we can hear that ‘Everything is in the head’, ‘His head was not in the game’, ‘We lost focus’, ‘We have to get our heads together’, ‘You lost your composure’, ‘They didn’t play as a team’ etc. Coaches, players, media, and the public are talking about psychology, but it is still a neglected part of the sport preparation. Some athletes and coaches are trying to apply some psychological principles they have learned along the way, but mainly the systematic education and psychological skills training is missing, as well as the inclusion of psychological preparation elements in the everyday training process on the sport court. If we want to use psychological skills effectively, we must train them patiently, regularly, and systematically like all other sport skills; this can be provided by a sport psychologist as an additional type of training, but it is also necessary to have the opportunity to test and practice this together with handball skills training on the court. It depends directly on the coach, his/her affinity, responsibility, and understanding that the handball game has its physical side but also its mental side.

Psychological Skills Training (PST) is a specific part of the sport preparation process, together with technical, tactical preparation and conditioning (Picture 1). It helps all other parts of the preparation to function together, optimally following up each other. It is a specific technology of training, approaches, and tools aimed to develop certain psychological abilities and skills for all those who want to reach their full potential within the sport and to use all they have learned not only to compete athletically, but also in everyday life. PST realizes the scientifically proven evidence from psychology, sport science, physical education, neuropsychology, and medicine science applying their principles to sport with the aim to enhance performance and to self-actualize participants in sport and exercise. PST is not only for those with problems, but also intended for everybody who wants to achieve excellence, to grow and become a better version of themselves.

Athletes approach PST differently - some want to solve something they struggle with; some want to learn new skills they can use to become better on the sport court, and some want to prepare for competition.

PST is also intended for coaches; there are coaches who want to invest in themselves, being aware of the need of certain skills and mental framework necessary when you work with people, especially kids and youth. By developing psychological skills, they can embrace their responsibility for other human beings more freely and help those they are working with in a proper manner, recognizing their needs and by creating such an environment where those needs can be fulfilled within the framework of team sport goals. Also, by learning about PST, coaches can implement the psychological preparation elements into the training process more easily, raising awareness of the importance of these factors in sport, and getting their athletes used to using them together with other skills necessary for sport performance. PST includes a specific work on motivation, focus, behavioural and arousal regulation,

emotions, self-confidence, cohesion and teamwork, communication, leadership, and relationships, as well as potential pitfalls as injuries or eating disorders.



Picture 1. The process of sport preparation

The process of psychological skills training with a professional sport psychologist usually starts with psychodiagnostics. It is a set of methods (testing, interviews) used to get a wealth of information about athlete in a brief period of time. A sport psychologist is collecting data from various sources (tests, interview with athlete, coach/es, parents, sport manager and behavioural observation) merging them together in an expert manner to psychodiagnostics report, i.e., the outcome of that procedure is psychological profile of the athlete. It is composed of certain parts (typical characteristics, motivation and work ethic, coach-athlete relationship, socio-emotional profile, areas for improvement, coach recommendations, strengths, and potential). In the case of a team sport, the sport psychologist prepares each individual athlete's psychological profile and a team psychological profile. It is based on all the collected information and on the motivational climate and sociometric testing results. Such a psychological profile is necessary for the sport psychologist to prepare the PST plan, but also represents the first intervention because it is presented to athlete/es, coach/es, parents (respecting ethical principles) containing many useful information and naming certain processes. The profile helps, especially when the athlete has certain psychological issues that limits him reaching his potential on the court. This step is particularly important when establishing PST goals, and the sport psychologist uses that data as an evaluation framework.

Individual PST starts after the delivery of the psychological profile. The sport psychologist and the athlete create common directions for future work. The athlete is introduced to principles of PST that indicates his/her activity and dedication, and the same for the sport training. It can be said that it is nothing more than different training, but with a different type of coach - the sport psychologist. The goals are then defined and it is the framework for common work. A part of the PST is educational, the athlete is introduced to specific topics, depending on PST goals. The second part is applicative, it implies the practice of certain psychological techniques related to the topic of the interest through certain tasks, homework, and direct work with the sport psychologist. The athlete's level of dedication and activity to all segments of work within PST determines the tempo of learning new skills and his/her improvement.

PST in team sports is a more complex process because it includes many individual PST processes, with all the athletes who make a team and all the coaches that work with them. Also, it includes the teamwork where all athletes work together on certain topics using team building methods and workshops. The important part of team PST is work with the head coach, who confers with sport the psychologist on actual issues, gradually learning new techniques and approaches that can apply to

real situations in the team, with the background help of the sport psychologist. The coach also builds his/her leadership style to be more in line with current athletes' needs but within the desired game framework and coaching philosophy that the coach wants to promote.

One of the important questions related to PST is duration. It is not easy to answer this question because the duration of PST can differ depending on the athlete's initial motivation to start PST (problem, preparation for competition, general psychological preparation). Initially it is particularly important to understand that PST is not a 'fireproof' measure or a 'pill', but a process that takes time as well as sport training to achieve results. Usually, it is organised in cycles following sport seasons, but it is a circular process; there are always some areas for improvement and defining new goals. It can last for as long as the athlete (or coach) wants to work on him/herself, embracing this part of sport preparation as completely equal to other parts.

PST usually starts with an initial contact with the sport psychologist. It can be done by the coach, parent, athlete, manager, club or federation representative, or another person responsible for the athlete or team. It is followed by individual or group psychodiagnosics evaluations and after that the individual or teamwork with the sport psychologist (PST) comes into play.

The Sport Psychologist

Although the interest and popularity of sport psychology increased rapidly in last years, in the sport environment coaches are still somewhat sceptical toward sport psychology and sport psychologists. A large amount of the sport psychologist's work is still a mystery for coaches and many of them are unsure about the justification and utility of this type of collaboration. There are few reasons for this apprehension; first, the outcomes of sport psychologist's work cannot be directly evaluated. The best evaluations come from athletes' testimony about how much they feel PST helped them and their improved sport performance due to PST experience. Secondly, there is a certain level of doubt in coaches who do not want anybody to analyse them, notice their shortcomings and 'teach' or 'coach' them how to do their own work. This is due to uncertainty, a fear of the unknown, and also, in part, an 'ego' problem. The best solution to all these issues is education and collecting information about how this collaboration works.

In contemporary sport, especially at the elite level, the sport psychologist is an inevitable part of the expert team. For example, team USA had 12 sport psychologists at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, and many others who prepared those athletes prior to the event in Brazil. The similar is more often the case in elite sport, especially in more developed countries. But at the lower level of sport we still meet some obstacles, although the situation is slowly changing (this book is also the evidence). The work and collaboration with a sport psychologist relies on some premises: professionalism, collaboration, a willingness to understand sport, and ethical principles. The basic idea, no matter who the client is, the sport psychologist's target is to help him/her to understand how the mind works and to help to develop certain skills that can be used not only on the sport court but also in life, and finally, to become self-sufficient. Sport psychologists are working hard to improve their clients (athletes, coaches, parents) experience in sport, helping them to enjoy, embrace all challenges, learn from experience, and keep progressing.

Although it is still not possible to find a sport psychologist in every town, the number of professionals in the field is growing all across Europe and the world. In Europe, FEPSAC (European Federation on Sport Psychology) is a professional organisation which includes more than 2300 sport psychologists from 40 countries and many of them are consultants who work in the field. To become a sport psychologist, a professional competent to apply sport psychology with sport participants in the sport environment,

the first condition is education - completed university study (masters) in psychology. In some countries there is even the specialized education, graduate study of sport psychology, but mainly psychologists finish their masters and then train and educate themselves further to become sport psychologists. Some countries have additional education programmes for psychologists to become certified sport psychologists. In general, psychologists continuously proceed to educate themselves after graduation, especially those who choose to work with people as consultants. In the USA, sport psychologists must have a PhD, a doctorate in psychology or sport psychology. In some European countries there are mental training consultants who differ from the sport psychologist because they do not have the basic education in psychology but in kinesiology. They must further educate themselves accordingly and work under supervision to get experience and training to work with athletes.

The reality is that there are also different other professionals without this specific education who finish short term courses or education in uncertified institutions or even no qualifications, and call themselves sport psychologists. The risk of working with such 'consultants' is the lack of background knowledge of psychology and the ethical framework because they cannot be members of any psychological association or chamber which guarantee the certification and the corresponding expertise for their members. Clients should be careful when engaging a sport psychologist. Getting the expected professional service is not guaranteed from somebody who does not have a graduate education in psychology or supervised experience working with sport participants. As applied sport psychology developed as a profession in the last years, sport psychologists invest a lot of effort to protect their profession and its reputation. Many sport federations or national Olympic committees have a Sport Psychologists Registry where any client interested in working with a sport psychologist can find a licensed professional.

In working with athletes or coaches, every sport psychologist should strictly follow ethical rules of the psychological profession and has to represent this codex in every moment as well as inform all other parties (e.g., coaches and parents when working with athletes) that this is mandatory; it is a legal necessity. In the other words, every sport psychologist should obey the principles of voluntariness and confidentiality, no information can be shared with no one without the permission of client. When some information about athlete is shared with coach, he/she should also follow the same regimen. At the beginning of the collaboration this framework should be clearly communicated so athletes know they can communicate freely, coaches know they will not get all information about athletes but will get some information and feedback for their coaching, and both parties are aware that the sport psychologist can encourage them to speak to each other effectively and more often.

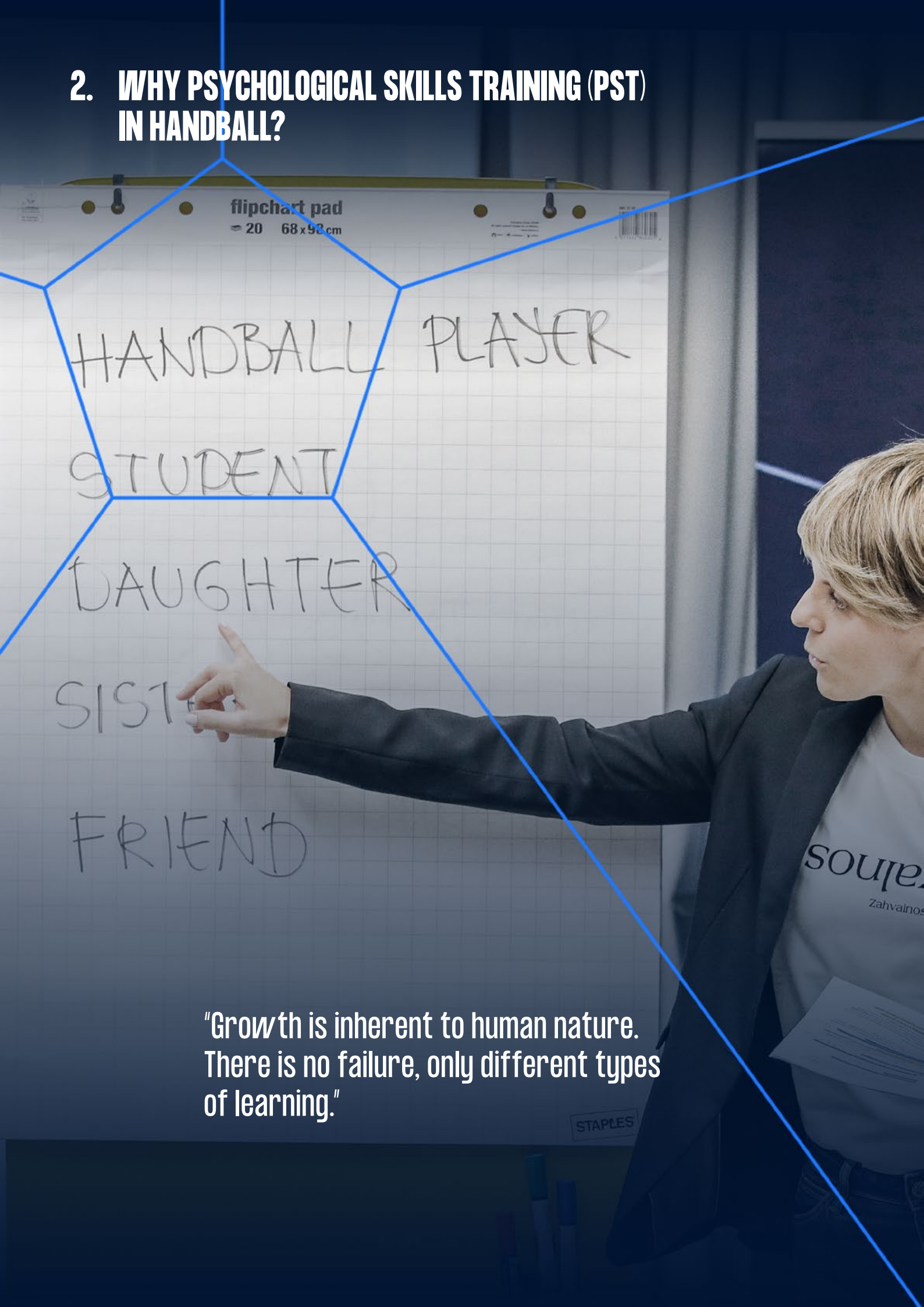
Also, each sport psychologist should clearly know that his/her basic position is to collaborate with the coach. It is not recommendable to put hm/herself 'above' the coach, to teach him/her how to do the coaching job, a sport psychologist provides a service to a coach that works within a partnership framework, and both are there because of the athlete/s who are the most important. The hierarchy in sport is strict, and it often means that the sport psychologist is the 'men from the shadows', and it is not acceptable for him/her to expose the work with the team to the public (e.g., in media) without consultation, with the coach. This is important baseline for sport psychologist-coach collaboration.

Additionally, the sport psychologist should understand the sport, the specific sport discipline, and its culture, and show willingness to learn about it. The sport environment is extremely specific and, to apply sport psychology principles, it is necessary to learn about it, as it is not necessary for techniques that work for swimming to work for handball also. Any good sport psychologist will take time to learn about specifics of certain sports, to introduce the basic rules and to understand the different factors that are in the background of success or failure. The own sport experience is welcomed, but not necessary.

Finally, no matter who clients are, the work of the sport psychologist is primarily based on a good consulting relationship. There is always an individual approach, but the power of teamwork and collaboration with the coach, parents, or other support staff members are beneficial. It is not necessary that the athletes and the sport psychologist match to each other in the case that change is legitimate option. Also, if an issue overrides the sport psychologist's professional competences (e.g., clinical issue) it is ethical to direct the client to another professional.

One of the main tasks of the sport psychologist is often to point out that athlete is always the priority, not the sport results. It is sometimes hard to understand, especially within elite and professional sport, but considering the athlete as a person not as just a number on sport jersey, contributes positively to the athlete's sport experience; finally, it is beneficial for the result also. This is especially important when working with children and young athletes and the sport psychologist must remind everyone who work in youth sport to this premise. Such an approach helps to create a more adaptive sport environment which makes it easier to meet the rights and needs of the athletes and enables healthy sport development.

2. WHY PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING (PST) IN HANDBALL?

A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a dark blazer over a grey t-shirt with 'souje Zahvalnos' printed on it, is pointing at a flipchart. The flipchart is a Staples flipchart pad, 20 pages, 68x93 cm. It features a hand-drawn diagram of a handball player's roles. The diagram is a large, irregular shape with a blue outline, divided into five horizontal sections. The sections are labeled from top to bottom: 'HANDBALL PLAYER', 'STUDENT', 'DAUGHTER', 'SISTER', and 'FRIEND'. The woman is pointing at the 'SISTER' section.

flipchart pad
20 68x93 cm

HANDBALL PLAYER
STUDENT
DAUGHTER
SISTER
FRIEND

"Growth is inherent to human nature.
There is no failure, only different types
of learning."

STAPLES

2. WHY PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING (PST) IN HANDBALL?

I have watched numerous sporting events during my student years and professional career, and I was always amazed with huge 'bet athletes put on their sport table', risking everything in them for that game, sometimes for a few minutes or for one moment of this particular opportunity in front of them. I was always amazed by the effort and sacrifices that are standing behind those moments of performance, but also, I felt sorry for many of them who didn't succeed because they lacked a mental preparation. I have seen disorganised approaches coupled with a distracted mind; fearful eyes, low body postures, emotional suffering, avoidant court behaviour, etc. because they lost what they should have won or made a mistake when it should not have happened.



Working with athletes as a sport psychologist for the last 20 years, a popular response to the question as to why they chose to visit and what they think about PST, is “during a competition, I can't reproduce the things on court, that I can do in the training”. Behind this sentence can be dozens of varied reasons, but the fact is - to become a successful competitor an athlete needs two sets of skills: the physical skills necessary to realize technical and tactical demands of his/her sport, and the psychological skills of a competitor. Every athlete who competes at any level needs to understand that every sport has got its physical and mental side, and this is obligatory to understand, to train and be prepared on both levels. This is especially true for cognitively and tactically more complex sports such as team sports, even for handball.

Aims

The main aim of applying psychological skills training (PST) into sport, even into handball, is to help the sport participants, players, and coaches, to increase efficiency in their everyday practice through the use of certain psychological skills and, during the competition, to be able to manifest the similar level of efficiency equal to their training efficiency to achieve their athletic goals. PST help athletes to consistently perform close to their potential and avoid discrepancy from it during the competition.

Also, the aim is to maximize athletic experience, to nurture positive values and emotions related to playing handball, to enable each athlete to grow as a person within sport and handball environment, and to use this environment for learning skills, mindset, values, attitudes, behaviours, and social interaction patterns that support not only the successful playing of a handball match, but also quality of life in general.

As handball is a team sport, the aim is also to help to the coach to understand the needs of the players, to help him/her to communicate his/her needs and expectations to the team and each individual, and to create the climate where the coach's expectations could be met together with the needs of the players. It implies developing a team spirit; a functionally and emotionally related group of individuals that are willing to follow common goal and strongly believe in their efforts invested to it, together with a coach. In other words, on team level, the main goal is to help to develop a team, from the group of individuals - players, coach(es) and team staff, led by common values of hard work, cooperation, and excellence.

Effects

The effects of PST can be followed on three levels: individual player's level, coach's level, and team level.

PST FOR THE PLAYERS:

- To understand his/her needs, emotions, and reactions.
- To define a system of values.
- To understand his/her inner drives, motivation, and to define goals.
- To understand the relationship between thinking, emotions, and behaviour.
- Preparation for a stressful competitive situation.
- To recognize and regulate the level of arousal (energy).
- To deal with the fear of failure and mistakes.
- To recognize his/her strengths and evidence it to help build the self-confidence.
- To learn to analyse his/her performance and learn from it.
- To learn how to efficiently direct attention and keep focused.
- To create pre-competition routines.
- To learn to apply PST tools (goal setting, relaxation, self-talk, imagery).
- To communicate more openly and honestly with the coach and teammates.
- To find the balance with sport and non-sport life.
- To deal with specific periods (career transitions, injuries, doping violation...).
- To prepare for career termination.
- Personal development and life skills.

PST FOR THE COACH:

- To understand his/her needs, emotions, and reactions.
- To develop his/her coaching philosophy based on his/her values.
- To improve communication skills.
- To understand players' needs and team climate.
- To create a stimulating team environment.
- To better understand the mental side of handball and to learn how to train mental skills on the court.
- To understand relationship between emotional state and focus and be aware of his/her own.
- To understand the relationship between the coach's and team's reaction and behaviour, especially during critical moments and challenging times.
- To learn techniques of emotional regulation.
- To learn how to organise an effective parents' meeting and bring effective motivational speech.
- To recognize triggers and critical moments on the court and react to them efficiently.
- To achieve better balance between the sport and non-sport life (health, family, free time).
- To develop his/her leadership style.
- To learn how to apply PST tools (goal setting, relaxation, imagery, self-talk).
- Learn about the importance of the coach-athlete relationship and how to build it.
- Personal development.

PST FOR THE TEAM:

- Team building.
- Creating team mission/vision/goals.
- Develop team identity.
- Create team routines.
- Improving team cohesion.
- Creating a team support network.
- Better conflict management and within team communication.
- Understanding and accepting team qualities and team/individual responsibilities.
- Creating a motivational action plan.
- Improve team communication on and off the court.
- Nurture process for motivation and a cooperative motivational climate.



PST Procedure

In handball as a team sport, PST can start in numerous ways. The most common, and for the sport psychologist the easiest, way is by direct interaction with a head coach through their own initiative.

For the PST efficiency, it is particularly important if the sport psychologist has the support of the coach and his/her full cooperation, because PST develops the best outcomes if it is processed through whole team and the coach's cooperation with the sport psychologist. With a coach on his/her side, a sport psychologist has authority and a more serious approach from the side of the players who, from the beginning, are more committed to the PST process.

PST can also be initialized by sport federation (national selections), club management or by a parents' suggestion to the coach (youth sport environment).

After having reached a cooperation agreement, PST is realised through several steps:

- Psychodiagnostics' evaluation (team and individual level, coach/es level).
- Presenting psychodiagnostics reports (individual and team's psychological profiles to coach, athletes, selector of the national team...).
- Providing PST on individual players' level (not necessary with all players, depends on the sport psychologist's style and appraisal of the actual situation).
- Providing PST on a team level.
- Regular consultations with the head coach, periodic consultations with other coaches and other support staff members
- Observing training sessions and matches
- Travelling with the team - preparations, away matches (optional)
- Evaluations.

For the handball coach who wants to start a cooperation with a sport psychologist it is important to decide about the purpose of this cooperation, as well as his/her expectations (sport psychologist's age, gender, level of experience and certification, personal style). Also, it is important to know the strengths and weaknesses of his/her teams and each individual player.

Sometimes coaches want a sport psychologist to help him/her with team selection decisions or to help with the election of a team captain based on psychodiagnosics evaluations. From the side of sport psychology, it is not correct to base such decisions exclusively on psychological reports, except in the case if a coach has, for example, two remarkably similar players according to handball skills and motor potential. In that case psychological data can serve as additional information which can lead to the upper hand.

PST combines all elements, the tempo and duration depends on the goals, the coach's and sports psychologist's agreement and other factors (financial resources, game schedule, preparation period/phase).

The main framework is a good and collaborative coach-sport psychologist relationship. Sometimes it is interesting how coaches perceive the sport psychologist in general, from the perspective of certain prejudices related to psychology as something that is only for 'disturbed persons' or insecure athletes with serious problems, and even from the perspective of stereotypes, especially if the sport psychologist is a woman. Letting a woman into a 'man's world' in such a sport can be very demanding for everybody, especially if she is expected to collaborate with male team. My experiences show that this is, on the contrary, a winning solution. Many male players confirm that they can open themselves and talk about their inner experiences more easily if the sport psychologist is a woman. There is no need to worry about delicate situations, for example in the dressing room, if the sport psychologist is highly professional person, she is trained to put a professional boundary related to all aspects of her job.

If you initialize the collaboration with a sport psychologist, it is important to define your expectations, and to be open to the expectations of the sport psychologist, as well as their questions and proposals, and to define the cooperation framework agreement. It brings the way of cooperation (frequency, modalities, duties, etc.), the time period and evaluations points; do not hesitate to ask questions and bring new insights and needs.

It is acceptable to prepare a list of questions you want to ask at the beginning. It can be about the sport psychologist's experience in general and in handball, type of qualification and certification, working style, any examples of his/her work (in general, the sport psychologist does not share information about their clients, but sometimes some athletes talk about their PST and cooperation with particular a sport psychologist openly, or allow them to mention their cooperation on such occasion), technical information (fee, schedule, duration of individual sessions or team workshop etc.).

How to find a sport psychologist?

- Call the local university.
- Check the homepage of the psychological association in your country.
- Check the Sport Psychologists Registry of your national Olympic committee.
- Use an internet search engine.
- Ask colleagues or athletes for recommendations.

The initial contact can be by phone for general information, but it is particularly important to meet the sport psychologist in person to see if there is a personality match between you, and to estimate if that person fits your expected standards.

3. THE FRAMEWORK OF OPTIMAL COMPETITIVE PERFORMANCE



"The brain works on the repetition model; it is a constant. You will continue to achieve the most common result."

3. THE FRAMEWORK OF OPTIMAL COMPETITIVE PERFORMANCE

The Sport Preparation Process of a Handball Player

Any athlete in any sport starts his/her sport journey from a place of love for the particular sport and the enjoyment he/she experiences by playing it. There is no sport champion who is not motivated primarily by that love, no matter of the level of quality, type of contract, money he/she earns from playing and level of competition. In handball, which is team sport, the additional challenge derives from the team, a group of players with a common team goal, but also with different characters, different individual goals and visions, experience, habits, and behavioural and communication patterns. All of them use a sport preparation process as a vehicle to their achievements - competitive efficiency measured in terms of winning and medals, goals scored, or components of play statistics. The true competitor in handball recognizes that striving to win is much more important than winning itself, and that the performance of each player increase their opportunities for victory. Also, the pursuit of excellence is never linear, but a series of 'ups and downs' that will test each player and each coach.

The sport preparation process in handball includes challenging work in all aspects - technical, tactical, conditioning, and psychological. A player can contribute to the game when he/she possesses sufficient knowledge of technical element and knows how to perform each element, but it will be completely useless if he/she does not recognize when to use it, if they do not understand the logic of handball game and do not possess the fine feeling for the play and tactics. On the other hand, a player can perform the technical elements, can recognize when to use them within actions that are happening on the court, but if he/she does not have enough strength or capacity to perform it, to run across the court in the last minutes of the match or engage the body in a way that is needed for a successful performance at that particular moment (that is the strength and conditioning part of preparation); all those segments do not have purpose and cannot interrelate efficiently. Finally, a player can have all three aspects well developed - knows how to perform elements, recognize when to use them, possess enough strength and conditioning for the performance, but if he/she doubts a decision and a selection of moves, being frozen for seconds in a particular moment (that is psychological preparation), everything falls apart and the opportunity is lost.

A competition is a situation that challenges the character and skills of the coaches' and player' in many ways. In sport everybody strives to win, but the inner force that leads to success is personal excellence and development. Unlike the winning, that has a clear definition and a tangible reward; the long-term development of player not only to become good handball professional but also a better person, physically, socially, and psychologically, is not fast, easily recognized nor publicly reinforced. This is a longer, but a more dependable path toward sport success.

Within the sport preparation process, handballers need to learn different skills and tasks. The learning curve is seldom linear, but is full of drops, plateaus, and flaws in form before moving on to a higher performance level and it is normal part of learning and development, and it should be treated that way. Coaches who are impatient and easily get angry due to player mistakes has players who are pressured and develop a fear of failure that limits their performance in the long term. It is important to educate coaches about appropriate communication and reactions, and to teach players about the learning process and how mind works. In this case, it is important to remember that the mind works following the principle of repetition, and the most dominant reaction is the best established. Very often coaches and players forget about this principle, continuing to train certain things that are not useful for the competition, on the contrary.

Each handball coach will confirm the importance of situational training, practicing similar things in a similar environment and circumstances such as in competition. It usually includes elements of the handball game, tactics, sometimes training on a court that is similar to where the competition will be played. But psychological aspects of this principle are neglected. The brain counts and the biggest number is a winner. If you play handball every day under pressure because of the strict coach, you train to be pressured (insecurity or fear of failure, critical team-mates, or any other reason), to 'choke', to play with tension that makes you ineffective. There is no logic to expect that such a player will be focused and relaxed during the match and enjoy handball when he/she is very well trained in a completely opposite manner. It is important to think about what we train and is this useful (or not) for our matches and competitions.

Today, we live in interdependent society. None is born to be an island, we are social beings, we are interrelated. On the other hand, we live in a society that values profit and competition, and, especially in western cultures, people show a tendency to surpass each other especially in school and work environments; the same is true for sport.

For the realization of a handball play, players need to learn how to cooperate as well as how to compete. The cooperation is necessary within the team if they want to play cohesively and efficiently. But cooperation is also necessary between opponent teams - both teams should agree to follow the rules and to give their best effort and a certain level of commitment to make competition (handball match) possible. The competition is understandable between different teams, but within teams it should not be accentuated. The pursuit of excellence is a strong inner drive, but each player should primarily compete with him/herself, trying to be better than before, following their own progress line and giving their best to move across it. On the handball court coaches often encourage competition between teammates; that can result in lowered cohesiveness, higher pressure, a worsening of interpersonal relations as well as demotivated and frustrated players.

All these things should be considered when one creates the team environment, coaching philosophy, or player's mindset. Also, there are other different agents that influence the framework of optimal competitive performance such as players' lifestyle and personal sport experience.

The Importance of Player's Lifestyle

To be successful in sport it is not necessary to have good technical and tactical preparation, elevated levels of strength and conditioning, and developed mental skills; sport success needs a responsibility for a professional approach to all aspects of life. Much research confirms that the development of a sports career depends on non-sport developmental factors - psychological, psychosocial, academic, even cultural. How a player spends his/her free time, what their social network looks like, how he/she fulfils school obligations, how they communicate with media and in which way, as well as the plans for the post-sport life, has an important impact on his/her reputation and their sports achievements. It is necessary to perceive sport performance, sport success and sport excellence from the holistic perspective; every professional who participates in the preparation process of an athlete should consider a full range of distinct factors which represent player's lifestyle.

PLAYER'S LIFESTYLE

Lifestyle is the way one person lives, it represents his/her attitudes, values, and life perspective together with typical patterns of experiences and behaviour. It can be defined as a psychological construct which describes the personality dynamics of an individual and reflects unique, unconscious and a repetitive way to approach (or to avoid) different areas of life: friendship and social relations, love, work, free time. It can be recognized in typical reactions, emotions, and behavioural patterns and,

to understand one's lifestyle, it is necessary to perceive it from individual's specific social environment perspective, in this case, it is sport.

Lifestyle is also a dynamic power and a framework for the achievement of the individual's goals. Every human is an intentional being and we always move toward certain goals even if we are not completely aware of that goal. Every behaviour has its function, and the simplest motivational power is to achieve certain success, to realize something we consider valuable and desirable, and to avoid failure and a demonstration of incompetence. We undertake different behaviours that reflect our lifestyle that is recognized through our values, attitudes, goals, interests, and choices. It is possible to change or improve individual lifestyle, it is influenced by our social environment and life circumstances, by authorities, important others, culture, and personal experiences.

The athletes' lifestyle is changeable during their sport career; it is influenced by different formal and informal support systems and the sport environment. Athletes maintain an active lifestyle that is characterized with certain attributes such as a high level of (self)discipline, commitments, sacrifice, pushing own's boundaries to the utmost and high achievement motivation. Sport pushes an athlete to risk his/her own health and overcome limits during trainings and in competitions.

To be successful, athletes need to maintain their health and physique, but risk it at the same time. Intensive sport training brings certain health risks as overtraining, injuries, disordered eating habits, doping, etc. Despite some common characteristics, players often differ across lifestyle, in the ways they relate to certain factors which act in sport and outside the sport, choosing behaviours that are (or are not) congruent to the role of athlete. Altogether it influences an athlete as a person, his/her sport preparation process and, finally, competitive performance and results.

THE INFLUENCE OF LIFESTYLE

Coaches spend many hours planning and creating specific training programs and protocols, calculating training loads, creating variability of training operators, introducing new methods etc., and they often forget or neglect the impact of player's lifestyle in relation to the training process and sport performance. The fact is that player spends less time under the coach's control than in it, and a significant amount of time is spent for certain non-sporting activities that can influence his/her sport performance. Some of the most significant differences between elite athletes and those who were talented but never achieved top level is discipline and commitment to goals. Both factors are features of a certain lifestyle that is characterized by asceticism but, at the same time, due to psychological balance and personal development, there needs the balance between the sport and non-sport life. If a player's lifestyle is not compatible to the sport goals and does not support improvement and desired level of sport performance, a sport career of such a player will be seriously compromised.

Every athlete has different roles to play, but despite that the role of athlete is the most dominant one, it is just one among others. From personal experience, every player knows that sport and non-sport life are interrelated by the 'law of connected vessels' - good training and good results makes the player calm and satisfied and that effects spreads beyond the sport court and vice versa. Also, stress and life problems diminish motivation, performance, and can influence the whole training process and its outcomes.

It is important to educate players and their social environment about those influences and direct them toward choices and decisions typical for healthy lifestyle. This way we can 'keep control' over the external factors, which is not easy task mainly because the players themselves are not aware how much other factors outside the sport preparation process can influence their performance.

Positive consequences of an adaptive lifestyle are easily noticeable through faster and better recovery, optimal training adaptation and a higher readiness to use personal, physical, and mental potentials, a higher tolerance to pain, discomfort and fatigue, better focus and emotional regulation, higher resistance to injuries, better commitment to training tasks and higher work efficiency, better preparation for next training or competition, faster learning and improvement, and finally through higher and more stable sport achievements.

The influence of different life stressors adds up to the general stress level players are confronted with, but also to his/her coping mechanisms. Feedback about player's lifestyle is useful not only to players but also to coaches, because it helps to neutralize potential negative effects by planning the training workload or modifying and adapting the training program.

ADAPTIVE LIFESTYLE FACTORS AND THEIR IMPLICATION TO SPORT PERFORMANCE

An adaptive player's lifestyle is one that is compatible to the sport regimen, where consequences and effects aid sport achievements. An adaptive lifestyle implies continuous care for the body and health that makes the player ready for submission to the training and competition effort in a way he/she can use all their potential. It presumes discipline and responsibility to avoid different behaviours, agents, or external influences that could limit the player's physical or mental capacities in the long or short term. Those factors are sleep and rest, healthy eating habits, pharmacological supplements, injury prevention, healthy life habits and avoidance of psychoactive substances, effective management of other life factors, and the balance between sport and non-sport life.

SLEEP AND REST

Sleep is an inherent part of regular circadian rhythm and a basic biological need of every organism. It is defined as a regular cyclic neurophysiological and psychological state of diminished neural activity in the CNS (central nervous system) that takes turns with vigilance and active state in relatively regular periods within 24 hours. Sleep has its protective role, the organism defends itself from exhaustion and fatigue by the need to sleep: in that period, bodily and mental functions are slowing down, the organism is regenerating and preparing for new loads.

Every athlete knows that rest is necessary after physical effort and sport activity, it is one of the key factors for efficient recovery. Each player who trains 1-2 times per day needs 8 hours of night sleep, but also the rest and short sleeping periods between training sessions. That way body recovers, body tissues regenerate, and the body adapts and 'saves' training effects. However, it is not rare that some players neglect the need to sleep and rest or skip or shorten rest time. This way they risk overtraining symptoms and increase the risk for injury. Also, insufficient rest causes weaker body adaptation to training loads, which reflects on sport performance and results. It is also important to increase the period of rest in relation to increased training loads. Short-term sleep and rest deficit can influence the sport performance immediately after the body did not get enough rest, but it will not produce the long-term effects.

Frequent sleep deficit and disregarding bodily signals for loss of energy and rest impairs sport performance in the long term. Such a deficit causes some neurophysiological and hormonal changes - the level of cortisol, stress hormone, increases, growth hormone level (necessary for tissue synthesis) decreases together with glycogen level. Some psychological changes also appear, e.g., irritability, mood swings, decreases in reaction time, and some cognitive functions (focus) are impaired. Some recent investigations confirmed the positive impact of prolonged sleep period in 5-7 weeks from a sample of basketball players. The players reported better physical and mental states during training and matches (lower fatigue, higher arousal, improved mood state, more positive self-perception), they significantly improved percentage of free throws and 3 points shoots and decreased reaction time.

Young players often sacrifice their sleeping time for late night online communication or mobile/internet activities. This is harmful for their recovery, focus (negative influence of blue screen light) and mood. Such habits are not part of an adaptive sport lifestyle.

It is important to mention that not only the amount, but also the quality of sleep and rest is important. Lack of rest can be partially compensated using relaxation techniques which can be an integral part of player's recovery routine, especially during tournaments, or exhausting preparation periods. It can be learned and planned through psychological skills training (PST).

EATING HABITS

Eating habits are important for efficient recovery but also for the preservation of health. Fundamental processes of energy consumption necessary for sport and intensive physical activities are related to nutrients intake that build the body, restore damaged tissues, enables chemical processes and energy production at the cellular level, and protect cells and tissues from potential damage caused by physical and psychological stress. Muscles under the training loads need energetic recovery and nutrition is necessary to keep such a balance. For every athlete, it is important to regulate nutrition and to adopt eating habits appropriate to the sport life regimen so that the body can be stronger and more enduring. This implies the intake of high-quality, nutritionally balanced food in an appropriate amount, considering the intensity and regime of work, body mass and caloric needs, gender, age, training and competition schedule, and the periodization of the training process.

For top sport performance it is necessary to think about all factors that could influence sport results and athletes, especially elite athletes, cannot allow themselves to adopt their nutrition to the occasion, mood or to be guided by the rule of availability. Their diet has to be planned, regular, and of high quality. It presumes a consumption of certain pharmacological and vitamin supplements (preferably in consultation with a nutritionist) and sufficient hydration is also of high importance. Irregular and slack nutrition can lead to a decrease of physical capacity and work ability even by 20-30% which is a significant limiting factor that impairs performance.

The rules of the healthy sport nutrition related to the composition and ratio of food intake go beyond the scope of this chapter, but proper nutrition is a particularly important part of the adaptive lifestyle of any handball player. Healthy sport nutrition follows three principles: diversity, moderation, and completeness.

It is important that players take care about:

- a well-balanced combination of food and caloric intake.
- regular and sufficient hydration and fluid intake.
- using nutritional supplements in consultation with a nutritionist.
- regularity and timing of meals.
- energy compensation immediately after training.
- stability of eating habits regardless of the part of the season.

Insufficient dedication or neglecting the principles of sport nutrition is a long-term stressor for the player's system that reacts defensively by lowering capacities or by saving energy reserves that leads to increased proportion of body fat. Some players 'relax' their nutritional rules and habits in rest periods between seasons, accepting less healthy habits. It causes body mass increment. Due to that they must adopt even more strict rules and nutritional regimen later that is additional stress for the body.

Players who eat healthy provide to their bodies sufficient amount of energy, can more easily withstand

the efforts of intensive trainings, recover faster, and get back in shape more easily preserving continuously their health. On the other hand, eating disorders (anorexia and bulimia nervosa, unspecified eating disorders) are not rare in sport, especially within those sports where body weight is important for sport performance (combat sport, aesthetic sports, etc.). Certain sporting demands can contribute to the development of a lifestyle in the area of eating habits that does not support health and, by that, the quality of sport performance neither. The risk for the development of such disorders is higher in sensitive periods of adolescence, especially in girls who tend to lose some body weight by dieting and restrictive habits that can be recognized as problematic signs.

AVOIDANCE OF PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES

Consumption of illegal or harmful substances as drugs (opiates), alcohol or nicotine has a high negative impact on the quality of sport performance and sport results. All these substances have toxic impact to the body. Players take these substances mainly for social reasons, they want to relax and have fun. Some illegal substances (amphetamine or 'speed') can be used for sport performance improvement because they contribute to lowering the pain threshold and elevating mood; this is considered doping.

Alcohol and psychoactive substances influence the central nervous system changing the way how individual perceives the environment, what does he/she feel, how does he/she react and behave. Young people who consume such substances (cannabis, synthetic drugs, etc.) do not usually think in advance about potential harm, they are simply curious and want to experiment. The same is true for athletes; one year prevalence is 8% for women and 25% for both genders.

Although athletes in general incline less to drug consumption, they are still inclined to take stronger opioids (cocaine) and there is no significant difference in this type of drug consumption between athletes and non-athletes'. Consuming drugs in athletes relates to stress and pressures and some athletes cross the line of drug addiction after they finish their sport career. Also, taking stimulating substances and the use certain techniques to improve sport performance is doping, which is strictly forbidden in sport. Both behavioural patterns are not part of a healthy lifestyle neither should be typical for any athlete who respects ethical standards, his/her own body and his/her sport. Also, the consequences of such a consumption can cause damaged sport performance, health, and finally endanger athlete's life.

Besides that, players incline the most to alcohol consumption, which some consider to be relatively harmless, and drinking is a part of the cultural heritage especially in certain sport. Also, marketing experts relate alcohol consumption to sport events and that influences people who follow sports.

Also, due to caloric value of 7 Kcal/g alcohol can be considered as foodstuff, but it has the biggest impact to our brain. It is reflected in physiological and psychological state. Despite some short-term effects that some may view as positive (for example self-confidence and increase in pain tolerance), alcohol also disturbs concentration, decision-making, and also influences bodily reactions, speed, strength, and reaction time.

Despite research showing that athletes drink part-time, some specific sport research showed that younger athletes incline towards alcohol consumption more than non-athletes. Avoiding alcohol and the consumption of psychoactive substances is part of a healthy lifestyle and the coach should lead their players not only by education, but also by their own positive example.

CARING FOR YOUR BODY

In the background, an adaptive sport lifestyle is the continuous care for the body and health. In addition to the aforementioned, a player must have a continuous and highly developed responsibility for his/her own body. Every player is firstly responsible to him/herself, but also to his/her coach, and it is necessary to monitor, and timely and honestly report all changes that could impact the sport performance. It presumes responsible behaviour toward injury or the first signs of it, but also avoidance of some risky behaviours which could cause injury, inflammation, or any health problem.

Many players believe that they should be ‘tough guys’ who should resist without complaining. Because of that they tend to neglect some signs of discomfort and pain, ignore such changes risking serious injury. A coach should teach players about this, talk about injuries as an inevitable state in sport, treating it as a normal part of sport participation and prepare a player’s protocol for such situations.

Also, some players do not think enough about consequences of certain behaviours (which may or may not happen), participate in certain activities that are adventurous or fun, or playing other sport in their free time, forgetting the risk of injury. It does not mean that a player should live under a glass bell, but disciplined and responsible behaviour should be always an integral part of the athletes’ lifestyle.



LIFESTYLE MANAGEMENT

Many athletes' own identity is built on the role of an athlete. The way how players make decisions about lifestyle factors is called lifestyle management. After a sport career many of them have problems to adapt to post-sport life, they have problems to find their place in the community mainly because they were not prepared for the end of the career and for other life roles.

Research show that athletes have a potential for successful adaptation, they are capable to find their place on the labour market or professionalize their sport within related professions, but it demands education. In developed countries (USA; Australia) different lifestyle management programs exist. In Europe, we have European Forum on Lifestyle Management for Elite Athletes which organises annual conferences where professionals exchange experiences. The integral system of care for athletes exists together with different services which are available for athletes in different areas. Such services are lately developed in different European countries and support athletes in areas that are important for their sport functioning but also for non-sport life. These professionals can be part of an expert team and use an individual counselling approach to help athletes deal with other life areas without disrupting his/her sports career. It includes:

- lifestyle support (public relations, free time regulation, promotions and sponsorships, travel organisation etc.).
- sports career planning (club selection, change of coach, competition schedule).
- educational support (selection of flexible educational programs, negotiation with educational institutions, counselling about right educational decision which will not disrupt player's sport career).
- counselling about building professional career or employment (selection of part time job, post-sport career planning, financial advising, legal advising).

Integrative and timely support helps athletes to build quality sport careers and also helps the better integration to the community after sport. The main prerequisite is a preparation of other organisational structures in sport (sport federations, Olympic committee, Ministry of sports) who prepare a legal framework for such services, development, and activities.

Every athlete must think and get decisions about his/her sports career on daily basis. If his/her career is led regularly it is possible to identify strengths and weaknesses that can be overcome and balanced. A coach is a person who meets such challenges every day and sometimes fights with athlete's reactions. This exceeds the scope of his/her role and disrupts the sport preparation process for two reasons: first, the coach is engaged for different tasks, and second, if we want athletes to do their sport tasks properly, we should take care that they do not waste their time and energy on other things that someone else could take care for, thus, leaving athletes focused on the sport.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN SPORT AND NON-SPORT LIFE

Athletes' lifestyle is characterized by asceticism, which means saying **no** to lower values and to refuse harmful influences or factors, and to say **yes** to higher values and to improve skills and qualities. Athletes are expected to develop bodily perfection, skills and abilities that often brings pain and suffering, and to fight with certain sources of pleasure that brings fun and joy. From the philosophical point of view, the question is do athletes have to be ascetics restrained by reins of (self)discipline all the time, or is there any place for hedonism? Psychology teaches that everything is in balance, and positive psychology accentuates the importance of positive subjective experience, positive emotions, and development of own potentials as a base for a good and quality life. If we want the player to be successful, he/she must be satisfied. I meet coaches who do not support education because they think that sport has to be imperative, those who do not want their female athletes to have boyfriends, because of the sport preparation. Dissatisfaction in any area of life spills over on to the sport court, and vice versa. The same is with satisfaction.



Playing on only one card, sport, brings additional pressure. One of the basic human needs is to feel competent. If player has only one area in which to act, others are minimized; to feel valuable and competent he/she has to be successful imperatively, because there is no other option. In sport terms it means results at any cost, which is origin for psychological problems.

It is particularly important to educate coaches, parents, and athletes from early age that the balance between sport and non-sport life is necessary for healthy development, but also for sport success. It enriches his/her identity through the development of different life roles, and it contributes to the sense of self-worth and self-confidence diminishing the probability of nonadaptive reaction development. The same logic applies for every training cycle, training period and single training session, despite an ascetic life regime. The phase of relaxation and 'non-handball-time' is necessary.

Athletic life is marked by interchange of asceticism and hedonism periods, players celebrate their achievements and victories and then get back to the challenging work and so on. But, unlike other average individuals, the athlete's life is specific, and to achieve sport goals the ascetic orientation is necessary, and it should be promoted as a value, from early on. It is a quality of champions; it implies 'reasonable ascetism', of course. In a modern world where the principle of hedonism and profit is

prominent, athletes can be lonely lighthouses who promote basic values inherent to human nature as work, using own strengths, physical effort investment, physical activity, and socialization that from evolutionary point of view helped humans to rise above other species and dominate.

Positive Aspects of Sport Experience

It is quite common to hear ‘Winning is everything’. It is the most prominent between athletes, no matter at which level they play. This orientation inevitably brings many sad faces because not everyone can be a winner. From the athletes’ point of view, especially for youth sport, an underlying competitive ethic should be an emphasis on the sheer enjoyment of participating in sport and striving for self-improvement and personal excellence even if ‘victory’ is never achieved. This is the long-term path to success.

There are many other possibilities for getting positive experiences from sport. Sport is a model of society where athletes can learn many skills and get lots of experience in a safe environment that can be used later in real life.

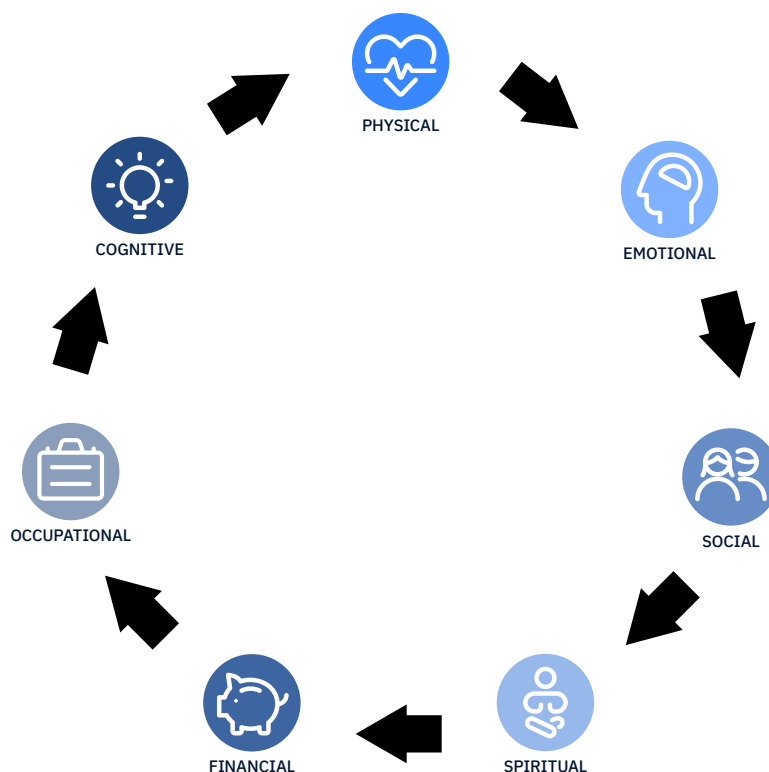
The intention of each coach should be the welfare of his/her athlete. The psychology of sport promotes the positive approach that is directed toward individual development of a player, as a person and as an athlete, in a way to become reinforced by playing sports to become the best version of him/herself, capable to use skills and strategies learned in the sport field and apply them in the everyday life setting.

The positive approach is also related to strategy of long-term athletic development that implies general welfare care for the player that goes further than technical, tactical, and mental aspects of handball game, but is related to development of self-confidence, self-worth, flexible mindset, self-efficacy, positive perception of life perspective and own action, optimism, social relatedness, communication skills, interpersonal relationships, productive motivation, adaptive coping strategies, etc.

The balance between sport and life skills produces a positive sport experience during and after the sport career. The support from the coach is the engine of such a state that makes the development of motor abilities and handball skills easier.

Players need more than ‘technical’ support. The truth is that people do not remember exercises, tactics, tasks nor match results either. In the long term, they remember how they felt on the sport court with a particular coach and within their team.

Players' welfare can be nurtured through the coach's care for their complete development, which includes physical, emotional, social, cognitive, spiritual, financial, and occupational components of welfare (Picture 2).



Picture 2: Welfare 7 Dimensions Model

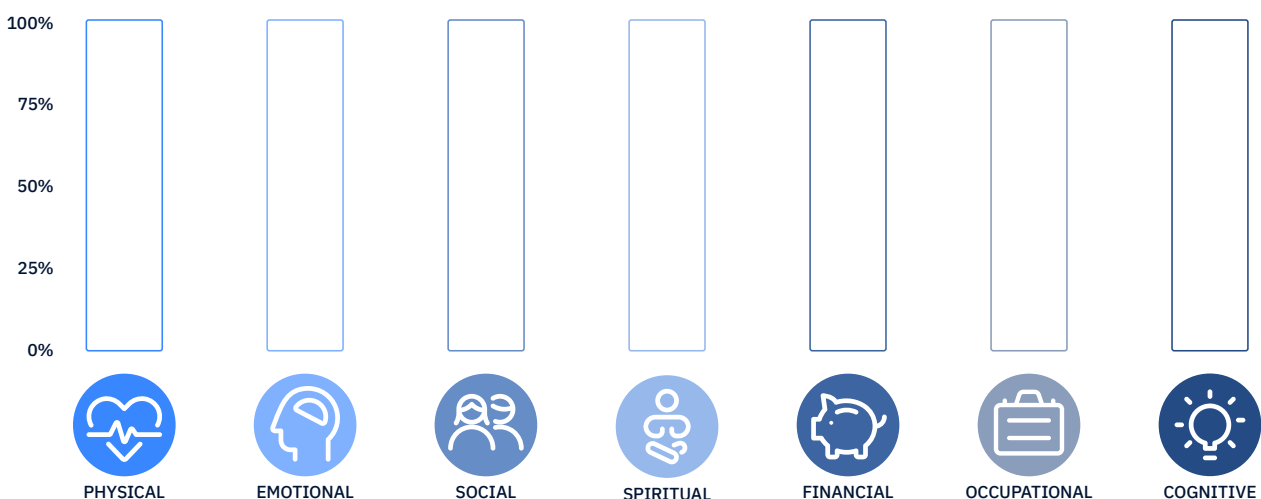
The 'Welfare Approach' can cover all 7 welfare dimensions through handball and result in higher wellbeing perceptions in handball players.

- **Physical Welfare** - realizes improvement through sport participation, training, and competition that influence motor and functional abilities, and handball skills. That way players also strengthen their positive body image, mental resilience, and level of trust towards their body that contributes to their positive self-perceptions, confidence, and general wellbeing.
- **Emotional Welfare** - includes awareness and acceptance of the inner emotional state, understanding emotional reactions to different situations, and freedom of choice of behaviour. Certain emotional difficulties can influence player performance, but the player should choose to work on this area by searching for sources of pleasant emotions in playing handball and building a positive and optimistic mindset. It can be realised through social interactions, achievement recognition, positive feedback, humour, celebrating small improvements, and enjoyment and excitement in playing handball that helps sport performance.
- **Social Welfare** - is realised through social support within the team or the coach-player relationship. It can be strengthened within club culture and mission and playing for certain higher goal (patriotism). The team is a community of important other persons, beside player's family, sometimes they share more time and experience together than a family does. In a handball team this can be achieved through open communication, social relationship, friendship, and social support networking that is active on the court but also in free time.

- **Spiritual Welfare** - allows players to be in tune with their inner self, finding the meaning of different life events, outcomes and defining their path, long term goals and purpose. It is related to values, attitudes, ethical and moral principles, inner guidelines. It helps the player to stay resilient and better prepared to cope with any life or sport challenges and to achieve the balance and inner peace in their lives. It can be related to religion as additional spiritual force, but not necessarily.
- **Financial Welfare** - can be achieved through achieving financial security by playing handball that is reserved for higher level and professional players. It also involves the process of learning how to successfully manage financial expenses. Money plays a critical role in our lives, and it can significantly impact our health if it represents significant source of stress. Through handball related travel for example, players learn about financial literacy that helps them in everyday life.
- **Occupational Welfare** - allows players to explore various careers in sport options and encourages them to pursue the opportunities they enjoy the most. This dimension of well-being recognizes the importance of satisfaction, enrichment and meaning through sport during the sport career and opens a possibility to choose the sport environment as something they want to stay connected to for their whole life. It can be realised through choice of study or profession after the sport career is over.
- **Cognitive Welfare** - it can be seen as opportunity for players to use the match as opportunity to think and use their brain in a purposeful manner during a handball match. It can be achieved through understanding and learning tactical options and the logic of the game, opening the mind through new experiences, developing a flexible mindset through creativity, but also through expanding their horizons beyond sports. It contributes to mental toughness, analytical capacities, information processing, and decision-making processes on the court.


A handball coach can contribute to each segment, but those activities should be planned in advance and aimed at encouraging players and contributing to their optimal psychological development.

Evaluation of individual welfare segment can be implement using the following protocol: a player or coach marks the percentage (%) of satisfaction with each welfare aspect (Picture 3).



Picture 3. Welfare Evaluation Protocol

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN HANDBALL

A young boy with blonde hair, wearing a red handball jersey with the 'kik' logo and 'TEXTIL-DISKONT' written on it, is holding a yellow handball. He is standing in a line of other children, also in red jerseys, on a blue handball court. A woman, likely a coach, is leaning over to the left, interacting with the children. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and the court environment. A blue geometric pattern is overlaid on the image.

"To become a healthy and happy child a few things are necessary: challenge, play, joy, and lots of love. To become a healthy and happy young athlete a few things are necessary: challenge, play, joy, and lots of love."

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN HANDBALL

Working with children and youth in sport is a privilege. In everyday practice, sometimes, coaches are sent to young athletes for 'punishment', when something went wrong at the higher levels and when somebody 'from above' is not satisfied with their coaching contribution. The truth is that coaching children and youth should be reserved for the best coaches, and imperatively for those who love children and youth. Otherwise, it can be frustrating, not good for sport development, and even harmful for psychological development and children's and youth wellbeing. This is why each coach has big responsibility for each young player.

Every coach is not only a handball expert, but also an educator and so called 'important other person' whose impact is enormous, especially in the sensitive formative periods of early age. At the same time, every coach has to be aware of his/her model role, which is active all the time, not only when the coach wants to be a role model. Those who work in youth sport have to constantly bear in mind that children are not 'small adults', they are beings with needs, rights, and different capacities, and if one wants to work with them, he/she should respect, before everything else, their developmental characteristics. To make that possible every coach necessarily should be familiar with the features of cognitive, socio-emotional, moral, and physical development and respect it when working with young athletes. Otherwise, using the same strategy as for adult handball players and neglecting developmental and gender specificities of young players can be characterized as a certain type of aggression.



In next chapters some developmental characteristics and specificities for different age groups will be presented. All age groups belong to the period of adolescence, the significant period of intensive development in physical and psychosocial status. Adolescence is a period of maturation which prepares a child for adulthood.

Adolescence is marked with intensive physical, sexual, emotional, psychosocial, and cognitive changes, which makes this period a time of confusion, but also disclosure. The relationships of adolescents with their parents and 'significant others' (coaches) can be determined by misunderstanding and conflicts. In their search for identity and independence adolescents can be rebellious because they often feel as if their freedom is still limited. This period is also intensive for coaches and understanding the characteristics of adolescents can help to build better relationship with players as a baseline for better cooperation.

4.1. U12 AND U14

The period between 12 and 14 years of age belongs to early adolescence. Different classifications define this period as puberty that lasts in general between the ages of 10 to 13 years with some differences in boys and girls; but it is possible that puberty can start even earlier or later. This is a period of intensive physical changes, cognitive maturation, and changes in relationships with peers.

Cognitive Development

This period is characterized with development of abstract thinking, the growth of ability to think and reason. Due to adolescents start to understand the world differently, their improved cognitive capacities reflect an increased ability to memorize, better problem solving and understanding abstract concepts, and decision-making. They are capable to think and visualize possible options also in the abstract instead of limiting themselves only to the real and tangible. They become able to create alternative options and explanations, i.e., hypothetical thinking. They are now capable to consider more aspects of certain situations at the same time and consider them all before deciding. Due to such changes, they are ready for the first time to learn and train the handball game; they are ready to understand tactics of handball, which was not the case before. In the other words, before age of 11-12 young players train the best elements of handball, where technical and physical components should prevail. Before early adolescence, they are cognitively immature and cannot understand the complex tactical demands of handball and forcing them to learn it produces frustration and demotivation for both sides, players and coaches.

Also, improved cognitive capacity cause adolescents to question and they less ready to accept facts as absolute truth. These new cognitive abilities make them more ready to argue and confront the opinions of others, especially parents, sometimes even coaches. A new way of thinking makes them more similar to adults, but they do not use those cognitive capacities consistently, making some cognitive mistakes that may confuse the adults around them.

Sometimes, despite their cognitive capacities, they make some immature decisions, show inclination towards risk behaviours and sensation seeking, apparent invulnerability and egocentrism. It can be especially prominent when they feel freedom in situations without direct parental control, as in dislocated sport preparation or travels, which should be a 'situation of special risk' for coaches. As the internal system for cognitive control develops slower than the system for new experiences and sensation seeking, those impulses are still not well regulated and can overcome the rational side, which warns young player to the risk and consequences. It explains why adolescents sometimes behave irrationally, without understanding risks and seriousness of the situation, believing that nothing bad will happen to them, neglecting long term effects of their decisions. In such situations, long explanations and blaming them does not help. It is better to give information, to speak about our own feelings, and offer the choice instead of attack and punishment. In these moments, it is important that

coach communicate his/her own values, expectations and describe the problem but with as few words as possible without giving corrective lectures.

The next characteristic is that adolescents, especially girls, become completely self-absorbed, intensively preoccupied with themselves. Their thinking is marked by the 'phenomenon of imaginary audience' that makes them permanently evaluate themselves, believing that others are watching and remembering all their moves, causing caution and shame. It is also present on the sport court and can limit a young athlete in his/her performance. It is not necessarily a sign of problem, but a normal developmental characteristic. In such periods young players often believe that nobody can really understand them, which derives from their developmental egocentrism.

There are external factors that can interfere with the thinking process of young players in early adolescent age; they are stress and fear. It can limit their capacity for decision making, trying new things, or taking risks on the court. In this period a caring and sensitive coach, who is able to form a well-structured environment and who is open for communication is the desirable option.

Socio-Emotional Development

Socio-emotional development includes communication and relational patterns, social interactions, behaviour, attitudes, and affects are united in the interactions of young players with peers (teammates) and adults.

In early adolescence the importance of the peer group increases, and young adolescents are not seeking parental approval and attention as before. They want to belong to the peer group and want to be identified as a part of it e.g., hairstyle, way of dressing, common interest, rituals, and behaviours, in that way satisfying their need for belonging.

Peers are an important source of support because they are accepted unconditionally. The need to be accepted makes an adolescent in this early stage more susceptible to peer pressure, which reaches a peak in early adolescence and declines after 14 years of age. The peer group is important because within the group the young player learns about relationships that are the basis for friendships and intimate relationships in adulthood and forms his/her identity. This makes the separation from the family a bit easier. It is important that a young player has a peer group where healthy values, atmosphere, and cooperation prevail. Sport teams are such a social environment that can be used to fulfil the mentioned developmental goals and represent a protective factor for risk behaviours. It is important that a coach takes care about inter-group relatedness, promote quality values, and supervise the group with caring to keep them not only devoted to sport, but also to create a healthy psychological environment where each player can develop as an athlete and as a person.

Younger adolescents are still more oriented toward peers of the same sex. Interaction with the opposite sex happens within activities in large groups, otherwise it can be a significant source of discomfort, for boys and for girls.

As young players give less importance and time to the relationship with their parents (what can cause the feeling of rejection in them) it is possible that they search for shelter and comfort in their coaches, as the next important adults in their life. It can be expected that entering into adolescence the coach-player relationship changes. It is more mature, young players are more interested in different topics, show more mature behaviour and a dose of seriousness, ask questions, and share their opinions, worries, attitudes with a coach. It is not surprising that some coach-athlete relationships are improving and take on different characteristics. The family still has strong influence on basic values and choices; young athletes need caring and patient parents and coaches who clearly express their rules and values,

live according to these rules and values, and show them as models. It is recommended to give young players enough space to be autonomous within an established structure. They are ready to start to learn how to express their opinions and needs, make suggestions and communicate, therefore, adults should give them the opportunity for it and support their trials.

Moral Development

Moral development is a process within which every child develops attitudes, values, and behaviours in relation to other people and in relation to generally accepted social rules, social values, cultural norms, and law. Within moral development, children and youth learn what is right and what is wrong, which behaviours are acceptable and which are not. They learn about moral judgements, understanding and recognition of good and bad, correct, permitted, forbidden, obligatory, as well as their rights, duties, and responsibilities in accordance with social norms. Such norms exist also in the sport world, where they are related to sport rules and to principle of fair play and Olympic spirit, and young athletes are educated to respect it and to behave in accordance with it.

In this period, a young player starts to develop his/her own moral compass. They internalize social norms and regulations, developing individual moral principles and conscience.

In early adolescence moral judgements reflect social rules. Young players consider something as moral if it is congruent to social rules, if it is valid for majority. The main rule is to adapt to others, it is moral to do to what others would like you to do. Young players in this period want to be accepted and to live in congruence with the social environment and others. They do the right things because it is also good for others and not only for them, but because it is also good for the team and friends. They understand concepts such as trust, gratitude, loyalty, and are not as vindictive as they were at a younger age.



The coach, as an authority figure, must dedicate some time to create activities and tasks where their moral behaviours will be put to the test, and correct them consistently if they try to bypass the rules or ignore them. It is especially challenging in the sport environment, especially in boys, who are on average at the lower level of moral development than their non-sport peers. It is a consequence of the sport environment where they are challenged all the time to use different strategies to achieve advancements and sport results. Sometimes, those side paths bring them to success, which is a reinforcement for

future behaviour, and the chances to repeat such behaviours are increased. Knowing that scientific fact, coaches should promptly correct any similar attempts and always promote and protect the principles of right, fairness, respect of others, etc. and show all of this by his/her own example.

4.2. U16 AND U18

The period between 16 and 18 years of age belongs to middle adolescence. This period is the most dramatic period where all changes that already started in early adolescence are the most pronounced. The most important developmental tasks in this stage are seeking balance between independence and responsibility, changes in moral reasoning, development of new relationships, and the introduction to sexuality.

Cognitive Development

Cognitive changes that started in early adolescence continue and contribute to the increased sense of autonomy in adolescents. In this age, adolescents have some experience in using more complex thinking processes. They are ready to learn about more complex tactical variants, to understand it better, to remember more, creating their own system of memorizing it. Also, cognitive self-regulation has improved - the ability to monitor their progress toward desired goals, to evaluate their instrumental behaviours and redirection of unsuccessful attempts. They are capable to create goals, i.e., to translate their wishes and ideas into desired outcomes and to create an action plan. They usually like to check it initially with a person of authority, a coach, and periodically within evaluation process.

Furthermore, young players of this age expand their thinking to include more philosophical and futuristic concerns and often question and analyse things more intensively. This behaviour reflects on the sport court where they may become more analytical, thinking more about consequences which can become a source of pressure in the match. They also begin to systematically consider potential future goals, question themselves about their wishes and needs, begin to think long-term and to make future plans.

At this age they are capable of learning from experience. It is useful to introduce the regular written match/performance analysis as series of lessons for future matches.

The advanced level of cognitive development enables questioning future relations to others and other developmental segments such as identity, relationship, sexuality. At this stage, the young person can realize that answers to these questions can be incongruent with his/her experience so far and that can cause certain dilemmas.

Socio-Emotional Development

In this period, the development of independence is one of the central tasks. Adults usually see this as taking responsibilities, but adolescents of this age see it as freedom from authority, especially parental. The adolescents' behaviour varies between a tendency to independently make decisions to refusing to take responsibility, from the expectation that parents should take care of him/her, to the dissatisfaction because of parental demands. At this time, the variations between mature and immature behaviours are common. This can also be recognized on the sport court. The performance of a young player can vary between dependable and structured, to superficial and non-focused. It helps to give them specific tasks for the match, to check if he/she heard it and understood it, and to remind of it during the game.

Also, the resistance to authorities is possible; which is something adults have problems dealing with. The child that had always been cooperative and obedient transforms into a rebel, who shows his/her attitude whether it be appropriate or not. They question norms and rules and do not accept them unconditionally, as before. For the coaches, it sometimes means repeated explanations of different things, their logic and purpose and, in this process, they can expect different comments and reactions. In the process of maturation, it is important to give to these young people opportunity to gain experience in being independent, to take responsibility for themselves, to bring them more challenging opportunities for independent decisions, and take the consequences in any case.

Middle adolescence brings changes in relations with peers. Earlier they identify themselves with their peers and sometimes can hardly recognise the limit between their own thought and feelings and those of their friends. In this age they clearly differentiate their own thoughts, emotions and needs, which makes them less susceptible to peer pressure. Friendships with peers of opposite sex are more common and the first romantic relations appear, but the closest friends are still of the same gender.

This period of substantial changes may be additionally stressful because of the transition from elementary to high school. Finding new friends and adapting to a new school are sensitive elements of adjustment. As some of the most important developmental tasks within social development in this age are to build personal identity, to accepted and to find the place within a group, these challenges for adolescents carry considerable weight. This can reflect on sport performance and habits. It is not uncommon that adolescents in the adjustment period cannot find a balance between school and sport obligations, and they need some time and coach's understanding and support, otherwise, it becomes additional source of stress and pressure.

The next significant aspect of socio-emotional development in this age is introduction to sexuality. Sexual maturation is accompanied by increased interest in one's own sexuality. Adolescents now adjust themselves to changes in body appearance and functioning; they learn how to deal with their sexual desire, they face attitudes and values related to sexuality, they experiment with sexual behaviours and learn how to integrate those experiences, feelings, and attitudes into self-image. Some potential problems that can be met here are preoccupation with sex, promiscuous behaviour, excessive discomfort to talk about these topics, or its completely avoidance. Some adolescents do not feel open enough to talk about these topics with parents, but they can approach other persons of trust, often their coaches. It is recommendable to be ready for open and simple communication, without making jokes about it, and to leave the possibility to come with the questions or need to talk any time.

Also, a coach, as a person of authority, can warn adolescents on dangers of internet use. The significant part of an adolescents' social life takes place via social networks. Adolescents exchange messages, photos, videos, publish their texts, comments, and opinions. A part of this dynamic are some undesirable behavioural patterns and different patterns of peer aggression. Coaches must be sensitive and careful about it and promptly react to first signs of such behaviours within their team environment. It is especially dangerous because such behaviours are present 24 hours a day, even at home, and what is especially important for adolescents is the audience, no matter if it is real or imagined. Also, anonymity makes everybody more courageous, without proper understanding the seriousness of consequences. Those specifics, together with specific way of thinking and specific needs in middle adolescence, make young people especially vulnerable to this type of peer aggression. Every safe environment is a good environment where different models can be applied and promoted. That is the case for the sport club environment and coaches have the additional responsibility to create such an environment and to provide education in informal and formal way to protect young players from all of these negative aspects in their 'sport home'.

Moral Development

Increasing independence brings new experiences which demand the choice between right and wrong. As adolescents progress in their moral development, their judgements are different in comparison to the younger age, but also their perceptions differ from the perceptions of adults and their authority figures. It leads to arguments between adolescents and parents (or important others as coaches) about what is right and what is not, and these can be heated discussions because adults use arguments in the later phases of moral development that adolescents of this age are not able to understand and accept.

Adolescents form their moral values through relations in family, school, from relationships with significant others and from popular culture - TV, media, social networks, music, and religion. Moral development is marked by adopting the fact that as individuals we are part of the society and community. Moral values are reflected in fulfilment the different life roles we have, in maintaining social order and meeting the expectations of others, and not just meeting personal needs. This way adolescents can earn a social approval from significant others, which is important to them. Gradually, by the end of middle adolescence, they stop considering only important others, but society as a whole has merit. Moral judgments are made in accordance with the regulations, social rules and the law, as well as respecting authorities. Some adolescents from this age group can reach the last phase of moral development, typical for mature age, and become oriented toward universal ethical principles that could be stronger than the law.

4.3. U18 AND SENIORS

The period from the age of 18 to 24 belong to late adolescence. The most important developmental tasks of adolescents at this age are identity consolidation, professional development, choice of occupation, and developing the capacity for intimacy in relationships. In this period, the physical growth ends and in general the acceptance of physical appearance takes place.

Cognitive Development

The capacity for abstract thinking becomes established in most adolescents. There are some who do not develop such cognitive capacity even in adult age, i.e., some people forever remain at the level of concrete thinking. It means that those persons are limited in understanding abstract contents or visualization of situations or actions. They are oriented toward physical objects and surroundings, but do not think of what is beyond their viewpoint; take words literally and have difficulties in anticipation. All that requires a specific approach when they are learning handball tactics. In this case, it is necessary to use simple explanations and visual presentations of tactical ideas, not only by using magnets and boards, but real positions of players, who are moving on the court in different combinations with regard to ball movements, as pawns. The actions should be divided into segments and changes of positions should be demonstrated slowly, gradually merging into a whole action. Many repetitions are welcomed, and coaches should be careful not to proceed with next action before the previous one is adopted. It is possible that one or a few players within team are a bit more simply cognitively structured; in that case they will need more time and a more individual approach. If not, they will have difficulties to follow the tempo of such a cognitive complex game as handball and it will cause a problem in the play during the match.

However, most adolescents in this age group develop abstract thinking in a way that those principles can be applied to new situations, they think hypothetically, think about the future considering many

possibilities and logical outcomes of possible events. They are able to hold and manipulate different abstract ideas and create systems for organizing abstract thoughts. This enables the learning of more complex tactical variants, and they are more able to remember more of them.

They are also ready to consider different points of view at the same time that can result in increased empathy and concern for others. They become tolerant to different perspectives and opinions, their thinking becomes more flexible and altogether it reflects positively on relations within the team. Also, conflicts with authorities decrease because the young person feels more secure in his/her ideas.

Their thinking and talking becomes more philosophical and idealistic. They have increased thoughts about more global concepts, such as justice, history, politics, and patriotism, etc. and they are more capable to debate about specific topics. Also, they begin to focus on their role in adult society, think about future professional choices and make certain career decisions.

Socio-Emotional Development

During adolescence young people try to form a consistent and stable identity. The part of this process is trying different interests and behaviours that prolongs an early adulthood age. It is very important that adolescents have the possibility to research in a safe environment without negative and irreversible consequences. The framework for identity development is the sense of belonging that young person gets from the family. Those who do not have supportive families can experience difficulties developing competence and self-confidence. Development of identity is also affected by other social agents who function as role models, e.g., coaches. In this age adolescents are moving toward forming a firm identity through accepting different roles, and to feel competent in those life areas.

The sense of achievement and self-perceived competence can be developed through areas that are important in young person's life; for young players it is sport. There is certain approach that leads to positive self-perceptions such as offering challenges, tasks that are not easy but attainable; respecting individual specificities, promoting learning and self-improvement, not rivalry, and comparison towards others; allowing these initiatives develops a mastery motivational climate within group, etc. All these can be developed within the group environment as team sport.

In late adolescence young people start to think about future. The choice of future profession arises together with the need of professional identity development. This is the crucial step into adult world that is coloured with an adolescent's value system. It is not an easy decision, and it is important to have support from family and other significant adults. Players of this age need support from the coach also. A coach with a congruent value system makes this process easier (for example a coach supports education and understands the necessity for periodical absence from the training sessions due to lectures).

The social development in this age is marked also with development of capacity for intimacy. Establishing close relationships with friends and first romantic relations appear, as well as potential problems related to it. It reflects on the sport life and can cause the deterioration of performance in training and competition. In the team environment it is possible to find a significant resource of support from teammates of similar age who all have such issues from time to time. This support can be better used if inter-team relations are well developed, which has to be planned and targeted.

Moral Development

In late adolescence young people are moving toward the phase of postconventional morals, the highest level of moral reasoning. They make decisions based on rights, values, and duties valid for everybody. They consider moral principles as important on its face, separable from the authorities who informed them, and they voluntarily agree to these principles not just to avoid punishment, but to help to contribute to a fair and just society. Also, young people in this stage start to develop their own ethical principles which are abstract and context free. Those represent some universal ethical norms which are above the law and ensure equality and justice for all people and respect human dignity and life. That is the most important principle.

In sport context it is related with following some universal sport principles as Olympic spirit, fair play, respect for the opponent, decency and dignity in victory and loss, etc. This is progressively learned in younger age and in late adolescence become even more important, as indicator of mature sport behaviour.

Gender Specificities

There are certain gender specificities in all developmental aspects. In general, girls start with all developmental phases earlier than boys and finish each phase faster and earlier.

Differences in physical development reflects on the socio-emotional characteristics. Girls are in general more worried about their physical appearance. It makes them more sensitive to words and messages about it, especially in early and middle adolescence. Coaches should be careful about comments and jokes related to physical appearance and body weight, especially in front of others. Critical comments can be replaced with a private conversation about the situation and followed by suggestion for a solution. No public weighing is allowed, neither threat nor punishments in any form related to body weight. On the other hand, boys are more preoccupied with their muscles and tend to have muscular body as obvious evidence of masculinity.

Also, girls of this age are more sensitive in general. In team sports is not strange to have a social contagion that involves the spontaneous spread of negative emotions and related behaviours across the whole team. In that age a roller-coaster of girls' emotion and intensive mood fluctuations can be expected. Unlike boys, when a conflict arises, girls are dealing with the issue longer than boys because they approach the situation in an emotional manner. Boys, on the other hand, solve such problems rationally, spend less time and energy on it, and are more capable to continue to train without it interfering even if a problem is not resolved. Female athletes, independent of age, do not respond well to constant, negative criticism. They tend to hold on things, good and bad, and are constantly thinking about them, which reflects on their mental state. It has to be considered, especially after matches, if through open communication and a proper 'after game talk' the coach can help.

Girls reach cognitive maturity earlier than boys. They are ready and more interested in more complex tasks and more serious conversations.

Regarding moral reasoning, boys are a bit late in comparison to girls. Younger age male players reach a lower level of moral development than girls, which is explained by their higher competitive orientation. Also, in late adolescence and with a higher level of moral development, when considering something as moral, girls usually consider how much suffering the situation causes. They are motivated by care for others and themselves while boys firstly evaluate equity and justice, it is correlated to social behaviour. Girls show more empathy and social sensitivity than boys. Also, girls show better ability of emotional recognition and regulation in comparison to adolescent boys who have a poorer knowledge

of emotions, poorer expression and regulation of emotions, and a higher level of aggression and anger than girls. This leads to better communication skills, less conflicts and higher satisfaction with social relations in late adolescent girls.

In general, the group (team) of adolescent girls is more cooperative and cohesive than adolescent boys who are more competitive and often perceiving their teammates as opponents. This is something that can endanger a team spirit within a handball team.

Every professional who works within youth sport has the obligation to respect the developmental principles and phases of the group he/she works with. Also, every professional has the obligation to behave as good role model in a way that enables optimal learning and adopting of desirable patterns of social behaviour and values. All developmental phases have specific needs and those needs should be additional guidelines to create the sport environment, what to accentuate and use within it to stimulate one's motivation, to maintain it, strengthen and multiply it within the youth handball team.

5. OPTIMAL COMPETITIVE MINDSET



"A competition is an opportunity to celebrate your hard work at the best possible place and moment."

5. OPTIMAL COMPETITIVE MINDSET

Everything that happens on the handball court every day is a rehearsal for main act - the competition. Handball matches are entirely unlike practice. There is excitement, different environment, crowd, opponents, excited teammates, aroused coach, and high expectations that brings pressure. Every handball player who has played under the pressure knows how muscles become tight and rigid, how the hand is shortened, and control over the ball decreases. This experience can be different for different players, but sometimes it can spread across the team as 'emotional contagion' causing problems.



Why do some players in such situations embrace the challenge, while others bow down? Is it possible to learn how to approach to the competition in a more functional manner, can we train it? Is it possible to adopt certain mindset that leads to successful performance on the handball court, no matter what is happening during the match? The answer is positive. Within psychological skills training (PST) we can teach players how to perceive the competitive situation and themselves in that moment in a more adaptive manner that helps to show his/her play. Also, the sport psychologist can help the player to become aware of his/her functional, and less functional, cognitive, and emotional patterns and establish a certain mental framework that works for him/her.

The attitude is what makes a champion, not perfect performance or physical skills. It is the connection between physical and mental side of the handball game, and it is the most important determinant in how far one will go as a handball player. The coach is the most responsible person who can teach players the right attitude, not only by explaining and talking, but also, that is more important, using him/herself as a model. Coach's attitude significantly influences team's and players' attitude, and it happens on the unconscious level. Our minds are connected, we feel and recognize each other, and interchange energy without talking, just by presence, even if we do not want to do it.

Everybody has a lion and a cat on the inside; different factors (personality, prior experience, environment) make us more as lion or cat. But every player can learn to find the lion inside, and lions sometimes have to know how to calm down. It is an important part of competitive mindset, which is about being serious and responsible and show respect toward your work and effort and toward your coach and team. It means leaving your casual, everyday life outside of locker room before the match and entering into carefully prepared and focused frame of mind. It means that player can 'program' his/her mind to competitive mode as well as he/she has prepared the body.

The optimal competitive mindset implies certain characteristics:

- discipline
- orientation to the process instead orientation to the outcome
- physical and mental relaxation
- high self-confidence
- the readiness to cope with challenges on the court with enjoyment
- good focus
- resilience
- a feeling of good energy, physical strength and endurance
- positive attitude
- high achievement motivation
- creativity and resourcefulness
- belief in individual and team abilities, good preparation.

A coach and/or sport psychologist can help player to work on these things and to evaluate a progress. Those characteristics can be recognized in certain behaviours on the court, prior, during or after the match.

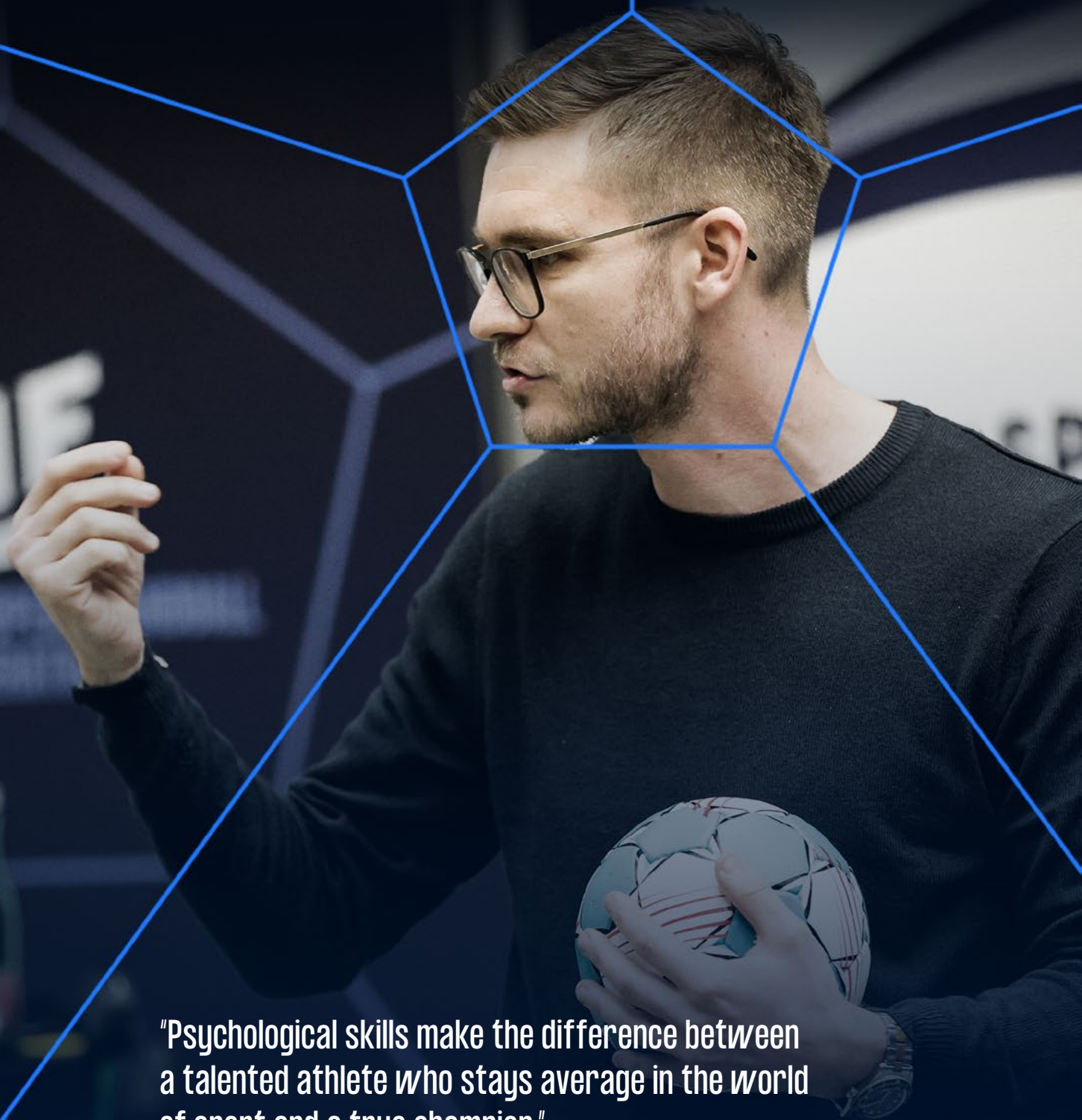
How to show optimal competitive mindset?

- *Keep positive mental attitude* - it reflects a player's intention to deliver a good play, the teams' intention to win the game, and a common firm belief in a positive outcome till the very last second of the match. It should not work as an idea, but as a decision that is obvious in every aspect of play, in a player's posture and positive self-talk during the game.
- *Believe and let it go* - it is important to keep 'I can' and 'I will' attitude through the ups and downs of the match. Maintaining composure under pressure is a tremendous personal achievement. Keep playing and letting the mistakes go, only focusing on the goal and performance is the key. The great skill is to be able to put things into perspective - what is one bad pass among all passes during the match? What is one goal missed in the context of all shots of the match or season? What is one lost match in the context of the whole season or sports career? Believe in your preparation and in your body that is capable to perform what it was trained to do, it is not necessary to push it hard to do it. Believe in your team.
- *Focus your mind on the game and on the court, stay present* - many players start to play the game before the game, spending energy resources and increasing excitement. On the court it is necessary to laser focus the mind to the 'battlefield', be there where the feet are, be disciplined in not allowing the mind to wander around. The player's task is to deal with the game not with his thoughts and emotions neither.
- *Accept and act* - do not panic, all emotions are normal, especially prior to the big matches. Let yourself be aware them, accept them and focus on your task, act. Emotions do not limit any player to play and move on the court. The key is the power of choice of where to direct your energy, we can do better than just react.
- *Everything is normal* - there is no place for tragedy or euphoria on the sport court during the game or warm-up, even after when the result is already known. A bad warm-up does not mean bad game performance, those are not related events. The only thing that makes them connected is the player's head. The highest dedication to the game plan and performance goals is the imperative, stop imagining scenarios in advance, play and stay patient.

A competitive mindset is developed gradually, patiently and persistently applied, and tested in different matches. Despite players hating their bad games, they are valuable for learning. To form a competitive mindset, a player needs excellent games, average ones, and those which they want to forget forever. All of these experiences bring information and are indicators for improvement. The competitive mindset partly depends on personality traits, but mainly on the level of psychological preparation and the motivational climate in the team environment.

There is no typical profile of a winning player. Winning the competitive mindset is a result of work on inner weaknesses and learning to use own strengths. The coach and sport psychologist can help; the competitive mindset should be planned and trained to show up in the most important moment, during the competition. The process of development of the competitive mindset and its application needs full dedication and the highest level of discipline.

6. PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING



"Psychological skills make the difference between a talented athlete who stays average in the world of sport and a true champion."

6. PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING

The general principles of psychological skills training (PST) are described in first two chapters of this book. In next chapters specific topics of PST will be explained.

6.1. GOAL SETTING

"Having a clear goal is already 30% of success."

One of the most important goals in handball is to score more goals than the opponent and to win. Sometimes having such a goal is a double-edged sword. One edge provides you a direction and the other produces pressure. Often, we hear athletes and coaches saying, "It was not our day" or "Sometimes you succeed, sometimes you don't". It can be comforting to believe that it was not our fault or responsibility. In fact, not taking responsibility can function as self-protection. The truth is that we are agents of our lives and as long as we are on the court, we are in charge of ourselves, and in certain circumstances for our sport performance. Proponents of successful human behaviour assume that individual behaviour is intentional, and we shape our environment rather than solely respond to it. For such action we need a certain source of energy, motivators that initiate our actions. Those are our goals; forming goals and knowing what we want to achieve is a basis for motivation.



One of the most important activities related to motivation is goal setting. A player without goals is like a computer without software. No matter how advanced player's hardware is (e.g., physical performance, motor abilities, conditioning), it is nothing without proper goals. A goal is something that a person is consciously trying to achieve, it can be defined as an object of one's ambition, something the individual is investing effort towards, a desired outcome. In sport, goals represent intended action that motivate and direct the athlete's behaviour. Goal setting is a strategy that enables an athlete to gain control over his/her own performance and behaviour within the sport environment and develop personal competence. Achieving the desired goals increases athlete's self-efficacy, they feel able to direct and control their reality and in turn they feel motivated and empowered. The athletes' achievement is highly dependent on their motivation. The level of motivation is related to the athlete's goals, its importance and clarity influencing the athlete's dedication and investment of effort. Everyday sport experience shows that having a goal is at least 30% of success and goal setting skills should be a part of 'sport kit' for each athlete. It helps in establishing the proper mindset that leads to sport achievement.

With respect to sport goals, we presume two levels with the broader one being the desired result. It is a motivational framework of sport performance and general intention defined as desired outcome. The second level reflects the goal setting process, i.e., actions necessary to achieve goals and reach the desired outcome, not the outcome itself. Goals represent the way an athlete needs to pass, actions that are necessary to reach desired performance, all the aspects of individual/team play that athlete/s can control in present moment. Setting goals means determining what you want to do and how you want to do it. This way an athlete directs attention to a particular activity, plans a level of achievement, a direction of intensity, effort and persistence that is required.

Goals direct attention, mobilize effort, foster persistence, and promote the development of learning. Reaching goals results in a sense of achievement that provides a strong motivational input. Having goals provides an insight into what is necessary to do in each training session or during competition. Sport is always a battle against yourself. The first step is to learn how to set functional goals and how to use this on a daily basis. Effective functioning in team sports such as handball needs strong leadership, good coordination and communication between team members and a certain level of adjustment. Individual goals should be congruent with team goals, always following the same idea: "We before I".

Benefits of goal setting

To have goals means having direction and purpose. A handball player may set a combination of goals. Training goals focus progressively on the improvement of the player's shortcomings, while competitive goals focus on specific tasks, technical or tactical, necessary for the good of the team or individual performance. Also, it is important that each individual goal contribute to the team goals. Team goals represent a framework of team play; defining some key points and routines necessary to take care of during offence, defence, and transitions. Goals help each player to stay focused and dedicated to the task at hand. They accentuate important aspects of the game, assuring optimal level of activity. Goals increase effort and persistence in the face of failure, direct attention and accelerate learning, they facilitate emotional control and cooperation within a team. In handball, it is necessary to have clear assignment of roles and tasks within a team and the system of the play. Well defined goals, accepted by all players, help foster high levels of discipline. Setting goals is a very demanding task for a coach because goals need continuous observation and evaluation. But, when goals are properly set, they can serve to enhance performance by increased the energy invested by the players.

How to set effective goals?

To set effective goals, one must have a clear picture of their own abilities and individual playing specificities. A handball player needs to assess each aspect of his/her performance through the evaluation of skills (dribbling, passing, controlling the ball, shooting) in a systematic and detailed manner. It is also necessary to evaluate fitness (speed, strength, agility) and psychological preparation levels (concentration, pressure resistance, confidence, teamwork, decision-making). Effective goal setting would encompass all of these aspects of the game. The player is encouraged to set goals from each of these areas, rather than focusing solely on winning or 'giving their best'. A goal should be something under the player's control and should promote the sense of achievement regardless of result. For example, setting a goal of winning is not completely within the athlete's control, it is an outcome goal dependent on others, both teammates and opponents. The handball team may play their best game of the season and still lose because the other team was superior. Such a goal brings pressure and an elevated risk of damaging the individual's motivation and confidence.

The following principles can assist with effective goal setting:

SPECIFIC - the goal should be specific, not general. 'Giving my best' could be motivating, but it is lacking specificity. A player should clearly specify (in terms of behaviour) what does giving one's best mean and how to accomplish it (I want to play aggressively; I will make a strong contact in every duel).

REALISTIC, BUT CHALLENGING - the goal should not be too demanding because a player will not reach it if it is too difficult. When goals are too challenging, they lead to dissatisfaction and a decrease in motivation. To set a challenging goal means to set the limit a little bit higher than the player's actual abilities. Such a goal will pull extra effort from player on the court and ensure improvement. Also, goals can be formulated towards something that is controllable, otherwise it will be impossible to reach them.

MEASURABLE - a goal without evaluation is meaningless. To evaluate, player's goals should be formulated as measurable operations. Although it is easy to measure a goal for some aspects of the sport (e.g., reduce the number of red cards received by the team), for other aspects it is not as easy. As such, it is necessary to formulate a goal in terms of numbers (e.g., I want to make strong contact in 80% of my duels).

POSITIVE - goals should be positively stated. Conversely, if the player is focused on a goal that is negative (e.g., not missing the penalty), he/she risks wasting energy and focus. A positively stated goal provides the action that is necessary to reach this goal. Players and coaches usually formulate 'warning goals' (e.g., not to lose the ball while passing around 6m). These negatively worded goals should be reformulated (e.g., keeping the ball around 6m). It sets players mind with positive image of what we want to have on the court rather than what we want to avoid.

PROCESS ORIENTED - goals should be process, not outcome, oriented. The focus should be on the present moment and performance (e.g., technical, or tactical tasks), not on future outcome. For example, a process-oriented goal might be "to keep your eyes on the goal during the last contact before shooting", not "to point that a goal".

TRAINING AND COMPETITION GOALS - both training and competition goals are necessary. It is impossible to reach a competition goal that has not been practiced on training sessions. Training goals represent small steps toward higher, more general goals. Training goals should focus on the quality and quantity of handball skills; challenging players to push beyond their comfort zone. Training goals prepare players to keep their focus on the goal and to discipline themselves in reaching it.

SHORT AND LONG-TERM GOALS - short term goals address different facets of the player's performance that are necessary to reach a long-term goal that represents higher achievement. Also, having a dream goal (e.g., to play in Barcelona) lightens the way forward during tough periods, i.e., it helps the athlete to keep pushing when it is hard and saves motivation.

INDIVIDUAL AND TEAM GOALS - all team goals should be formulated following all previous principles. Individual goals should be incorporated in, and congruent with, the team goals. Effective coaches try to increase the team's performance efficacy by setting demanding, reasonably challenging goals. Team goals offer direction for collective performance, which is realised by the individual contribution.

TIME-BOUND - each goal should have a specific period of time in which the goal should be evaluated (day, week, month, preparation period).

PERSONAL - the players' individual goal has to be their own, rather than assigned by someone else. Goals that are accepted by the player assure higher dedication and motivation. It is recommendable to deliver goals in athlete-coach cooperation.

RECORDED - it is always good to write down your goals as well as expected signs of improvement. Recording your progress is motivational. As humans, we are predominantly visual learners. By seeing how we have improved (through the benchmarks identified), and sharing our goals with others, can enhance our commitment.

Handball coaches often equalize certain position demands with a goal that is especially confusing for young players. Playing on a certain position in a handball team does not automatically mean that player has a clear goal. Among other factors, goals are dependent upon the game system, phase of preparation, opponent, player's progress, and the importance of the competition. Being a line player may imply different duties, depending on tactics and game plan. Successful coaches developed some goal setting skills which help them in game preparation and the players' career development. They help athletes to set specific, individual training and competition goals that are congruent with team goals, athlete's current abilities and needs, but also with future vision of this athlete's playing profile.

Developing coaches' and athletes' goal-setting skills

Achievement in sport is usually measured by only one criterion - winning. Winning is usually viewed as success, while losing is perceived as failure. Winning strengthens confidence while losing can diminish it. If we want to have highly confident athletes with consistent performance, the criterion of success should be redefined. Goal setting skills can help athletes and coaches develop adaptive coping strategy, avoiding the win-loss trap. Process goals, which are in the athlete's control, allow for more success than outcome goals, which can lead to pressure, stress, anxiety, maladaptive cognitions, and decreased confidence. Outcome goals can be beneficial in some specific circumstances. Outcome goals increase training motivation by reminding athletes why they invest so many resources to improve performance. Also, players who are highly competent are less endangered by outcome goals.



One of the biggest problems met in the sport practice is that goals are set and then gradually forgotten. Goals setting mean much more than defining goals. It requires a consistent implementation and an evaluation process.

Psychological preparation and goal setting

Goal setting should be a required part of planning and programming activities in handball. A sport psychologist can help a coach and a team improve all psychological aspects of their performance; one way is the systematic implementation of goal setting. To this end, the sport psychologist can encourage players to:

Create a vision - meaning to think about the long-term goal, the final objective that is to be achieved. Having a vision serves as a broad motivational framework, in which congruency is required by the team.

Formulate a mission statement and key words - it represents the players' vision and gives the meaning to the training process. A team's vision can be to play the most intelligent handball in the league, to be fully focused on the court, or to be Olympians. It is recommended to have mission statement that reflects process goals; with elite players this mission statement can also reflect outcome goals. A mission statement can be implemented into the team salutation. It is also recommended to find some key words that represent the team's mission (intelligence/focus/winners) and to place those words around locker room. It is recommended to encourage all members of the team (e.g., players, medical staff, coaches, sport psychologist) to use these key words so that they help to 'set' the players' mind to that behaviour,

Identify strength and weaknesses - this is important on an individual and team level. Sport psychologists use psychodiagnostics procedures to evaluate team structure and group dynamics, to make individual and team psychological profiles, and to identify which aspects need improvement. The sport psychologist and the coach should work together to identify strengths and weaknesses.

Evaluate - evaluation is a critical part of the goal setting process. Evaluation enables evidence for goal attainment and provides direction for the correction or adjustment of goals. Sport psychologists, together with coaches, help players become aware of their progress towards their goals and provide feedback to the players. Also, the sport psychologist provides feedback to the coach helping him/her communicate about progress of the set goals to the team.

The goal setting process contains two sides. The outside reflects actions that a player takes to change the environment or their own behaviour. At the same time, the inside is comprised of feelings, learning, perception of self-development that is not obvious to others. Players and coaches usually talk about the obvious; a sport psychologist collaborates with them on both sides at once, which is necessary for stable changes.

Goal implementation process

The more athletes and coaches adopt the aforementioned principles of goal setting, the more they will benefit. Goal setting follows 3-steps: education, acquisition and implementation. Having the proper action plan turns a dream into an achievable goal.

Education - this phase has two objectives: awareness and education. Handball players would meet with a coach or sport psychologist to receive basic information about the goal setting process, as well as its benefits and principles. Players can share their experience about their goals and ways in which they are trying to achieve them. They are provided with some examples for practice and challenged to evaluate their current goals. Also, players receive information about basic goal setting procedures and about the possible shortcomings and barriers associated with implementing this strategy.

Acquisition - in this phase handball players are encouraged to try to set new goals, to apply new knowledge and to practice new skills. The first step is to develop a goal and an appropriate time limit. After, players are required to develop the vision and mission statement, to reformulate their current goals and set improved goals based on what was outlined in the education phase. These reformulated goals should include what is to be accomplished and how it will be accomplished. Further, athletes will need to identify some potential obstacles how they may be overcome. In this phase, players start to apply their goals, evaluate their effect, and discuss their progress and action plan development with a coach and sport psychologists. A goal setting protocol might help with planning and evaluating individual progress.

Implementation - after time, athletes usually become more skilled with setting goals, but also less dedicated to the goal setting process, especially for training sessions. It is necessary to encourage athletes to develop a good habit with establishing 1-2 goals for each training session, and to write down their progress in a training diary. Also, it is necessary to make the post-game analysis based on competition goals, related to factors within the athlete's control. Under competitive pressure, athletes can lose their focus; having a goal helps them refocus. Also, competitive goals can be adjusted (elevated or reduced) based on evaluation of previous competition or a player's actual state. In team sport, it is always good to foster a supportive network amongst players as a safe platform for discussing goals, getting recognition and support from teammates, or sharing knowledge and experience that can be used for further learning.

The coaches play a particularly important role in the goal setting process. They initiate and encourage players to develop these skills. The coach can be the facilitator in the awareness process of evaluating a player's individual performance and can significantly help to establish their training and competition goals. Also, the coach can monitor the players' activity, and provide feedback and reinforcement, thus motivating them to persist. Also, a coach can have his/her individual goals, related for example to personal improvement, or leading a match. Those goals should be set following the same principles.

When goals do not work?

Some athletes may be reluctant to establish competitive goals. They may wonder: ‘What if I don’t succeed? Will I lose motivation?’. Having a goal does not guarantee success but helps to work towards and focus on what is necessary to be more successful and enhances one’s chances of success. Regular evaluation is an important part of the goal setting process, allowing one to adjust or replace goals that are not congruent with the player’s current state. Some athletes like to have a ‘plan B’ from the outset, thus giving them a feeling of control.

Taken together, goal setting can be a powerful tool when done properly and when made specific to each team and player. The journey towards a goal is much more important than the outcome. There are no guarantees, but goals help us to dare, to take a risk, to make a change and to enjoy the journey. Sometimes there is no prize, but the experience itself enriches our lives. No invested energy is wasted energy, effort always counts.

A coach can use such a protocol to help his/her players in goal setting process, or it can be used for coach’s individual goals too.

Think about your goals, define them, or check those you already have. Try to define them according to the goal setting rules. Chose only things that are under your control.

Long-term Goal _____

Short-term Goal 1 _____

Short-term Goal 2 _____

Short-term Goal 3 _____

What I want to Improve?	My Goals	What exactly will I do and in which time period?

MY ‘PLAN B’

What could go wrong?

What usually prevents me from achieving what I planned?

What can I do to prevent it, or what will I do if it happens?

6.2. SELF-CONFIDENCE

"Self-doubt is the worst enemy of dreams."

The optimal performance formula is made of distinct parts, but one of the most important is confidence. There is much scientific evidence which suggests that levels of self-confidence can distinguish between successful and unsuccessful athletes and teams. Confidence in sport can be viewed as a belief that is changeable in relation to the athlete's point of reference. A player can be confident about his/her ability during the season but may be less confident of performance in the upcoming match.



Defining confidence

Most athletes and coaches think that self-confidence means to believe that they will win or be better than their opponent. In the other words, if one does not believe in winning, he/she thinks like a loser, which leads to losing the game. Such a belief can led to pressure and finally to a lack of confidence, or overconfidence, both states move a player away from desired outcome. Self-confidence is the athlete's realistic thinking and expectation about achievement. It is built on experience of previous performances and achievements across many different situations during training sessions or competitions, together with the preparation for an upcoming match. Altogether it forms specific expectations about success. A coach's task is to help players to understand the difference between reality and fantasy, to help them to know that confidence is not what they want and hope, but what

they realistically expect and are able to do. It is not important what they talk about, but what they think about it, how their inner expectation lines up with what they are realistically capable to do in the moment, regardless of all outside factors and competitive pressure. The solution is to be ready to accept anything that comes and to focus on the sport task at that particular moment. Such a strategy reflects firm confidence helped by the force of strong discipline.

A confident player knows his/her abilities, has faith in his/her training and skills, accepts challenges, goes beyond the comfort zone, tests limits, knows and accepts their own strength and weaknesses, believes that he/she can manage any situation. These characteristics are also obvious in behaviour. Self-confidence can be felt from outside, it is reflected in body posture, the way a person talks, in his/her look, walk and actions. A confident player possesses attitude, he/she is determined to act, without questioning his/her decisions. The performance is energetic, and goal directed, a player is free to take a risk or responsibility during the game, especially in the critical moments, and keeps a posture and firm mental attitude even when they are not performing well.



A confident attitude reflects the awareness that making mistakes is a normal part of sport (and life), and nobody has maximal confidence all the time. A confident competitor accepts his/her mistakes, bad results, and underestimation of performance without getting entangled in a web of self-blame and criticism. Moreover, real confidence can be seen precisely in the most difficult moments of crises, mistakes, when things do not go according to plan. A confident player keeps his attitude and, in the case of failure, learns from the situation and keeps going. The important aspect of such a lesson is learning about oneself.

Coaches should know to differentiate between confidence as a state of mind and confidence as personal attribute. In the context of training session or handball match confidence is a psychological state that is empowered by a player's successful performance or belief that his/her abilities and skills are used in the right and efficient manner. It can fluctuate in time, depending on recent experience, preparation, tasks and goals, external circumstances (the score and time remaining), opponent's attitude and playing style. It can also be increased or diminished by the team's confidence and energy during the match. The confident players are mentally tough and resilient, meaning that they possess certain level of confidence that is resistant to any type of changes. Because of that their performance is stable, they are dependable and in general they play at the upper limit of their capacity no matter of the conditions. Those players feel certain fluctuation in their inner security but are able to play the same way with it and despite it. Also, a coach should know how to recognize players with high and low confidence and to know certain strategies how to help the players with low confidence in general and in the particular moment, during the handball match.

Recognising confidence

Confident athletes possess a functional mindset made by positive and functional beliefs and attitudes that influence their thoughts and behaviour. Players with high and low confidence feel differently and behave differently on the sport court. Characteristics of players with different level of confidence:

HIGH CONFIDENCE

- strong body posture.
- keeps positive body language after mistakes or negative evaluation.
- demand a ball from teammates.
- Watches the goal every time he gets a ball.
- plays energetically, moves fast, passes the ball quickly without bouncing.
- firm in contact with other players
- takes responsibility in critical moments.
- shoots at the goal in the last minutes
- demonstrates inventive and creative play.
- shoots after he/she missed before
- spreads optimism and motivation to others
- interested to learn and try new things.
- takes criticism as feedback.
- keeps harder after failure.
- proudly accepts the praise.

LOW CONFIDENCE

- bad body posture, keeps head down.
- poor body language after mistake or criticism
- 'hides' on the court
- passes the ball, instead of taking the shot.
- does not look 'dangerous for the goal'.
- does not take risk or responsibility in critical moments of the game.
- avoids contact or barely makes it.
- blames others.
- easily irritable with other players due to insecurity
- inhibited play after mistake.
- does not like to try new things, likes to do what he/she is good at
- disengages from the game and easily lowers investing effort.
- takes criticism personally and becomes emotional.
- has problems to accept praise.

More confident players have a higher level of commitment. Also, self-confidence is followed by positive emotions, the feeling of readiness and strength and an active approach. It determines the competitive mindset; will the player approach the task calmly and patiently, or be discouraged, overwhelmed with negative projections etc., it depends on his/her appraisal of the competitive situation, which is highly dependent on the level of confidence. When an athlete loses confidence, he/she feels that the control over the situation has been taken away.

Self-confidence can improve, there are several ways in which players can enhance their confidence. But the most important thing to remember is that being good at sports i.e., skill is the main source of confidence.

Sources of self-confidence

Self-confidence helps an athlete to reach their full potential. Low confidence comes with anxiety, which consequently diminishes the level of concentration and motivation. Athletes often come to the sport psychologist to solve their low confidence problem and have some unrealistic ideas - they want a sport psychologist to give them confidence. Confidence is an internal variable, it comes from inside, no one can give confidence to nobody. Some people (sport psychologist, coach) can (and will) support this process and help a player to find some sources to boost his/her confidence, but the process is primarily the athlete's own responsibility. In other words, a player must be the first one who wants to work on it and actively engage in it.

According to sport psychology literature, there are certain sources of self-confidence:

- *Performance Accomplishments* - as long as a player gets credits for hard work and ability through success, each accomplishment will boost his/her confidence. Personal success feeds confidence and repeated personal failure diminishes it. The coach should plan and choose tasks for every single player that will enable improvement and accomplishment. That way it breeds a feeling of success and serves as consistent evidence used to boost confidence. Also, athletes' confidence is more influenced by success in difficult tasks (winning against a tough opponent), and a failure on the easy tasks is very damaging for self-confidence (losing against weak opponent), less than failure on a challenging task. Athletes value recent experiences more than old ones. Prior to the game it helps to create such training sessions which can give the feeling of satisfactory performance.
- *Recognizing Strengths* - identification of sport-related strengths is important for confidence development. Focusing on the strengths of a player takes his/her mind off weaknesses. Sometimes athletes have problems to identify their strengths, when they are good at something they often consider it as normal and expected, even if that something must be like this and had to be like this even before. Coaches often act and think the same way. Players can identify their strengths by thinking about past accomplishments and the sources that enabled them. They can journal the things that make them satisfied at every training session collecting evidence for their confidence and become aware of the things they are good at. Also, the coach can help them to identify their strengths directly, or by positive feedback. This is something that can be used in tough periods when confidence lowers. Players may use this list to remind themselves what their strengths are and why should keep their confidence.
- *Vicarious Experience* - means experiencing success indirectly, through modelling, watching others similar players that look confident and demonstrate how to perform a skill or strategy successfully. This effect happens easier if the player believes that a role model has similar characteristics and abilities to him/her. A change happens by the presumptions 'If he can - I can too'. It is important to recognize players who could be good examples for others, which is the coach's task. The specific type of vicarious experience is imagery, a type of self-modelling where players create a mental

image of how to perform certain skill well and mentally rehearse it. It can be included into regular practice sessions or to game analysis sessions.

- *Verbal Persuasion* - this is a powerful tool for any change and the level of self-confidence also change. It can be used in the coach's communication with players as positive feedback, showing faith in his/her success, progress, and positive outcome, but also by positive expectations. This way they can 'set' the player to success in certain tasks (e.g., 'when you score a goal, run back as fast as you can'). The other form of verbal persuasion is self-talk. A player can use positive messages and encouragements during the match, praising themselves for good performance, but also, they should replace negative self-talk with positive talk. It should be trained and formed as a habit, a skill that is continuously used on the court. Words are not unimportant, because they reflect our thoughts, influence our emotions and behaviour; this is an important psychological skill of each good player. This technique should be used in combination with some others (e.g., keeping good posture). Just repeating positive phrases without any evidence for them can have diametral effect to self-confidence.
- *Physiological State* - it relates to player's ability to control their own physiological reactions (arousal) during trainings and matches, and his/her beliefs that these attempts can be successful. Our body reacts to stressful situations by additional tension. If a player perceives situation on the court as something unwanted or problematic it increases stress levels and influences self-confidence. When a player has a stronger arousal control, he/she will feel more confident. In chapter 6.4. some techniques for arousal regulation are presented.
- *Emotional State* - self-confidence can be understood as an emotional response to different situations. If we feel insecure and scared in certain situations, our level of confidence diminishes. In such challenging moments maintaining the desirable level of confidence is a product of player's ability to control the emotional state. All techniques that target a negative emotional state indirectly change the confidence level.
- *Body Posture* - the simple way to boost the confidence in the particular moment when player feels insecure and anxious is to keep good body posture. It works because body and mind are connected, and psychology scientifically proved by changing facial expression or body posture, we can induce or strengthen certain emotions. It means that in a situation when a player feels anxious they should act in the opposite way to how he/she feels - keep a straight and firm back, head up, stable foothold, look forward. Holding such a confident posture activates the neural circle in the background, activating a certain area of the brain that is naturally active when we feel confident, and this will change with the emotional state. The anxiety level decreases, and a player will perform the requested task easier. It is a technique that works on the sport court, any time. A coach should teach players to use their body to feel more confident especially in situations where they feel unease or under pressure.
- *Getting Out of the Comfort Zone* - most people do not like to change. It is more comfortable to be in comfort zone, where everything is well known and familiar. It gives a sense of control which brings us feeling of security. A confident person pushes his/her limits, tries new situations that demand a new adjustment, change of usual patterns, and finding new ways with no guarantee for success. Areas out of comfort zone are areas of improvement, progress, and growth. Despite this, we have an impression of risk, is it worth to take that risk, to dare, see the challenge and have a courage to act. There is always at least a 50% chance for success, when we feel it after such an adventure, our self-confidence increases. In sport it means to look for new ways, testing limits, let the imagination and creativity act. It also means to search for such situations that are not pleasant, and to be persistent in tasks where we are not successful enough. Persistence in such situations elevates self-perceived competence and the feeling of control, a player will recognize the effect on his/her behaviour and increase confidence levels. A coach can help player to deal with this by giving him/her certain tasks, but those have to be under player's control, challenging, but not too demanding.

- *Self-Confidence as a Personal Choice* - it is important that everyone who feels that his/her confidence is insufficient really chooses to work on it every day. It means implementing techniques useful for strengthening self-confidence and finding evidence in favour of oneself daily. Confidence will not increase by itself and no one external source can feed our self-confidence as much as we can. The first step is to make a conscious choice towards a certain behavioural pattern, using the mechanism of social learning. If we want to feel more confident, we have firstly to look like a confident person, to act like such a person in a particular moment, no matter how hard it can be at the beginning. Also, it is very important to collect evidence in favour of our confidence, be aware of the amount of work on the sport court, become aware of the effects of preparation and congratulate yourself for big, but also small, successes. It will help the gradual change in self-perception and bring about positive change. Athletes and coaches may use these sources, behaviours, and techniques in the process of building confidence.

Self-confidence and performance

Good preparation is the most important basis for a desired confidence level of any competitor. If a player is not well prepared but confident, his/her confidence is not grounded and will not help the performance. Even the most confident attitude cannot overcome such a deficiency. On the other hand, good preparation gives a player sense of security that can respond to requests even in new and unexpected situations. The important part of quality preparation are situational training sessions that use simulation of different situations from a handball match. A special case reflecting this are the preparation games that can be used as a useful terrain for testing segments of play and to give players a sense of individual and team confidence. Good preparation leads to positive and realistic expectations that breeds optimal confidence. This is important because one of the most powerful sources of confidence is sport success. The relationship between confidence and performance is presented in Picture 4.



Picture 4. Confidence - Performance Sequence

Higher confidence contributes to the sport performance, but good sport performance also boosts confidence. The indirect relation between them is reflected in the motivation (confident players are intrinsically motivated to develop the game and persistent to succeed), anxiety level (confident players feel less symptoms of anxiety and interpret them more likely positively, as excitement), and concentration (confident players are more resistant to distractions and are able to focus on the play and not themselves).

The coach can help players to identify the situations and stimuli causing fluctuations in their level of confidence. It can be done by use of this protocol.

Think about circumstances or situations during trainings or competition where you feel brave and confident, and where you feel insecure and doubt yourself. Becoming aware of such situations and triggers that make you feel insecure is the first step to strengthening self-confidence.

Situations where I feel confident	Situations where I start to doubt myself

Under confidence and overconfidence

There are players who have immense potential to be talented players, but due to mental blocks they cannot use their full potential. The basis is often **under confidence**. Many coaches are struggling to help such players, trying to convince them of their quality or finding enough evidence to shut down their criticism. The problem for athletes' come from various sources.

Some players have a high level of self-criticism that limits them to realize their real quality. Some of them give too much importance to the physical components of the game, having difficulty when facing physically superior opponents. They forget that mental skills are powerful tools than can bring the advantage. Some of them are much too upset by mistakes or failure, giving too much importance to the first movements of the match, evaluating everything based on it. If it is a mistake, their negative beliefs and doubts are confirmed and they mentally quit. Some of them spend too much effort on the last training session or pre-match warm up, spending all mental energy that is now lacking in the match. Some of them take too much responsibility on themselves, even when it is not real, which causes 'choking' on the court. Different players can learn how to use psychological skills training tools and recognize the most functional sources of self-confidence that works for them.

Overconfidence is something that is also evident on the sport court. But the truth is if a player has well-founded confidence, he/she cannot be overconfident. The term overconfidence means unrealistic confidence, greater than the player's abilities and actual competences. Such players are not easily coachable due to two reasons.

First, they believe that they are better than really are, even better than others. This makes them less engaged in training sessions, investing not enough effort and the outcome is poor preparation that cannot be compensated by any level of ability. This does not have to be the case at the beginning, they might be very successful, for example at a young age. They easily become 'stars' and continued to ride on this wave even when there is no basis for it anymore. When the things go wrong, they start to wonder about it, do not have abilities to face and overcome failure, become lethargic and insecure, or even trying too hard to change things, which produces additional pressure.

The second mechanism that happens during the match is that overconfident players play too risky that causes many mistakes and may bring team to unfavourable situation. Also, overconfident players, due to their misperception, often have an attitude that everything will be done by itself, their task is just to appear on the court. It means that they invest insufficient effort to the game and do not play at their best.

There are some players who look overconfident because they act so, but it is a defensive mechanism or psychological tactics used to compensate inner sense of insecurity. Those players usually look arrogant or pretentious, but it is a mask to hide their self-doubts. Those players usually avoid the situation where their competence is endangered, choosing too easy or too difficult tasks (in this case they are successful or have an excuse for failure), offer excuses for poor performance, or fake injury. The truth is they refuse to take responsibility and to admit their real problem to themselves first.

Team confidence

In team sport, collective confidence is at least as important as individual confidence, if not more so. These two levels do not have to be congruent; a player can be confident about his/her performance but have little confidence in the team. Another player can feel confident that the team will perform well but have doubts about his/her own ability and performance. Team, by definition, is a group of people with common goals that strive together towards it, investing their effort. In general, due to the constructive interaction, a team can perform better because each player can be better performer when he/she plays with the team rather than as an individual. It is mainly encouraged by collective confidence.



There are some additional factors that should be considered for team confidence development, beside those important for developing individual confidence. It is very important to clearly define team roles, and tasks within each team role, as well as to maximize skills necessary to fulfil duties assumed by the role. Also, a higher level of functional and emotional cohesiveness contributes to the team confidence. It means that is recommendable to create a positive and constructive working atmosphere, as well as teamwork rules, together with a problem-solving strategy, and clear goals.

Team confidence is something that is developing every day within a framework of prominent team values and the way how problems that arise within the team are solved. Also, a coach can contribute to the team by:

- *'no fear of failure' climate* - creating a climate where it is allowed to make mistakes that are considered as a normal part of learning, sport, and something that happens to everybody. A threatening atmosphere where coach loses their temper, yelling or punishing mistakes harshly supports anxiety and diminishes team, as well individual, confidence.
- *maintaining a positive attitude on the court* - it can be done continuously, through certain training session tasks, or in a specific session that is designed for this purpose periodically. Players are reminded to keep positive body language and to talk and think in a positive manner, no matter if their performance was successful or not. The learning part is accentuated as a goal, there is no fear of mistakes, where they are training the psychological skill of resilience and to play on, that is one of the most important skills during the match that reflects the player's and team's confidence.
- *positive accomplishments* - a coach should assure plenty of opportunity for success. It can be done by setting appropriate individual and team goals and providing feedback even on small successes. Also, it is useful to remind players to evaluate when they are successful, to ask them how they felt in the body while performing successfully, to make aware their kinaesthetic sense of successful performance that functions as additional reinforcement during the match. Likewise, it is good to allow players to focus on their favourite drill and to let the team play their favourite combination or exercise that increases their opportunity to feel good about things they are doing well together.
- *support network* - for team confidence, it is beneficial to offer a lot of positive verbal support and praise to the whole team, aloud and to each player individually. It should be given not for accomplishments only, but for trials and learning attempts also, as well for social interactions (cooperation, help). If the execution was not perfect, but intention was good and the moment of play well recognized, it should be praised, not criticized. This helps players to play freely, and to seek the ball more, which contributes to the team play, but moreover to the team confidence and support. Furthermore, players should be encouraged and trained to try to save others' mistakes, this makes players free to play, without a pressure of fear of mistake or criticism, which breeds team confidence.

To conclude, the training sessions need to be a learning environment where those positive things are regularly experienced by players, because it elevates team confidence. It takes an intentional and targeted approach from the coach.

6.3. STRESS MANAGEMENT

"We cannot control our emotions, but we can always control our behaviour! Do not let stress overwhelm you! Be disciplined and do what is right. The ball is round!"

Stress is associated with any sport competition. Everybody engaged in sport - athletes, coaches, coaches, spectators, sports fans watching the matches on TV miles away, can feel the excitement and emotional tension. Athletes and coaches should be skilled to survive those troublesome moments; ability to cope with intense pressure and elevated anxiety is an integral part of competitive sport. Stress in sport is related to certain psychological constructs as arousal, anxiety, and activation. In this chapter I will try to explain their interrelations and some of them (arousal) will be covered in the next chapter.

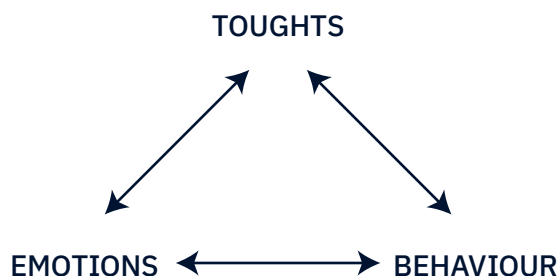


Defining stress in sport

Stress is a state in which some demands are placed upon the individual, who is required to act in those circumstances, and to be able to cope with these situational demands. Despite the stress, as elevated excitement can be experienced due to positive events, in general people consider it as a negative state that implies imbalance between what we believe is demanded of us and our current strengths, perceived abilities and capacities, in situation in which success is important. In sport it means the discrepancy between a player's sense of control and competitive demands, i.e., stress appears when a player thinks that his/her capacities are not enough to meet situational demands and expectations. It is important to know that it is not demand itself or the real level of player's capacities, but the player's perceptions of these demands as well as his/her own strengths determine the amount, nature, level and duration of stress, and the stress reaction.

Sport psychology research showed that athletes are, in general, less sensitive to stressors and have lower anxiety than non-athletes. It implies that athletes can learn coping skills, but it is also possible that those who are more sensitive to stress drop out. There is certain situation in the sport and competitive environment that could be classified as universally stressful (big matches, penalties), but it is also true that some athletes respond better to stressful situations and others, not. The question is what makes the difference?

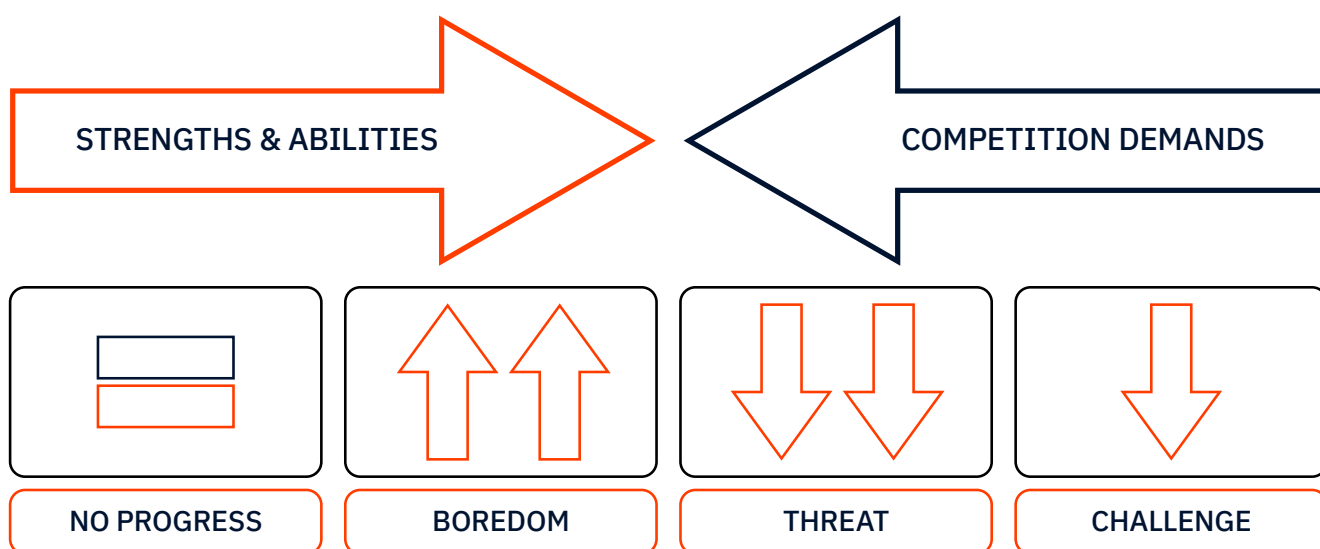
It is already said that the beliefs and self-talk in the competitive situation may have stronger impact than situation itself. Our perceptions influence our thoughts in a particular situation, which affect our emotions, and those impacts our behaviour (Picture 5). In other words, our appraisal of a situation places us under stress, or not. The way we think in competitive situations make us feel a certain way, which influences our action, in the case of sport, a sport performance.



Picture 5. Cognitive-Behavioural Model (Beck)

Players appraise the competitive situation comparing their strengths and abilities with situational demands, and it can result with distinct types of appraisals (Picture 6). It can be:

- *Positive:* player perceives his/her strengths sufficient to meet competitive demands, feels good, balanced, confident to act, but in the long term, there is no progress. Player perceives his/her strengths and abilities much higher than actual competitive demands, feels calm, confident, but it is bored and unchallenged.
- *Negative:* player perceives his/her strengths and abilities insufficient than actual competitive demands, feels anxious, unconfident, sees the whole situation as a threat. Player perceives his/her strength and abilities less than the actual demands of a sport situation, but the discrepancy is not big, and still sees the whole situation as a challenge. Participating successfully in such situations ensures the increase of competence and long-term progress.



Picture 6. Types of Cognitive Appraisals in a Competitive Situation

The greater the uncertainty about reaching the desired goal or performance in a competitive situation an athlete has, the higher perception of competitive demands and levels of stress increase. The lower the perception of personal control and performance abilities is (combined with the ingrained belief that a source of stress cannot be relieved), the more the level of stress in the competitive situation increases. In both cases, there is possibility to show a performance below current capabilities and a player may 'choke' under pressure. A general task is to find a balance between those two factors - by increasing and improving strengths and abilities, or by lowering the perception of competitive demands. It can be done by lowering expectations, establishing more realistic goals, seeking help and support through inter-team cooperation etc. A coach plays an important role in balancing those factors on a team level, but also on each player's level.

Coaches should recognize players who are more vulnerable to stress as well as situational threats, which commonly increase stress responses. A player's stress level and behaviour are affected by personality traits (anxiety, emotional reactivity) and their level of self-confidence. Players who are more anxious and less self-confident are more likely to appraise different situations as threats, which may limit their capabilities on the court. Those who are more confident and have low anxiety are more likely to appraise a competitive situation as challenge, which is desirable. The coach can get information about individual differences from the results of the psychodiagnostics procedure and, in cooperation with the sport psychologist, get advice on how to approach two different types of players prior to, and during, the handball match.

Coping strategies

Coping strategies are techniques that athletes use to deal with stressful situations and to feel better in order to perform well in the competition. There are different types of coping strategies, functional and dysfunctional. Effective coping strategies help athletes perform better and use their current performance abilities effectively. It also can help coaches in stressful situations to lead the game and be more focused to the most important things. There are:

- **Problem management** includes certain techniques addressed to solve competitive problems (planning, using performance routine, defining protocol on how to react after something stressful happens, increasing effort). When players or coaches perceive competitive situations as challenging, they tend to use problem-oriented coping, approaching the situation in a rational manner, trying to focus on the controllable factors, analysing it as a problem and trying to find a solution.
- **Emotion management** aims at changing a player's mood and increasing positive emotions even if the problem did not change. Players and coaches under stress use social support, relaxation, reframing the situation or their feelings, accepting their thoughts and emotions and focusing to the task, positive thinking, optimism, etc. This coping strategy is more used when the competitive situation is perceived threatening. It helps a bit to improve a sense of wellbeing, and it is additionally useful when it seems that problem cannot be fixed or that there is not enough ability to do it.
- **Maladaptive coping** uses strategies that do not help, on the contrary, they make the problem worse. It includes endless talking about the problem, rumination of thoughts, excessive venting emotions, using illegal substances or excessive exercising to try to help, or withdrawing from competition mentally or in a real manner.

Coaches and players should learn about effective coping mechanisms and get used to using problem management and emotion management coping strategies instead of maladaptive ones. Those two functional strategies can be also combined. Problem management can be used to find a solution in a challenging competitive situation, and emotion management to hold a posture and stay composed.

Ineffective coping impairs sport performance in athletes and leading capabilities in coaches. It can be additionally enhanced by doubts and negative thoughts, focusing on uncontrollable factors like the game result.

Stress response and symptoms

Stress results in two types of responses, a physical one and a psychological one. A certain stress level can be a useful energy that helps action and performance, but also it can significantly inhibit the sport performance. It depends on one's perception of the stress reaction itself and the sense of control over it.

Physical response to stress is reflected in an automatic reaction of our body that prepares for action, i.e., fight or flight. The body gets activated by certain processes of our autonomic nervous system which are not completely under our control. Adrenaline starts rushing, the heart beats faster, the body sweats, blood pressure increases, breathing becomes shallow and faster; the entire body becomes more alert and feel less pain, the mind is more activated. The problem may arise when players forget about these effects in a stressful competitive situation and keep warming up as normal, causing too high level of activation that impairs performance. It is important for every player to recognize his/her own optimal level of activation, the same is valid for coaches. They also must recognize actual team's level of activation prior to or during the match. It will be discussed in next chapter.

Psychological response to stress is reflected in thinking patterns and the appraisal of the competitive situation. Increased stress derived from the perception of competitive situation as threatening, results in elevated anxiety that diminishes sport performance on an individual or team level. Anxiety has some antecedents as personality, previous experience, and self confidence level. Players can experience somatic anxiety (physical symptoms of stress and arousal) and cognitive anxiety (worries, doubts and concerns about failure and its consequences) that are triggered and influence performance by different mechanisms. Players will play better the less cognitively anxious and more self-confident they are.

Different stress symptoms can be seen in the next picture:

Physiological	Increased HR, sweating, elevated respiration and blood pressure, muscle tension, dry mouth, frequent urination, lump in the throat, increased adrenalin, sickness in stomach, paleness, diarrhoea.
Psychological	Worry, doubts, feeling confused and overwhelmed, distraction, narrowed attention, inability to think clearly, forgetting, no focus, negativity, feeling strange, weak, or not in control, indecision, fear.
Behavioural	Rapid moving/talking, foot/finger tapping, trembling, poor eye contact, frequent blinking, covering face with hands, isolation, repeatedly adjusting equipment, scowling, nervous ball handling, empty look.

Picture 7. Symptoms of Stress

Developing player's stress management skills

The most effective approach is to use a combination of a problem coping strategy and an emotion management strategy. Independently of which coping skill a player is trying to implement, there are several principles that should be considered.

1. Developing stress management skills is a process that needs practice and persistence, it improves with experience.
2. If players better understand how their mind stress mechanisms work, they would be more motivated and capable to apply different techniques; education helps.
3. The self-awareness of individual stress related patterns, triggers, and typical reaction, is necessary.
4. Stress managements skills should be practiced on the handball court regularly, firstly in training sessions, and later in matches.
5. Players should learn and accept that thoughts are not truths and that no thought limits them to perform. It is recommendable to become aware of their own thoughts and emotions, notice them, accept them, and use inner discipline to focus on committed action only.

First, a general education about stress is necessary. A coach can use this chapter to explain to players why and when stress appears and how it impacts the body and mental processes. It helps players to understand their own stress and to become aware of its consequences on individual and team level. Often, coaches overestimate their players, but also their own ability to cope. It is necessary to identify stress level during the practice sessions and competitions for a certain period (at least 6-10 training sessions, 3 matches) its triggers, accompanying emotions, and to try to identify typical patterns. It is useful to have a protocol to follow it (see Picture 8).

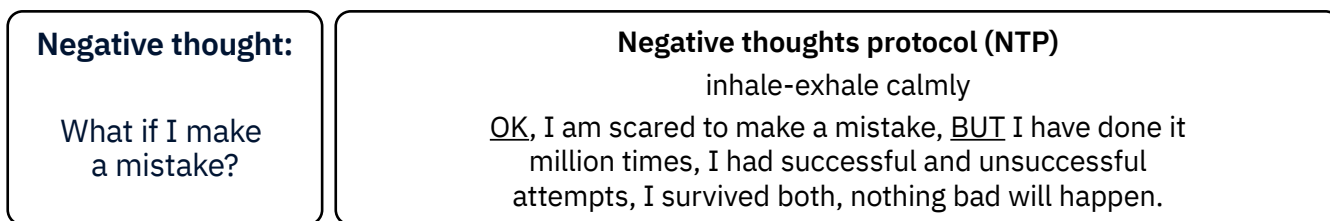
STRESSFUL SITUATION	REASON FOR CHOOSING THE SITUATION	PHYSICAL AND BEHAVIOURAL SYMPTIONS OF STRESS	WHAT PASSED THROUGH YOUR HEAD, WHICH THOUGHTS?	LEVEL OF STRESSS 1 - 10

Picture 8. Stress Evaluation Protocol

The next step is the application of psychological skills that can help stress management. It presumes awareness of negative thinking and the application of positive self-talk in combination of relaxation techniques and breathing exercises (that will be explained in the next chapter). This should be practiced on and off the court regularly. Also, the problem-solving plan for certain situations prepared in advance helps. It is necessary to continuously monitor the team's strengths and weaknesses and invest in the teams' and individual player's confidence.

It is helpful to create a strategy on how to deal with increased anxiety in any situation. Anxiety can be elevated by negative thoughts, external pressure(s) or certain events that cause negative expectations and lower confidence. It is helpful to structure a protocol for such a situation that consists of a brief relaxation intervention and cognitive restructuring of the situation. Negative thoughts protocol (NTP) starts with calm inhale-exhale followed by identification of the particular negative thought, accepting

it (“OK”), and finding solutions (counterargument – “BUT”) other than the anxious one which at that moment comes to your mind (Picture 9).



Picture 9. Managing Stress with Players - Negative Thoughts Protocol

Similarly, players can use imagery to visualize and create a highly stressful situation vividly in their mind, trying to stay relaxed during this exercise and apply NTP. After that they can try it in the real situation.

Coping with any stressful situation related to player’s perception of threat that leads to anxiety can be improved by the same general idea in the background - try and face your fear! It enables experience of survival, taking away the power of fear, and brings a new strength.

On the sport court, stress can be caused by different mechanisms and another unpleasant emotion, which is anger. It also causes over arousal. How this state can be regulated is found in the next chapter.

6.4. AROUSAL REGULATION

"It is just a pulse, my body speaks to me, sharing its excitement for the game!"

Different sport disciplines, even various parts of the handball game require a different distribution of energy. The physical state that indicates the player’s level of energy is called arousal. It can be defined as a physiological and psychological state of being awake, attentive, open for stimuluses from environment and ready to react.

Arousal can be described by a continuum, it goes from low (sleep), through moderate, to high (intense excitement, hyperactivity) (Picture 10). A handball player needs a different level of energy when getting dressed in the locker room prior the match, on the court when the score is tied, on the bench watching the game, or when they have to perform a penalty shot.



Picture 10. Arousal Continuum

One important psychological skill is arousal regulation that means energy management. It is especially important during the match. Arousal is physical and mental energy that fuels player's performance. It should be distributed smartly and used in a function of efficient performance. To do so, a player needs to understand the concept of arousal, recognize his/her arousal prior to and during the match, in different match periods, and know how to intervene in the case they drop out of the optimal arousal zone.

Understanding arousal

Each of us have optimal zone of functioning, a certain arousal level where we operate the best. It is determined by our personality, activation of our central nervous system and in specific situations with situational characteristics such as intensity of stimuli around us or the meaning of the situation. Our arousal state is changeable, it depends on the physical activity level, but also on our interpretation of our arousal state at the moment. Players usually talk about arousal in terms of 'psyched up', 'ready' or 'psyched out', 'deflated' or 'tired'. If a player perceives his/her arousal as energy that will help him/her to run faster, jump higher, guard an opponent stronger, the level of arousal will be beneficial. On the other hand, if a player perceives the same level of arousal as anxiety, irritability, unrest, or something that is risky for the performance it will have detrimental effect, causing problems with performance.

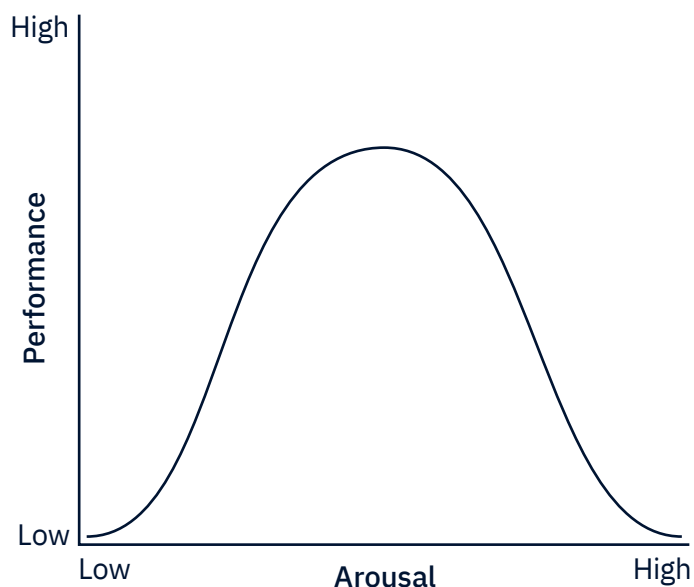
Arousal changes due to our actual physical activity level and due to our emotional state. There are certain emotions that are elevating our arousal (e.g., fear, anger, happiness, pride) and some emotions that are lowering it (e.g., sadness, disappointment, guilt). Increased arousal activates a physiological stress response of our autonomic nervous system that starts to prepare the body for the fight or flight reaction (see chapter 6.3). This mechanism is evolutionary-based, and it was very useful for our survival it is a way the body faces certain danger. Such a response always activates when we face certain demands, physical or mental, especially if we feel a bit endangered in the situation. It functioned well a long time ago when our prehistoric ancestors' lives were constantly in danger. The mechanism did not change (50000 years is not much in terms of evolution) and we have the same mechanism, but we live in less dangerous circumstances. But our mind kept the same mechanism that activates in situations as speaking in public, shooting the goal or penalty, entering the game for the first time, playing against famous opponents or attempting a counterattack, etc.

Understanding arousal helps the player to understand how the body works and to accept certain signals as normal, without panicking. A coach should teach players that those bodily signals of elevated arousal are signals of readiness, excitement, that the body barely waits the game to start. It will have different impact on performance than when a player interprets those signs as threatening.

Also, it is important to train the team that the arousal level can be spread around the team, it can be recognized as team energy and it is useful to know what brings the team to optimal level, which is moderate arousal. Also, players deal with the level of their arousal differently, it is important to know the differences and to respect the personal space and needs of each player. Some players keep talking a lot, some are restless, moving around, some are isolating, some are jumping or screaming in excitement, trying to make fun. Others may be disturbed by that and need completely different approach. Each player needs to find what strategy works best for him/her personally, during training sessions or in the competition, but also how to incorporate it to the team environment, especially prior to the match.

Arousal and performance

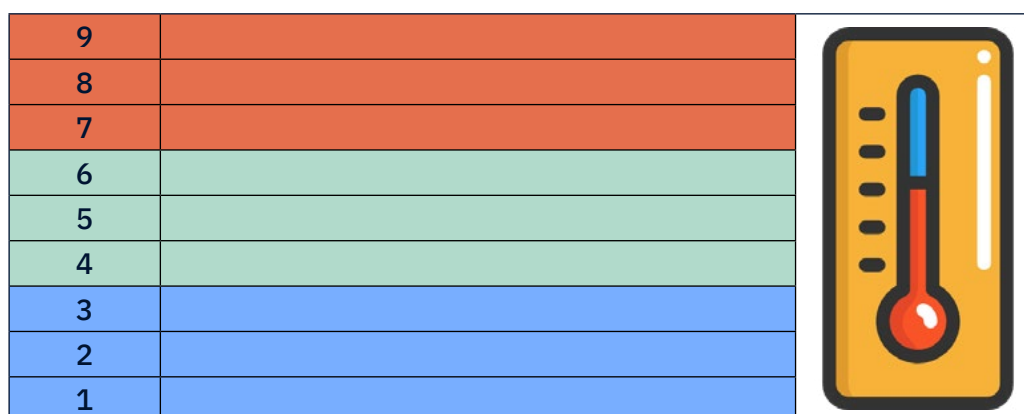
The Arousal-Performance relationship is best described with inverted U-model (picture 11).



Picture 11. Arousal-Performance Relationship

The model shows that the best performance is possible to achieve when a player is in the middle zone, which is moderate level of arousal, mild excitement prior to the match. If a player (or a team) is too aroused or not aroused enough, the performance will be compromised.

The sport psychologist often uses arousal thermometer, a simple and visual example how to evaluate one's arousal level (Picture 12) is envisioned below. When arousal is too low (blue zone) a player is not aroused enough. Such players need to raise their arousal if they want to play well. When arousal is too high (red zone) the player needs to lower arousal level, otherwise a performance suffers. The green zone represents optimal temperature, i.e., zone of optimal arousal. When the players or the team, are in this zone they play their best handball. Under-arousal and overarousal hurts performance due to the elevated tension it produces; it affects muscles and coordination due to the ignition of controlled thinking and overanalysing, which limit free body movement and cause attention problems, which will be explained in the next chapter.



Picture 12. Arousal Thermometer

Optimal arousal state depends on several factors. For example:

- *Individual differences* (personality, level of sport abilities, current physiological state of the body). For example, an extroverted player is sensitive to slight changes in the arousal level if he/she possesses lower sport abilities. A more experienced, and higher quality, player gets to the optimal arousal zone faster and are more resistant to arousal changes, the deterioration of their performance manifests slower and gradually. It is important for a coach to consider such individual differences, for example prior to the game when they deliver a motivational speech. It is possible that it pushes some players into the overarousal zone.
- *Tasks characteristics* - different levels of arousal is useful for different kinds of tasks. Longer duration tasks, such as the handball game, player's need better control of arousal over time that saves energy and enables them to focus on the play. On the other hand, a penalty shot needs laser focused arousal at the right level in that moment, any elevated amount of energy can impact performance. Complex tasks, especially those that demand fine muscular engagement, do not tolerate increased arousal levels; simple tasks that do not need much decision-making, or use gross motor skills, demand a higher level of arousal.

It is a difficult and demanding task to find optimal energy and the zone of moderate arousal; it needs patience, lots of introspection and self-awareness. Within PST, it is possible to learn how to manage arousal levels and those skills that help better performance. To find an individual zone of optimal functioning (IZOF), it is necessary to monitor and analyse one's performances and inner state during training sessions and games - excellent ones, good ones, and bad ones. For this purpose, the 9-point scale can be used, 1-3 (under arousal), 4-6 (optimal arousal, with peak state on 5) and 7-9 (overarousal). There are certain signs for all arousal levels, and certain techniques can be used to help a player to reach his/her optimal arousal zone.

Arousal regulation

One of the most important skills related to arousal is the recognition of the own arousal level and its variations before or during the match, as well as being aware of the circumstances that causes those changes. Additionally, the coach should be able to recognize under aroused and over aroused players (Picture 13). Overarousal symptoms correspond to the stressful response described in the previous chapter.

LOW AROUSAL SYMPTOMS

- slow motion
- lack of energy
- fatigue
- yawning
- bad body posture
- cognitive absence
- slow reactions
- lack of focus
- slow and quiet speaking
- player seems bored

HIGH AROUSAL SYMPTOMS

- fast and restless moving
- increased, shallow breathing
- sweating, red face
- shaking, muscle twitching, foot/hand tapping
- checking equipment repeatedly
- frequent toilet breaks
- excessive energy (speaks loudly, laughs, disturbs others)
- unfocused; scattered

Picture 13. Arousal Symptoms

As the arousal level is related to performance, the important task is to intervene if arousal is under or below the optimal level. The relationship between arousal and attention is one of the most important for successful performance (see chapter 6.5). If a coach wants his/her team to play focused from the first second of the game, taking care of the optimal level of arousal is an important task. Here are three different situations where inefficient arousal regulation can interfere with the flow of the handball match and consequently may influence the game outcome.

- Problems can be seen after half time. Players use these minutes to calm down, sit, listen to the coach, their energy level drops. After coming back to the game, they use the first 3-4 minutes of the game to get back to the optimal arousal level, mainly by way of physical activity. These minutes can be decisive for game outcome.
- A challenging situation arises with players who play in one direction, as defence or offense players only. They have continuous 'play-sit' exchange that leads to a continuous change of energy levels. Sometimes a rest period can be prolonged due to the events on the court and, after that, players can enter back on the court with sub-optimal energy levels. They should be aware of such a possibility and keep their arousal on moderate level with physical activity. Otherwise, they can have problems with focus and attention distribution, which causes mistakes which could be decisive if they happen during critical moments in the match.
- This relates to players who sit on the bench. The bench is the area to observe the game, to rest from playing efforts, and to support the team. In handball, players' exchange happens often, the game is intensive and physically demanding, and players should use the bench time to recover and recharge the battery. In the tense moments of the game, players become over-emotionally engaged and start behaving like spectators. It can be harmful, because a player who leaves the court has certain level of arousal, sometimes even too high. Acting as a spectator on the bench, jumping, shouting, etc. additionally elevates the arousal level which is not helpful when he/she comes back to the court. Of course, it does not mean that players on the bench should be quiet and unsupportive, but it is important to be aware of the right 'dose'. This is important for the coach also who has responsibility not only for his/her behaviour for the same reason, but also to observe everything that is happening and calm down the bench, if needed.

There are some interventions that can be used to regulate arousal level (Picture 14).

<p>LOW AROUSAL PSYCH-UP</p>	<p>Additional warm-up, dynamic stretching, speed up body movements, good posture, music with a beat, going to take fresh air, wash a face with cold water, applying motivational speech, high energy self-talk, reminder to the importance of the competition; fast, intensive, short chest-breathing session.</p>
<p>HIGH AROUSAL PSYCH-DOWN</p>	<p>Stop all body movements for 45s, static stretching, calming music, lay down, muscle relaxation, diaphragmatic breathing, confident body posture, distraction, and redirection of the focus from the thing that caused overarousal, mindfulness presence exercise, getting a hug and support, smiling, competition routine.</p>

Picture 14. Energy Management Interventions

There are some techniques, mainly physical ones (additional warm-up and stopping all body movements) that could be 'first choice techniques' because their effect is rapid. It is useful to have a choice of different techniques which should be trained in advance if we expect them to help during particular situation, before or during the match.

One of the most useful energy regulation techniques is **breathing**. It can have a twofold effect - regulating energy and helping the player to keep their focus. We have different breathing techniques which relate differently to the autonomic nervous system. If we want any of them to work when needed, it should be regularly practiced and skilled.

Chest Breathing - useful when a player is under aroused. It is connected to the sympathetic nervous system that activates our body. It can be used in combination with contracting hands and arms together with the big postural muscles (back, gluteus, abdominal muscles) together with 2-3 intensive inhale-exhale chest breathing cycles. A player inhales, contracts those muscles and holds the contraction and inhale for 1-2s, and then exhale strongly, relaxing suddenly all previously contracted muscles.

Diaphragmatic Breathing - when a player is over aroused the respiratory system contracts and oxygen intake is inadequate, especially for the demands of the handball game. Controlled diaphragmatic breathing provides oxygen, brings energy to muscles, and removes carbon dioxide from the system, which is accumulating in the state of overarousal and causes fatigue and cramping. The technique is simple. A player should be careful to move only abdomen and ribs, not a chest, while inhaling and exhaling. For the calming effect, it is important to have certain breathing rhythm, the inhale should be shorter than the exhale, intercostal muscles should be relaxed and no inhale neither exhale are maximal (because it causes additional tension), and there is a short pause between each inhale and exhale. The rhythm 3:1:4:1 is recommendable. On the inhale, the player pushes the abdomen out and inhale lasts 3 seconds, it continuous with a 1 second break, then exhale slowly for 4 seconds, pulling abdomen slowly back in, that is followed by a 1second break again. This cycle repeats. It is not important at the beginning to breathe only through the nose, it can be done however it feels comfortable to the player. It is helpful to follow this procedure by counting in slow rhythm and by putting a palm to the lower part of abdomen (that should move) and another one to the chest (that should rest), to control the body movements. In the beginning it can be practiced in the repose position, but it is important to practice this type of breathing in the standing position also, as it is a position of active handballer during the game (Picture 15).



Picture 15. Diaphragmatic breathing

6.5. CONCENTRATION

"The home of successful concentration is the present moment."

A handball match is dynamic field where thousands and thousands of stimuli arise for 90 minutes, which is the time necessary to perform one match from the moment of first minute warm-up till last whistle. Handball is fast and cognitively complex game where processing the quality of all the information impacts the decision-making, which is one of the most important mental aspects of the handball play. Attention is a cognitive process that enables players to make a good selection out of the most important stimuli on the court, and also the ability to switch awareness from one source of information to another and to focus on the selected information for certain amount of time. The last is called concentration. It reflects the player's ability to sustain attention on a certain object, a person, an instruction, an action, a goal, a thought or feeling for certain amount of time (seconds or minutes).

Concentration is important mental skill not only for playing sport, but in everyday life also. We are continuously bombarded by so much information. If we would direct our attention to all of them, we would quickly spend all our energy and be ineffective in most things we are dealing with. For this reason, our mind has an attentional filter that is used to select the most important things, keeping our cognitive capacity free for strategic or creative thinking.

Each coach should know that concentration is a mental skill that can be improved and trained. If he/she wants players to have better concentration on the court, it is necessary to:

- educate them about how this cognitive process functions.
- giving them opportunity to practice this skill regularly, in training sessions by implementing certain tasks into different parts of training.
- understand cognitive demands of handball well.
- identify main distractions for the team or individuals.
- make them be aware that motor automatisms (well-developed handball skills) save the attentional capacities.
- understand that it is not possible to hold maximal concentration for 60 minutes, fluctuations are normal because our mind works like that, but the better player or coach is the one who recognizes more quickly that the focus is lost and knows how to re-focus

Many players consider their ability to concentrate as the most important for a superior performance on the court, intuitively perceiving their weak concentration as a cause of performance mistakes.

The quality of concentration is related to three factors:

- Attentional focus – related to the choice where the player's focus of attention is placed, i.e., the selection of stimulus.
- Attentional range – the number of stimuli, internal or external that is enlightened by our 'reflector of attention'.
- Attentional endurance – the ability to remain focused, to hold attention on important stimulus for a certain amount of time without distraction.

Understanding attention

Concentration and attention are interrelated. To be concentrated means to direct the attention (to put the focus of attention) to things that are important at a particular moment and ignoring everything else. To concentrate effectively means to be in the present moment, to hold the attention on the right thing at the right time. Many players have excellent concentration but on the wrong thing, being focused on the irrelevant.

In every sport situation there are some relevant and much more irrelevant things – signs where it is possible to put the attention. The principle of how our mind works is quite simple. Our attention span is limited, if we spend our attentional capacity on something that is not important, we have less attention to deal with important things. It is necessary to differentiate things that are personally important from those things that are important for the game. For example, if a player, while running into a counter, thinks about coach’s comments in case he/she misses the goal, that specific percentage of attentional capacity is wasted. If he/she is usually anxious because of the coach it can be even 50%, meaning that for the current task (bouncing the ball, perceiving the court, players in front, a goalkeeper and shooting) only 50% is left. Certainly, this player will be less efficient if they play with an attention span of 50% to put to the task rather than with 100%.

Thinking about the coach’s reaction can be personally important to the player, but it is completely unimportant in that particular moment of play; the player was distracted by his/her own thinking about the coach. There are many different internal and external distractors that can steal one’s attention, and a few relevant signs of where to put the attention in a function of good performance.

Playing handball well needs two types of effort – physical effort and mental effort. The mental effort is about what the mind is thinking and what the eyes are doing, both support the proper use of physical effort. Understanding the process of attention and the impact of distractors motivate players to regulate their attention better.

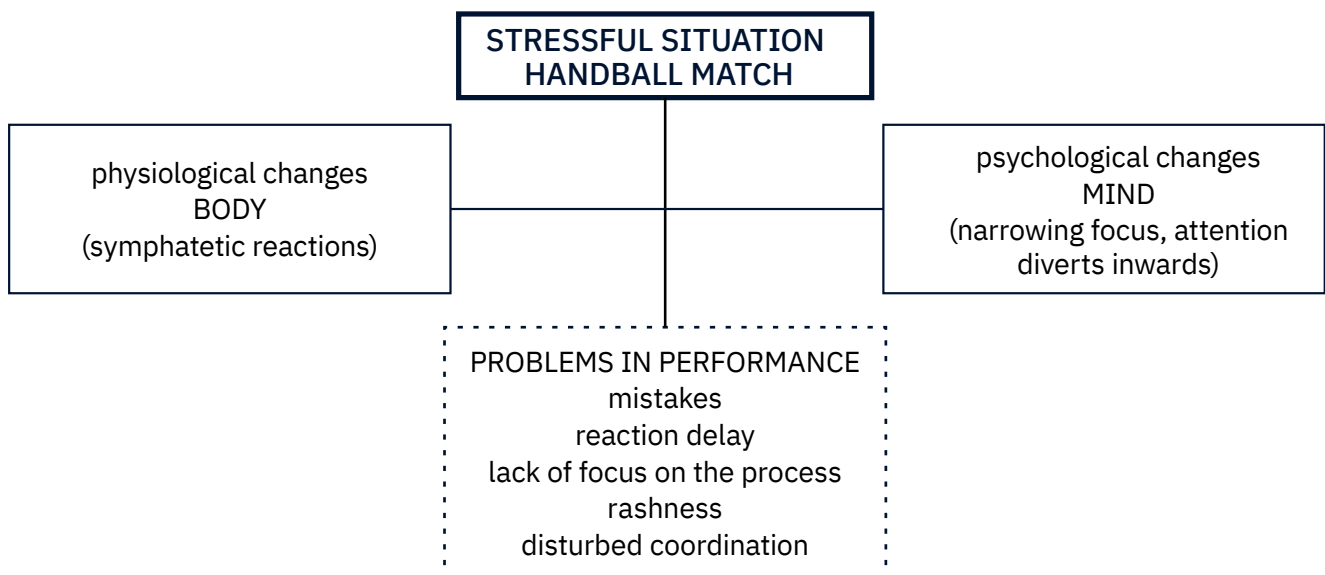
IRRELEVANT SIGNS - DISTRACTORS		TASK RELEVANT SIGNS
External	Internal	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crowd • Coach’s behaviour • Players on the bench • Light • Billboards • Delegate and persons responsible for time and statistics • Scoreboard • Floor quality • Cameras and reporters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotions • Fatigue • Pain • Other inner sensations (hunger) • Other plans or things unrelated to the game • Thoughts • Result • Mistakes • Consequences • Previous experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ball • Coach’s instructions • Game plan • Time • Individual goal • Team-mates movements/actions • Opponents’ goal keeper’s movements • Players who I am guarding

When somebody has a problem with concentration, the first step is not to practice concentration with some general concentration exercises (that is something athletes or parents often expect from the sport psychologist), but to identify what happened with the concentration, how a player wastes his/her attentional capacity. The second step is the psychoeducation about these cognitive processes because understanding how our mind works helps to deal with mental issues. The third step is the implementation and practice of certain psychological techniques to hold the focus in the important moments of the game or to get focus back.

Concentration and performance

Players are more easily distracted when they are under stress (Picture 16). In those moments they start to direct attention to him/herself, certain symptoms, or emotions, starts to direct the attention inward instead keeping the focus outside, on the task, on the action. Furthermore, becoming aware about deconcentrating makes a player start to deal with concentration on purpose, which is also a distraction because he/she is not paying full attention to the task, performance, and to the game. That is why appropriate concentration can hardly be forced. It involves passive avoidance of the irrelevant and focusing on the relevant. Disturbed concentration results in additional problems in the performance.

Research on the psychology of excellence confirms that attention related factors are crucial to sport success. The elite players are better at maintaining focus on the task at hand during competition than less successful players who get more easily distracted. The same applies to expert and novice players. One of the biggest differences between skilled and less skilled players lies in attention-related sport-specific skills. Expert players are better in processing stimuli, selecting the most important ones, sustaining their focus on the relevant signs that help them to anticipate and perform better. Also, their experience and higher level of psychological skills helps them to cope better in stressful situations.

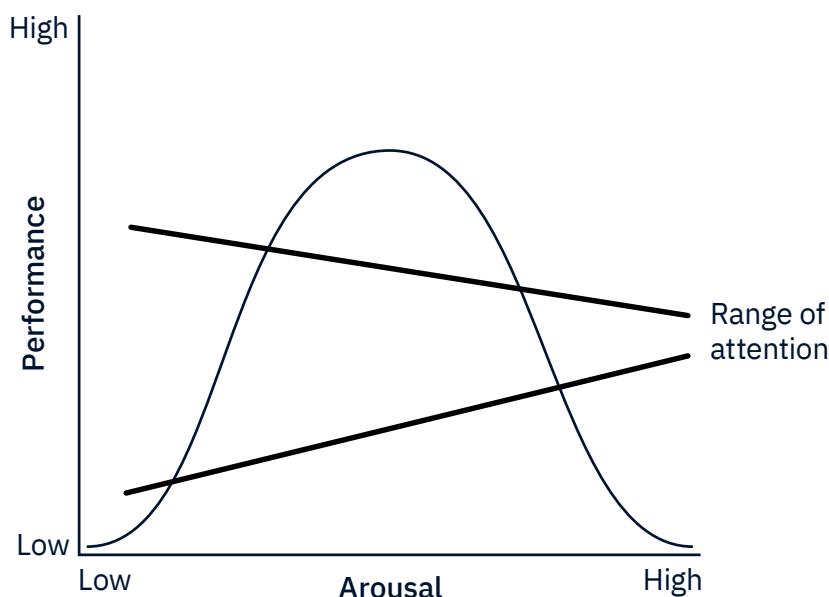


Picture 16. The Effect of Stress on Attention

Additionally, one of the important attentional skills is to shift attention. Some players become 'too focused', i.e., stick to one aspect of the task, failing to recognize the need to shift or to expand attention. This depends on the player's level of arousal but also on the attentional style that is needed for a particular part of the game or activity.

The relationship between arousal and sport success is already explained in previous chapter. Too low or too high levels of arousal impair sport performance. But the mechanism as to why it happens stands in background of this process. It is related to attention, more precisely to the range of attention that changes under different arousal levels (Picture 17). We already know that during the game our mind can be focused to relevant or irrelevant cues. If we are optimally focused it means that our mind is focused only to the most important things relevant for a satisfactory performance (for example, in defence - ball, my player, players beside me who will help me in defence). This is the case when player's level of arousal is moderate.

On the other hand, if a player is under aroused, his/her focus is too broad meaning that the most relevant, but also some irrelevant signs, enter into his attentional field spending his/her mental energy, and insufficient energy remains for the important things. This impairs performance due to inadequate information processing. If a player is over aroused, his/her focus range becomes too narrow. It means that from the attentional field some important things are lost, the player focuses only on one of three most important things (for example, the player who is he/she guarding) the other factors are missing. It causes mistakes and omissions (for example, a player is hit in the head by a ball, because he/she was too focused to the opponent that the forgot to also follow the ball).



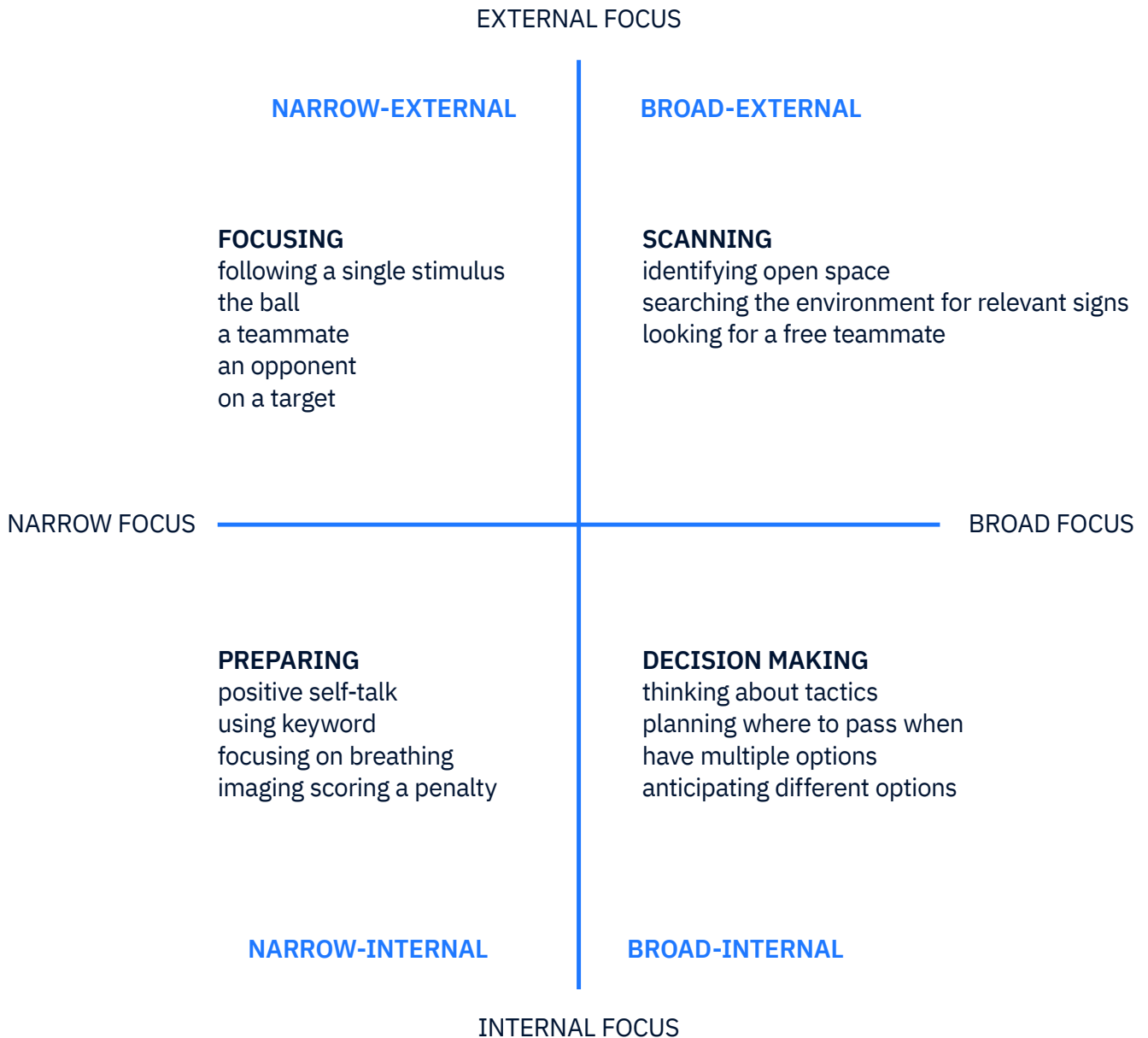
Picture 17. Arousal-Attention Performance Relationship

Adequate focus also implies the player's ability to expand or narrow the focus in relation to what is happening on the court. Such mental flexibility is especially important for certain positions in handball, e.g., goalkeeper's task is to exchange the range of the attention constantly. It goes from very broad (when the action starts on the other side of the court, to broad (during the ball goes around the defence set), to narrow (when one player takes a shot to the goal, or on the penalty line).

Different attentional styles exist. To be an efficient handballer it is important to know which style is appropriate for handball, for certain positions or certain moments of play. Different attentional styles determine how many signs a player will chose to focus on during the game, and where his/her reflector of attention will be directed. In the other words, direction and span of attention determines different attentional styles (Picture 18).

There are 4 different attentional styles that are related to different cognitive/attentional processes (Picture 18):

- internal-narrow (focus on breathing),
- internal-broad (repeating tactical action),
- external-narrow (focusing on ball),
- external-broad (focusing on opponent players moving in their attack formation).



Picture 18. A Handball Specific Example of Four Attentional Styles.

Practical recommendation for better concentration

The first step to improve concentration is become aware of the concentration problem and make a firm decision to work on it in a very disciplined manner, because no changes happen by itself. A player can work on the concentration within psychological skills training (PST) with a professional guidance of sport psychologist. A good strategy is to think about a personal concentration 'switch', a certain word (verbal cue), movement (kinaesthetic cue) or a scene (visual cue) that will remind athlete to stay focused. It can be a key word ('focus'), or a small jump after the starting whistle, or directing a look to central line on the court. Also, it is useful to have a 'switch-off' that can be used during the half break, which helps a player to free the mind and mentally relax. The use of these signs should be regularly practiced, on the court.

For the one who wants to improve concentration, keep in mind to:

1. Direct your attention to a single thing in a single moment

Applying this principle helps process orientation, but when competitive pressure arises, a player's head is full of 'musts' and 'don'ts'. Good concentration needs a calm mind and body to manage the game, step by step, and to play in every moment. The principle 'keep it simple' usually gives the best results.

2. The mind is focused when you think about what you are doing

When there is no difference between our thinking and doing, we are fully focused. A player needs to reduce his/her analyticity to focus to relevant signs on the court and to the controllable.

3. Become aware of the loss of attention and refocus

It is normal to lose attention especially when activity is cognitively complex and is lasting. By switching-off, the mind gets rest from cognitive effort. It is important to recognize this state as quickly as possible and to apply well learned refocusing techniques.

4. Direct your attention 'out' when you feel nervous

Players are distracted mainly by mistakes and negative emotions. In such moments it is necessary to be disciplined and to direct focus to the elements of the game and the task itself.

5. Encourage yourself

It is always good to support yourself. If losing focus resulted in mistakes and impaired performance, additional self-blame and criticism does not help. It is recommendable to remind yourself that everybody loses concentration, to stay calm and focus to the next task.

How to improve concentration?

- Use attentional cues (visual, verbal, kinaesthetic) as reminders.

For example, a player can remind him/herself to his/her goal using a sign on his hand. As it is a part of the body that moves a lot during the game, every time when a player sees it, reminds him/herself to certain task, keeps concentrated.



Picture 19. An example of using visual attentional cue

- Use keywords and focus cues

This technique implies using specific words or verbal cues that should be strong, vivid, and positively formulated to help a player return focus to a specific segment of performance. A player can repeat these words during their performance in training sessions or during a match. It helps to direct attention to something that is most important for his/her performance. It can be a keyword e.g., 'aggressively', reminding a player to make a firm contact with his opponent, or it can be a keyword e.g., 'back', that can be used after a mistake in offence reminding a player to run back to defence, and not spend time analysing the play in that moment.

Keywords can be used also at the team level. The whole team chooses one key word that they can say to each other during a game, or a word that the coach can use with any player, or the players can use it themselves. For example, it can be the word 'focus', which can be used any time somebody loses concentration or directs their attention to something irrelevant. This technique is useful for coaches because it saves words and emotional energy in communication with a team when something is not going well on the court.

Similarly, a player can define key focus cues, reminders where to pay attention during their performance, for example it can be 'elbow' reminding a player to raise up the arm during the shot.

There is a simple technique for refocusing after distraction that uses key words. It contains 4 simple steps and can be used any time. It is called STOP technique.

STOP Technique:

1. Become aware that the focus is lost, acknowledge the distraction.
2. Imagine a 'STOP' sign or tell yourself firmly to 'stop'.
3. Pay attention to the diaphragmatic breathing (one inhale-exhale)
4. Apply keywords that direct you to where your attention must be in that moment ('ball').

A keyword must be chosen in advance and the technique should be practiced during the training sessions.

- Use routines

Forming precompetitive and competitive routines is a powerful technique to improve concentration. A routine is a sequence of actions which are defined in advanced and performed in exact, always the same order aimed to make a mind busy in some critical moments when there is a space for worries and negative thoughts to arise. This is different from rituals, because the routine is related to performance and physical or mental actions related to the play.

Precompetitive routine: a sequence of actions related to physical or mental preparation that a player uses in a specific order before the match. It is usually incorporated into the warm up procedure, for example, a player can use certain keywords in first contact with a ball, apply short relaxation exercise during stretching, use some supportive words in contact with teammates, enter with the firm posture to the line-up before the game, take two minutes just before the game to centre him/herself and set the right mindset, use a specific motivational word after first whistle.

Competitive routine: composed with the same logic for a segment of the game that is completely under the control of the player. It can be a penalty execution. A routine such as this represents an action plan and can involve several steps. A player repeats them in the same order every time he/she performs a penalty shot, in training or in the match.

Using a routine helps a player in two ways: firstly, in a situation that is tense, it helps to redirect the attention to what can be controlled by the player. The mind is busy with doing something, step by step, that is useful for this task (instead of worrying about missing the goal, which would elevate stress). Also, the player follows well-known procedure and deals with something familiar in a situation of uncertainty, which brings a higher sense of control. It diminishes anxiety which may naturally arise in such a situation. Routines can be combined with other techniques that could be incorporated as a part of the routine (e.g., keywords, breathing exercise).

The example of competitive routine: penalty

1. Take a ball with both hands, feel the ball, hold it consciously for few seconds.
2. Look in front of you, ahead and towards the goal.
3. Walk slowly, bouncing a ball for every step made (decide where to direct the shot).
4. Step to the line, feel the ground, say to yourself 'ready'.
5. Make eye-contact with the goalkeeper.
6. Keep your posture firm, inhale-exhale.
7. Tell yourself 'Tornado'.
8. Shoot to the goal.

- Situational training of psychological factors.

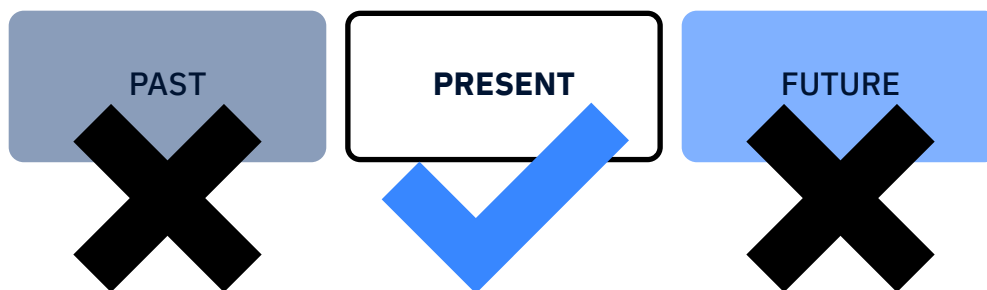
A champion athlete leaves nothing to chance. On the day of the competition, he/she is well prepared for most eventualities, not only because of their ability and well-developed skills, but also having rehearsed them in order to apply them under specific circumstances, such as in competition. Good coaches usually implement the specificity principle in physical, technical, and tactical training, but usually the same is forgotten for psychological factors. It is very important to do things in practice in exactly the same way as in competition. In other words, everything the players will use during the match, should be assessed during the practice sessions and preparation matches.

Situational training may include different conditions that enable practicing mental resilience and playing in distracting conditions, for example:

- crowd noise (it can be audio recorded as hostile and friendly).
- fatigue (sometimes is recommendable to apply certain tasks that demand a high level of concentration when the players are tired e.g., at the end phase of training, or even when they think that the training session is over, and unexpectedly).
- simulation of pressure (it can be done by limiting time, unfair scoring in a favour of one team, punishment, unequal number of players in groups).
- playing in the full team kit and equipment for competition-like practice sessions.
- playing in hot/humid circumstances (stuffy or hot gym, playing in additional clothes, etc.). Under stress the body temperature increases, and the person tires easily and becomes less focused.

The most challenging moments to play a mental game on the court are the moments between active play or moments when a player is not in possession of the ball. For the quality of sport performance, one needs to know how to play a mental game. The lack of stress management skills usually causes attentional problems. Stress management techniques (see chapter 6.3) can help players and coaches to improve their attentional skills. By improving them they will be less likely to experience stress

because their mind will deal with a single important thing during the game, their task at every single moment. To be where your feet are, in the present, absorbed in process, without wondering about the past (mistakes) or the future (outcome and result) is key for optimal concentration.



Picture 20. A key for optimal concentration

6.6. DEBRIEFING A PERFORMANCE

"A clever player learns from his past performances."

Match days are the most exciting part of the sport process. Not all matches finish as we had wished and planned, and those bad matches and bad plays are challenges for both the handball coaches and players. Post-game talk plays an important role in team communication, confidence, and attitude, and it manifests the coach-team and coach-athlete relationship. Today, there are many performance analysis software that can help a coach to reach objective parameters of each player's performance. It is related to game analytics, and it is not a point of this chapter. Here, the psychological part of performance analysis will be discussed.

Many coaches fail to understand the importance of post-game talk, or not paying enough attention to it. Sometimes they provide a few comments to get the point across and try to go further. Some coaches spend time and energy commenting the bad games, mainly criticizing and expressing their dissatisfaction, which is not well received by players who usually feel guilty, and stand quietly, waiting for the 'storm' to pass. If a coach tends to talk only about mistakes, individual or team, no matter if the game was good or bad, he/she can make players feel insecure. To have a proper post-game talk, the coach should follow the same pattern after every game, no matter what the result was.

The function of post-game talk is:

1. to give feedback and information at the team, and individual, level.
2. to create a safe space where players can be debriefed, i.e., to talk about and work through their emotions, and to close the game.
3. to accentuate a point that should be remembered for the future.
4. to generate optimism and maintain positivity.

Nobody, neither the coach nor the players, feels good after being criticised and talking about the negative aspects of a game, It is necessary to be sincere, objective and realistic, but no team will improve because of the negative comments, warnings, and speaking only about negative consequences. The negative

aspects of the game should be mentioned, and a coach should let the players know what went wrong, but it is also necessary to highlight the good things (even in the worst game, there are some), to stay positive and put focus to the next game using the learnings from this one.

When a coach leads a female handball team, he/she should remember that compliments are important, that emphasising things that the team did well and the plays they executed correctly, is necessary. Highlighting positivity in a negative outcome and giving a space to the players to do the talking is a part of the coach's psychologist role. It means sometimes, the coach needs to step back and let the players share their feelings and thoughts about previous game; this helps to find understanding for their point of view as to how they played and what they can improve.

It is necessary to give a team and individual feedback, but for a good post-game talk, a coach should be prepared and think about his/her words in advance. Letting the inspiration of the moment to do the job is bad decision, and such a speech would not have a good effect.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL AFTER GAME TALK

Keep it short and simple. Players do not like coaches who love to listen to themselves. Make the point quickly while all the players are still attentive and listening.

- *Stay positive.* The more negative a coach is during the task, the less the players will listen the message.
- *Mind your words.* Whatever you say, there is a high probability that it will stick in the minds of your players (especially girls) and will be carried over into the next game. Also, be careful about negative comments, relate it to behaviour and not the person.
- *Give collective and individual feedback.* Start with the collective performance and then add the individual contributions. Prepare short messages (1-2 sentences) about what was good, what was not, and how to improve it; finish with a positive message (sandwich-feedback principle).
- *Use it regularly.* Use the same principle after every game, regardless of the result.



Here is a sequence of questions that could help a coach to provide a post-game analysis. The same pattern can be used by the players at the individual level. Analysing their own performance in relation to goals set for a particular match and writing it down in their sport diary, a player collects ‘lessons’ about his/her performance efficacy, and it can be used as mental preparation for the next game. This is a useful way to monitor progress and to become aware of individual weaknesses and, by the middle of the season, each player will have respectable number of lessons for further use. These questions could be organised to a game analysis sheet and used as a part of post-game routine. It gives a chance to each player to think about the game and their contributions. An example for team post-game analysis sheet is presented at the end of this chapter. All players can complete this sheet after each match.

How to analyse the match?

1. What was played right? What was I good at?
2. What could have been done better and how?
3. What is the most important learning from this game?
4. For what do I congratulate myself? (For what do we congratulate ourselves?)

These questions can be used as a basis for a team conversation. A coach can add a question about how they feel at the beginning, and again, at the end of their conversation, which assists in the emotional debriefing.

The most important thing that should result from any game analyses is ‘what did we learn from this game?’ Every game can be used for learning, and we learn the most from the worst games; it is a part of process.

Team ‘Post-Game Analysis’ Sheet:

Team name											
Player’s name											
Date & location											
Opponent (result)											
Status	Started	Played	Did Not Play								
My personal preparation for the game	Physical	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Mental	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
What did i do (play) well in this game?											
What could I have done better in this game?											
What did the team do (play) well in this game?											
What could the team have done better in this game?											
What did the oponents do well in this game?											
What did the opponent not do well in this game?											
What have i learned from this game?											
How did i impact this game?											
For what do i congratulate myself today?											
Overall satisfaction	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

6.7. COPING WITH INJURY

"Uninjured players do not exist. We only have those who were injured and those who have not been injured yet."

Injuries are an inevitable part of performance. In sport only two types of athletes exist: those who have been injured and those who have not yet been injured. There is no third type. Due to this fact, coping with injury is necessary part of the psychological skills kit of each athlete. Also, coaches who repeatedly meet this problem must know how to deal with it in a functional way, meaning, in a way that will make the recovery process easier for the athletes, and not making it even more difficult.



Coping with injury is one of the most difficult parts of the training. Everybody else is practicing, learning, competing, scoring goals, improving techniques, and having fun, while injured player sits on the sideline or exercising on the mat somewhere in the corner. It makes him sad, disappointed, angry, helpless, hopeless, depressive, and frustrated; it is not easy to be patient and watch him/her deal with this every day. This is a challenge for coaches; many coaches, under a pressure to get the result, incline to force injured players to come back to the court earlier than is realistic. It causes additional problems and increases the risk for another (compounding) injury. Some coaches do not want the player to move around others to avoid 'bad luck' on the court. The last thing an injured athlete needs is rejection; support is something that heals and helps.

For majority of athletes injury produces a significant life imbalance. It happens immediately and all sources that ensure health, fitness, accomplishments related to regular sport participation are lost. For some players, the absence is temporary, and for others it means a permanent absence from the sport court; this is the cause of the imbalance in the identity structure and life roles. The impact of an injury is not only physical, sometimes the psychological effects are more prominent. Loss of confidence, self-esteem, life, and sport career perspective are endangered, which cause psychological reactions. In addition to that, it hurts; the pain, decreasing mood and life satisfaction, is a part of everyday life.

The classical approach to a sport injury follows the bio-medical model that treats the injury as a broken part of a system that must be repaired, and a player is expected to be brave during the process. The modern approach follows the bio-psycho-social model that considers psychological factors,

too, in terms of prevention and treatment of a sport injury. Today, psychologists are part of the team that takes care of injured athlete. Putting the needs, feelings, and reactions -not an injury itself, at the centre of recovery process helps the injured person as it accelerates the recovery process and increases the adherence rate.

There are certain scientifically proven factors that can indicate an elevated risk for the occurrence of a sport injury. Knowing them, a coach can intervene before an injury occurs, implementing preventative measures e.g., modifying the training workload, reducing expectations, and adding a rest day. It is always important to communicate and to listen the player's opinion, as nobody knows better than athlete him/herself about his/her feelings, body reactions, and pain.

Injury risk factors

- *Major life events* (e.g., death of loved one, relocation, breaking up with a partner, losing a study year, illness in family, becoming parent, etc.) require significant resources to adjust to new life circumstances. Increased stress makes athletes more susceptible to injury or diseases. It works by two different mechanisms - by decreased immunity and by lowered concentration because of the distraction of actual problems.

It is important that a coach possess information about players outside the court and to be sensitive to such circumstances and adjust the workload and demands in this period.

- *Accumulated daily stressors* (e.g., bad family relationship, low team cohesiveness and rejection from teammates, different aggravating situations) lower the player's capacity to cope and causes a stress response, which works the same way as already explained.
- *Previous injuries* - the probability of injury increases when a player has been previously injured, especially if they return to the court before they are fully recovered. The player is not psychologically ready, feels scared and this shows in the protective behaviours displayed on the court. To protect the injury, the player overcompensates and overloads other parts of the body that work differently. Additionally, a player changes his/her technical performance, activating some unnecessary muscles to protect the injury. In both cases, the risk of new injury is elevated. As the old injury is not fully recovered, the risk of re-injury also exists.
- *Poor coping resources* - players with undeveloped stress management skills are more sensitive to stress that produces a more harmful effect. And those without emotional support and an unhealthy lifestyle are more prone to injury.
- *Personality* - risk of injury increases in emotionally unstable athletes. Those with an elevated level of anxiety, prone to anger or aggression during handball match are also more prone to injury.

Most of those factors are psychological by nature. The influence from most of them can be diminished by developing psychological skills, and by educating players on the background of injury. This should result in a higher responsibility to prevent injury from both sides.



Players' response to injury

Advancing the research of injury from the perspective of sport psychology it becomes clear that there is more to injury than 'being brave'. One of the most popular models which explains the athletes' reaction to injury is a 'Stage' model that explains different levels of emotional reactions and the cognitive and behavioural responses to injury and the rehabilitation process (Picture 21). The model suggests that when people face a loss of health, which happens to injured athlete, there are some expected emotional reactions: disbelief, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.



Picture 21. Stages of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses to sport injury

Not all athletes go through each stage in this order; it is also possible that some stages happen at the same time (an injured athlete can be angry and depressed at the same time). Likewise, circularity is possible; players may regress to previous stages based on their progress (or stagnation) in their rehabilitation process or some other factors (e.g., loss of status due to injury). The model is not fully applicable to those players who must finish their career due to injury.

It is important that the coach knows that certain reactions are normal and expected, and gives a player additional attention, comfort, and support. The goal is to start the rehabilitation process as soon as possible, and the best mindset that helps recovery efforts is to dedicate themselves to rehabilitation in the same way as they would to training. In the other words, coaches should present rehabilitation to the athlete as a different and specific training, demanding the same dedicated approach as given to handball practices.

Obstacles to successful recovery

Sometimes coaches and athletes think that the rehabilitation has failed if the progress is slow. This is not true, it depends not only on type of injury, but on the athlete's experience and body. In the sport teams we can see many impatient coaches who perceive the result more important than the players and their health, forcing injured athletes to come back to the court too early. It causes additional problems, as fear of pain and new injury, deterioration of coach-athlete relationship, loss of confidence. But there are certain things pertaining to the athlete that can slow down the progress.

Pressure from the coach - the worst mistake a coach can make is to tell the athlete something akin to 'it is all just in your head', 'You don't want to be better', 'It is impossible that you still feel the pain, the doctors said that you are ok', 'Don't complain all the time, pain is normal in sport' or 'It is your fault', etc. It shows wholly unsupportive behaviour and a total misunderstanding of the problem, causing deep emotional pain and a feeling of rejection. No one can understand the pain of another; this is ultimate truth. Nothing should ever be put before a person and his/her health. That is why coaches should educate themselves (on physical and mental health), as it is not true that their behaviour cannot be harmful.

Lack of support not only from coaches but from teammates also can slow down the recovery process and hold the athlete in the stage of anger or depression. Sometimes other players avoid the injured player because they do not know what to say to him/her anymore, changes are slow, and questions are the same. Also, some of them are superstitious, scared of bad luck and negative energy. Losing support at a time when it is needed the most can be an important limitation.

Fear and culpability are emotions that makes the rehabilitation process more difficult. Fear appears through worries about the recovery, as doubts about exercises and rehabilitation methods, and about future capacities and performance. A player has lots of doubts and questions about expectations and rehabilitation outcomes, which can be signs of fear. It causes tension in the body during the rehabilitation exercises or during the testing period of the first days when player returns to the court. Some players also feel guilty for their injury, for betraying their team and not contributing. This is followed by self-blame and can cause a social withdrawal resulting in a lack of beneficial support.

Pain is the inherent part of sport injury. It can make a rehabilitation process difficult because in the early stages the athlete feels intense pain that causes fear and tension and limits the performance of rehabilitation exercises. Also, there are many players who are ready to suffer more than it is necessary to confirm a belief that it is something that makes the recovery and rehabilitation process faster. The truth is that it can slow it down the process and exacerbate the injury. Athletes are 'tough guys', but it is necessary to know different levels of pain and to recognize the limit and to talk about it.

During rehabilitation, the medical staff, and the coach also during first days of the player's return, should be attentive to player's facial expressions and body language to avoid problems caused by athlete's intention to 'tough it out'.

Unrealistic goals and expectations can have a negative impact on the motivation for rehabilitation. It happens when those expectations cannot be reached and some players do not see any point to their efforts anymore, investing less or sometimes even stopping the rehabilitation process. The coach can help injured athlete to set realistic goals, sharing with him/her information about this type of injury and experiences of other players, and giving him/her enough time to recover.

Successful recovery

For successful recovery from injury, it is necessary for treatment to be provided by a care team. This includes cooperation between athlete as the active participant and expert for his/her body, medical staff, a coach, and a sport psychologist. All these powers should adopt the same mindset considering the sport injury as a different performance and sport challenge, and as a constitutive part of sport and any athletic career.

Any injured athlete needs to develop certain psychological skills that enables them to better cope with the injury. A supportive and optimistic environment that considers the injury as something normal, and not as a catastrophe, is also needed.

The next table on the next page provides recommendations for coaches, teammates, and injured athletes itself how to overcome injury faster and with less stress.

<p>RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COACHES AND TEAMMATES</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - education on injury and its prognosis - give unconditional support - communicate with the injured athlete often - include the injured player in regular training session with rehab exercises - be patient and optimistic, communicate that way to the injured athlete - use the team approach, cooperate with other experts - build a social support network within the team - support a player to use this period for other obligations (education) - monitor improvement
<p>RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INJURED ATHLETE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - educate themselves on the injury and its prognosis, seek information - return to aerobic exercises as soon as possible - regularly attend team training sessions doing your own exercises - set realistic short-term goals, focus on the right thing in the present moment; pain, emotions, rehabilitation are normal sport challenges - approach a rehabilitation as a sport training, do it with all effort - strictly follow all medical advice - work on and use psychological skills - use the injury as an area for mental strength training - relate to people, ask for support - use the time to do something that was 'on hold' (education) - cooperate with the sport psychologist - video monitor your progress, use diary method - be grateful for small steps forward - keep the optimistic mindset, be patient

7. TEAM BUILDING



"Me before I."

7. TEAM BUILDING

By nature, humans are social beings. We love to interrelate to each other, and sport gives us the specific opportunity to fulfil our social needs, as athletes or as spectators. Many sport activities are group activities, and in handball, as a team sport, the importance of team dynamics is well recognized. A successful sport team excels beyond the contributions of the individuals who compose the team. But, in sport we have often witnessed that group of excellent individuals, quality and expensive players who were outperformed by some less-known players. This is possible due to the ‘team spirit’ or ‘team chemistry’ and relatedness, which is used to explain this phenomenon. This chapter will help in understanding these terms and bring recommendations for coaches interested in building a great handball team.

Team Development

Whenever there are different people at the same place gathered around a certain task, the prerequisites for building a team have been created. A team is a group of people working towards a common goal who invest their energy and efforts to realize it. The internal dynamics of the team depends on the athletes’ and coach’s roles, interaction and behaviours, leadership, team values, and the motivational climate. There are no two teams that are the same and they should never be. Every team is a living organism that has its own internal logic and processes that finally can be recognized from the outside through the team’s competitive efficiency. Because of that, every team must be led differently, and the coach’s leadership style should be adjusted to the team’s characteristics.



It takes time for a group to become a team. The developmental process goes through a series of predictable stages (Picture 22). The pace at which the team will be formed and the level of connection between the team members depend on various factors: the common goal, amount of time spent together, the clarity of team roles, the level of commitment to overall work and individual tasks, and the leader.

It all begins as a collection of individuals, for example like at the beginning of the season. Gradually, they start to form a collective identity, sharing same goal, purpose, and some patterns of behaviour and interactions. This is an exciting time because the players are getting to know each other and the coach; everybody is friendly and glad to be a part of the team, sharing positive expectations, optimism, and energy. Players now think about the team purpose and their contribution. This stage is called **FORMING**. The coach's task in this stage is to enable different opportunities for interaction and open communication, and to clearly present the game framework, goals, and expectations.

The next stage is the most turbulent one. Players started their interactions and now start to build relationships. They are testing each other, they start to build the inter-team hierarchy, fighting for their own place and role within the team, or for the coach's attention. They find out what is expected from them and from their teammates, sometimes disagreements and conflict may arise from this. Some players are confused, even disappointed due to the discrepancy between the reality and their expectation. It is a normal part of team building process. Excessive conflicts can diminish motivation, elevate pressure, divert focus, and produce negative emotions that are conditioned into team environment. This stage is called **STORMING**. The coach's task in this stage is to encourage open communication, to accept differences in attitudes and goals, to help resolve conflicts, and to give a clear, well-structured framework for common work.

In the third phase the players finally accept team's goal and their roles within the team. Here, they have a sense of group belonging, they are not individual players anymore, but a member of the team with the common purpose and goal. Everybody has learned their own tasks and responsibilities within the common team play framework and have a clear vision of everybody's else role and responsibility. Self-confidence, satisfaction, and team trust increases. The coach-athlete relationship strengthens. Now the team is ready for its first successful performance. This stage is called **NORMING**. The coach's task is to provide quality communication, development of confidence, trust, and support.

The last stage of team development is marked by functional relationships, strong determination, and dedication of all players' toward achieving the team's goal. They are united and committed to progress and become a great performing team. After all these preparation stages, this stage can last for months or a year, and the sport results are evident. There is a great constructive collaboration, huge investment of effort, excellent relatedness, support, and trust. Players become more autonomous in decision-making and successfully solve any problem that arises within the team. This stage is called **PERFORMING**. The coach's task is to monitor the progress and team's achievement, to bring new challenges and to encourage creativity and responsible independence in decision-making during the game.

The end of the team's life comes just prior to the departure of team members. Players in this stage can be emotional, feel dejected because of the separation. This stage can occur due to some players are changing teams, the departure of the coach, the end of the season, or a team goes to the next level where players will work with another coach, or simply when the common goal has been achieved within the cycle. This stage is called **ADJOURNING**. The coach's task is to summarize the team's and all the individual player's contributions to the common goal, and to finish their cooperation in a positive manner. In the sport context, it is almost common for coaches to be removed from their posts within (1-2) hours after a bad game. This removes a possibility for a natural and humane exit.

During the initial contract negotiations, prior to assuming responsibility for a team, it is recommendable for coaches to ask for an exit clause option in advance, and to put this into the written contract. This allows the coach the opportunity to end the story, to show a level of care for each player and a respect for their common work and invested efforts, leaving the players with a feeling that it was worth it in the end. Also, in the sport realm, people's paths cross often, and you never know when you will meet a player again. This practice provides everybody a better opportunity for a new start.

Name of stage	Characteristics	Typical questions
FORMING	Players getting to know each other and the coach, think about the team's purpose and their contribution.	Why am I here? Why this team should be formed?
STORMING	Fighting for their own place and role, or for the coach's attention; conflicts may arise.	Who are you? What do you want?
NORMING	Players accept the team's goal, their roles, and responsibilities, agree about the common purpose and goal, and ready to cooperate.	What are we doing? What do I need to do? How will it be done?
PERFORMING	Great synergy, invested effort, support and trust, sport results evident.	What are our strengths?
ADJOURNING	End of a team, recapitulation of individual and team achievements.	What did we achieve? Why should we continue?

Picture 22. Stages and Characteristics of Team Development

The team development process repeats every time when the structure of the team members is changed. When some players leave the team, or new players arrive, this is not the same team, and this process must start all over again. If those changes are minimal (1-2 players) it will happen faster. This is a good explanation as to why changing a coach during the season usually does not produce better results.

Prerequisites of Effective Team Functioning

When a team is formed, there are certain prerequisites for the team to work successfully (Picture 22).

Firstly, it is a clear **team goal** that keeps the players together. Goal setting principles are described in chapter 6.1. If we talk about the national team, there is one additional, and lofty goal, which is patriotism and playing for your country. It gives a team additional strength and motivation.

A team needs a good **leader**; that is the coach. But it also needs an informal leader - a team captain. Both should cooperate with each other; a captain represents the interests of the team as a whole and negotiates for other players with the coach. Also, he/she is a link between the coach and players in certain situations. It can be the oldest or the most experienced player, but usually, when players are asked to choose their captain by themselves, they often chose the best one, a player of the highest quality. It is important that this person has developed communication skills, professional authority, and motivation for the cooperation with others. Likewise, a captain is a person who can take the risks in the difficult situations during the match on him/herself.

The functional team is the team with a **clear** distribution of tasks, **roles**, and responsibilities. Each player should be aware of the individual contribution to the team's success within the team framework; this strengthens functional cohesiveness.

Communication is a group process that is necessary for good intrateam relationships. It is necessary, especially in the beginning, to open the space for open communication. Effective communication between older and younger players is important.

Good communication and exchange of experience and knowledge contributes to the development of **creativity**. It is one of the important resources because it enables a higher level of using abilities and skills. It brings advancement in understanding the handball game and in responding to different situations. A good handball player is capable of 'thinking outside the box', he/she is capable of finding new solutions and bringing new ideas.

Social **support** is a very important factor for any success, especially in the team environment. Even though criticism can limit individual performance, support is accumulated from three levels: from teammates, from the coach and from within. It implies the giving of positive feedback, motivating, encouraging, and offering help if necessary.

The **feeling of accomplishment** is one of the most powerful motivational tools. It feeds the player's sense of competence and, on the team level, increases cohesiveness and dedication to the team. It is important to create conditions that enable the experience of success through the appropriate selection of tasks, often emphasizing the qualities of the team, without comparing it to others and their achievements.



Picture 23. Prerequisites of Effective Team Functioning

Values

The way we do anything in life reflects our values. Values are those things which we consider as important, they reflect something we believe, something that deeply motivates us to act one way or another. Values can be either a thing which we strive to achieve (terminal values) or ways in which we behave (instrumental values). Certain values are personal and do not involve other people, others are social, have interpersonal effect and can be obvious at the group level. Every single person possesses their own value system. Within a team, players should be congruent about team's values and can choose them. It can be done in a workshop with the team's sport psychologist.

Values are a certain form of belief, something that exists in our mind, not in physical world. Each value has three aspects: what we know, what we consider or believe important, how we feel about it and how we behave in relation to it.

Values are progressively shaped from childhood, we learn about them in our social environment and from other important persons, but also from our own experience. Values are mainly stable and enduring; our value framework influences everything we do.

It is especially important to foster certain values within a team. A coach can help to form a system of values and live them, together with players, every day. It should be visible in the team vision and mission, and congruent to the team's goals. Values function as a compass - helping a team to move in the right direction. It is necessary that the coach has values which drives his/her coaching practice and a team that plays by certain values.

There are different types of values:

1. *Attainment Values* - reflects the goals we strive for and are not related to the welfare of other people. It may be a player's personal accomplishment of gaining social recognition or the feeling of pride and self-respect by playing good handball. Such values push a player to attain a certain level of performance in sport (e.g., to become the MVP).
2. *Social Values* – reflects the aspirations we have for society or certain groups we belong to such as a club or team. These values represent guidelines for joint actions and relationships; they are fair, moral, have equal opportunities, they are just, respecting all, and can be seen in certain behaviours (e.g., every player has to play in the match).
3. *Competence Values* - represent how much we consider to be important and to show how good we are at whatever we are doing, and how much we want to demonstrate our superior abilities. These values are excellence, competence, ambition, and discipline. Failure to achieve such standards can cause disappointment or shame.
4. *Specific Sport Team Values* – these values are created by the entire team, including the coach and reflect the different individual systems of values. They also represent a background for the desired behaviour necessary to achieve team goals and reflects a team's mission. For example, it can be a value of relatedness, excellence, responsibility, dedication, unity, engagement, trust, persistence, etc. (Picture 24)

Practical example: a handball team can have a mission to become Olympians and qualify for the Olympic Games. Their guiding values that reflect the team's goals and the way to this achievement could be: responsibility (*to the team's goals, to teammates, to myself and my effort investment, to my task*), dedication (*to every part of the preparation process and to every step on this path, no matter how hard it may be*), family (*to consider the team and teammates as family, something that is supreme and valuable, something to work hard for*), enjoyment (*to play handball as a child, to enjoy the play itself, to find reasons every day why they love the game, to have fun*). Those values should be well explained, repeated often, used by all coaching and support staff, reflected in team's goals, constantly accentuated through different examples and situations, shared, mentioned in pep talks and post-game analyses. The purpose of this is to move the players towards behaviours that would reflect those values, which we expect to be fully accepted by every single player and coaching staff members.



Picture 24. The System of Values in Sport

Different values can be recognized in the different coaching styles and different approaches to coaching handball teams. Some coaches do it because they love handball and, as former players, they have a lifelong and deep emotional connection to the sport. Others may coach young athletes because they love to work with children and youth, they are interested in the welfare of children and wants to help their development. Some coaches are result orientated, they are very keen to coach champions and want to help them to achieve competitive success, but also want public recognition, status, and glory for their athletes, as well as themselves, too. There are some coaches that do it for money, they are financially orientated, and less interested in development or improvement. Thus, depending on the values of the coach, their approach to the coaching job and to their players will significantly differ. It is very important for the coach to become aware of his/her own values, which operate from the background.

Motivational Climate

In this part of the handbook, the reader becomes familiar with different factors that influence sport performance in handball. Most of them are related to the player and represent certain dispositional characteristics or skills that can be learned, but some of these influences are situational and related to the environment. In team sport, a motivational climate is one of these variables that influence the players' and team's motivation, system of values, emotional reactions, and behaviour on the handball court. It is a contextual variable and relates to the characteristics of the social environment. The motivational climate represents an achievement environment and its psychological structure. It is a psychological atmosphere within a team that is shaped by the interaction of the coach and players.



The motivational climate is assumed to be a function of the goals that are to be achieved, part of the evaluation and reward process, and how individuals are required to relate to each other in a particular team setting. The prevalence of a particular type of motivational climate depends on the external signs which operate in a particular environment. Motivational climate reflects the actions of coaches and parents, but also of teammates, such as their demands, expectations and values that are prominent in a particular achievement context. It also contributes to the establishment of the player's goal orientation and exists in team and individual sports alike.

There are two basic motivational climate patterns in sport which affect the athletes' motivation and their achievement behaviours through the perception of what is necessary to achieve success.

- *Mastery motivational climate (cooperative motivational climate)* - represents an environment in which players are reinforced by their coach to improve, work hard, cooperate, and help others in learning. Players are oriented towards learning, mastering skills, or improving personal competence. All believe that each of them is important and that each of them contributes to the team's effort and success. Individual success is evaluated according to the self-referenced criteria, not normatively referenced ones. Coaches who operate in this environment and shape its framework are moderately democratic, they appreciate learning, improvement and trying hard, and, according to literature, they are more instructive, supportive, and ready to give feedback. This is considered as a desirable motivational pattern, and it relates to different adaptive behaviours. Sport psychology research shows that players who train in such environments have higher confidence, a better relationship with their coach, are more persistent when facing failure, enjoy their sport better, feel less pressured, and finally have better sports achievements.
- *Performance motivational climate (competitive motivational climate)* - represents an environment in which the emphasis is put on outperforming others. Players perceive that poor performance or mistakes will be punished, that the high ability players will receive the most attention and recognition, and that the competition between team members is encouraged by their coach. A coach is less supportive, less ready to give positive feedback, and more autocratic. In such an environment, players often think that for sport success it is necessary to be favoured by their coach. The main accent is put on performance and the imperative on results, and these elements are of the highest values. Performance is permanently evaluated by the coach or by teammates. This type of a climate leads players to adopt the normative criterion for the assessment of competence. Performance motivational climate appears to evoke a pattern of motivational processes that are associated with maladaptive responses such as lower motivation and team cohesion, higher anxiety and pressure, bad coach-athlete relationship, diminished confidence, and finally worse sport results. According to scientific evidence from sport psychology research, this pattern is a less desirable one.

CREATING A MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE

In practice and in everyday life we often hear people interpreting competitive and game outcomes in similar ways, believing that one strong individual would be enough to diametrically change losers into winners; everybody needs the "Perfect Coach" to shape a winning environment and to create a winners' climate. In the sport context, a coach is the main situational factor that influences the shaping of a motivational climate.

In general, players are exposed to a goal structure created by their coaches who govern the achievement context. Also, they interactively communicate with their coach and react to his/her behaviour provoking in turn his/her reactions and next behaviour, i.e., indirectly influencing the motivational climate within team. Coaches, when talking to their players about their performance, during practice or during/after a competition, have choices to make about how to present information to the athletes. These choices become critical in determining the motivational climate. The coach's individual goal preference becomes evident through the messages about his/her expectations and through the evaluation of players' performance. It is also evident by the way he/she designs practice sessions, how he/she groups players, how he/she gives recognition, when he/she gives prizes, etc. In other words, a coach encourages a particular goal orientation by making certain cues, rewards and expectations salient and, in doing so, establishes a motivational climate. It promotes certain goals to players, who differ among themselves in how they give meaning to these cues. Players use situational signs to interpret which behaviours are required and expected and which actions are more valued for achieving success within a team or recognizing something as being successful. Players perceive a type of motivational climate created by the coach and act accordingly.

In the competitive sport context, the competitive climate is expected since winning is the criterion of success for coaches, athletes, and everybody who follows sport. However, in general, competition should be directed towards the opponents, and competitive sport can and should nurture a 'mastery' climate also, where improvement and advancement should be the main criteria of success. The competitive climate in practice sessions most often means competition against the teammates and the promotion of the normative criteria for the evaluation of success. Sport psychology teaches about the superiority of a mastery motivational climate, and it is possible to develop it following certain recommendations.

The so called 'mastery strategies' are grouped into six areas of the 'learning and achievement' environment that are identified by the acronym TARGET. It refers the task, authority, recognition, grouping, evaluation, and time dimensions. TARGET areas may be used to promote either performance or mastery motivational climate or may be used for the evaluation of the actual motivational climate and identification which climate pattern is more salient. Effects of TARGET variables are moderated by the coach's leadership behaviour and the influence over the athletes' cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses. Moving forward, TARGET dimensions will be explained regarding the coach's influence.

TASK – In the sport context, this is the design of tasks, drills, exercises and learning activities; i.e., a sport task is the central element of it. The task's dimensions include diversity, demanding features, challenge, control, and meaningfulness. All information related to these components are the main sources for the competence evaluation. According to this information, players decide the effort investment, feel satisfied or dissatisfied, or less or more motivated for further participation. A particular task and performance expected from a player affects the self-evaluation of his/her abilities, as well as the estimation of abilities and success of others. If a coach sets different tasks that need different skills in order to be accomplished, and offers a wider range of criteria for evaluation, he/she provides the prerequisites for creating a multidimensional framework of sport performance evaluations. In these circumstances, the necessity for comparison and competition between teammates is less salient; all players have greater chances to recognize their own capacities independently from others. In this way the players develop a sense of importance towards their abilities at their own level and everyone has a chance to find something they are good at. On the contrary, the absence of variety and challenge lead players to develop the sense of their own ability based on social comparison. The performance differences can be easily changed to a feeling of ability differences.

AUTHORITY - This dimension is related to responsibility in the learning process, and it is defined as the degree to which a coach is ready to involve players in decision-making processes. Players' motivation is higher if they feel autonomous and self-determined. That may be accomplished by respecting their opinions and interests, by listening to their propositions, by giving them the possibility of making choices congruent to his/her capabilities, i.e., by way of democratic leadership behaviours. In a motivational climate where the normative criterion of evaluation is most salient (competitive motivational climate), players tend toward an inappropriate choice, i.e., non-demanding tasks to prove their competence through the easy achievement of goals. In such an environment players worry about mistakes and have less control over situations; choosing non-demanding goals enables them to have better control over their achievements and outcomes. If a coach wants to create an incentive climate, he/she should listen players' opinions, give them the opportunity for choice among a wide range of tasks available (from easy ones to very hard and challenging), sufficient to attain certain goals. This way a player's choices are based on his/her actual interests and not by an intention to protect perceptions of his/her own abilities, and not from the need to make a good impression. On the contrary, if players do not participate in decision-making processes, they have fewer chances to develop self-management and self-monitoring skills, consequently, the performance motivational climate would be created.

RECOGNITION - This aspect relates to the use of rewards and incentives, one of the most obvious aspects of sport. It often seems that rewards and incentives are more important than the activity itself. Despite good intentions, the rewards and incentives used to enhance motivation may sometimes provoke detrimental effects. It happens especially when applied to an entire group with varying abilities and levels of interest, followed by the information or message about one's abilities, and not about effort invested. Also, the use of rewards and incentives can diminish player's self-determination and enhance the feeling of external control that provokes pressure and develops extrinsic motivation. Since in sport rewards and prizes are almost always public and given on the differential basis, they invite social comparison, and this contributes to the development of a performance motivational climate. If a coach recognizes individual progress and improvements, if he/she assures equal opportunities for the attainment of rewards and prizes, the prerequisites for a mastery motivational climate development are salient. Also, it is recommended that rewarding and awarding should be private, not public. If so, the player who has been rewarded receives the message that individual achievement is evaluated and recognized, i.e., that the reward has not been derived from social comparison and can feel proud and satisfied. Also, such a manner eliminates the possibility of incompetence and unsuccessfulness, which can consequently diminish motivation in others who only witness to awarding or rewarding. This influences the experience of players and their perceptions of the mastery motivational climate.

GROUPING - Represents the manner and frequency of players working together. It is the basis by means of which players are brought together or kept apart during practice. The ease with which they can change groups may influence their motivation. Research has shown that coaches treat groups differently, giving more instructions, more opportunities, support, and attention to more capable and adept groups. Coaches often have 'stars' in their teams, giving them much more attention and support, giving them more benefits than to others. This may have negative effects on the motivation other players and may endanger group cohesion. Coaches usually cannot hide these preferences, thus promoting social comparison and competitiveness between teammates. Also, by forming closed groups, based on the ability criteria (homogenous groups), a coach influences differentiation according to abilities between his/her athletes. Aiming to create a mastery motivational climate, it is recommended a coach should use and promote the circulation of players between groups to provide multiple grouping arrangements, and to encourage cooperation. Also, it may be recommended to treat the team as a heterogeneous group, offering differently demanding tasks; this is especially important with children. In this way each athlete may find something to prove his/her competence and the necessity for comparisons is lowered.

EVALUATION - How players are evaluated is one of the most crucial factors that affect their motivation. The question is not do we have to evaluate, but how to evaluate. It is necessary if we want our players to perceive this information as useful, positive, and motivating. Evaluation can have detrimental effects on motivation when it is normatively based (on winning or outperforming others), public and linked to ability assessment. Young players are mainly oriented toward learning and improvement, and they are more ready to use specific task features and different strategies to accomplish sport skills and achievements. Fact is that social intergroup comparison is almost always present in sport, but a coach has a mission to diminish its importance. It may be accomplished by using transparent criteria (standards) for evaluation, which put the accent on individual progress and associate success with effort invested and hard work. Also, athletes' work should be permanently monitored, and be encouraged towards self-monitoring. These preconditions lead to the creation a mastery motivational climate.

TIMING - This dimension labels the time which players have at their disposal for the realization of certain sport goals and may be a very important motivational factor. It is related to the other TARGET dimensions, as such task design (e.g., how much players are expected to accomplish within a specific time period), authority (e.g. are players allowed to create the practice schedule, order or time for the completion of a particular task), grouping (e.g. is the instructional time equal for all) and evaluation (e.g. how strict time pressure for the task completion of performance is imposed on athletes). For the creation of the mastery motivational climate, a coach should consider that different players need different time for task accomplishment and improvement, and this tempo should be respected. Also, it is important to keep in mind that deadlines function as external pressure and indirectly diminish motivation in any achievement context and in sport also.

The way a coach, as the most important situational factor, will operate in the area of TARGET dimensions determines the prevalent motivational climate in a team.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are several recommendations to create the right motivational climate in a sport setting:

1. Facilitate decision making by the players.
2. Give players a good rationale when requesting a task to be done a certain way.
3. Try to see the player's perspective.
4. Express an understanding for the player's feelings.
5. Provide feedback directed towards the accomplishment of tasks and personal improvement.
6. Seek to diminish external pressures and demands.
7. Encourage initiatives.
8. Provide opportunities for individual choice instead of requiring all players to conform to the same activity expectation.
9. Develop a sense of teamwork and mutual support.
10. Emphasize the importance of effort over outcome.
11. Focus on personal improvement and contributions to the team.
12. Reduce the focus on "winning at all costs".

Research has shown that a mastery motivational climate contributes to the satisfaction of many psychological needs. It would be the case if authority figures (coaches) avoid the following:

- a) comparisons or evaluations among players based on ability level,
- b) punishing or ridiculing poor performance,
- c) creating competition within teams, and
- d) providing attention to players based on ability level.

As previously explained, the next table brings the key aspects of the TARGET model in relation to the mastery and performance motivational climates. It should serve as guidelines for the improvement of the actual motivational climate or as the indicators that may be used for its evaluation and identification.

Descriptions of Mastery and Performance Climates and TARGET Structure

	Mastery Motivational Climate	Performance Motivational Climate
TASK	challenging and diverse; use of equipment; active involvement	absence of variety or challenge; basic drills dominate; analytical techniques
AUTHORITY	athletes are given choices and leadership roles; encouragement of self-management skills; free to make suggestions to the coach	no players' participation in decision-making processes
RECOGNITION	private; based on individual progress and effort invested; equal opportunities for reward assured by the coach	public; based on social comparison; performance outcome is rewarded
GROUPING	cooperative learning and interaction of teammates is promoted; partner exercises and group performance, use of flexible and heterogeneous group arrangements	groups formed based on ability; closed, homogeneous groups
EVALUATION	based on mastery task and individual improvement; players involved in self-evaluations; evaluations are private and meaningful	based on winning and outperforming others; public
TIME	time requirements adjusted to personal capabilities; developmental skill progression is respected	time allocated for learning uniformed for all athletes; extensive skill progression

It is also important to say that in a sport context, there are many 'important others' who are somehow involved and influence the development of the motivational climate; these could be parents, but also club management, or media. Furthermore, certain common rules and procedures in the sport practice (for example, rewarding winners, the longest playing time reserved for the best, etc.), and demands coming from the club management, transmitted through the atmosphere or the coach's behaviour, may directly or indirectly negatively influence the motivational climate in the team. It would be important to interactively take into account the influence of all these factors. Neither should the players' contribution to the development of the motivational climate be ignored. If we want to have satisfied and successful players, it is important to recognize their needs (not fads) and to create a healthy environment where those needs would be satisfied and respected.

Team Cohesion

Many parents have their children participate in sport to become good team players and to learn how to interact with others. In sport, being a part of the team has a specific value, we are taught to value cooperation and teamwork as a special force that can bring sport success. Every coach wants to have team that has a high level of team spirit. It is called cohesiveness. It can be defined as a dynamic group process which is reflected in the tendency of a group to efficiently work together in the pursuit of its goals and for the satisfaction of the members' affective needs.



Cohesion has two dimensions:

1. Task cohesion - conveys the unity that the team expresses toward a common goal, i.e., the way how well the players work together. It is also called functional cohesion.
2. Social cohesion - refers to concerns of relationships between team members and represents the level of unity of a team in social and emotional relational aspects, i.e., how much the players like each other and spend time together outside the court. It is also called emotional cohesion.

Each player feels to a certain extent, close, similar, and related to other teammates and to the team as a whole. In other words, cohesion can be perceived from the viewpoint of a single player and his/her attraction to the group or from the group standpoint, representing relationships between the whole team. There are four different orientations about team cohesion:

- Group-task (the way a team functions to achieve the goals)
- Group-social (overall quality of relationships in the group)
- Individual task (the extent to which the individual's actions are coordinated with the group as a whole to achieve common goals)
- Individual-social (quality of individual social relationships within a team)

In more cohesive teams all those orientations are well developed on an individual or team level.

COHESION AND SPORT SUCCESS

It is well known from scientific evidence and from the sport practice that better cohesion brings better results, but also better results improve the team's cohesion. But the real influence of cohesion on team sports performance depends on the prevalence of a certain type of cohesiveness, i.e., the source of the team's cohesion. If both types of cohesion are well developed, i.e., if task and social cohesion are both high, it is the best option and those teams are the most successful. Thus, task cohesion is effective and has influence; it can bring a team success even in the case of low social cohesion. However, contrariwise is not the case. If team cohesion is based only on social cohesion and task cohesion is low, the team will not achieve results and it can be harmful.

Damage occurs due to deterioration of relations. It happens because we have a team of friends who are frustrated because they do not function well on the court and because of their good relationships they easily dare to complain to each other about play and it is highly possible that conflicts will arise. If both types of cohesiveness are low this handball team cannot be successful (Picture 25).

		SOCIAL COHESION 	SOCIAL COHESION 
 TASK COHESION		BEST RESULTS TOP handball teams	Good results
 TASK COHESION		Damage possible	Weak results or no results

Picture 25. Team cohesion and performance success

Conflicts and rivalry can appear in any team and influence the team success or individual players to give their best. It is necessary to have open communication about the issues and not ignore them. The more cohesive a team, the less likely the players want to be different. When pressures and hard moments come, it is more likely that players will seek comfort and understanding from their teammates who can understand their experience and feelings the best. Also, the players will contribute more when they would feel better in the team environment, i.e., when they feel supported and appreciated for their efforts.

In less cohesive teams two group processes may appear. One is social loafing (in a group environment, especially if the individual contribution cannot be assessed, players may show a tendency to invest less effort than they would invest if alone. They do not have to be aware of it). The other is diffusion of responsibility, a group phenomenon in which people are less likely to act when in the presence of a group of people because they expect somebody else to act. It can happen during the critical moments on the offense. Clearly defined values protect a cohesive team from these phenomena.

If a coach wants to have a successful and cohesive team, there are several directions to be respected:

- Team goals must be clearly defined.
- Player's roles and tasks and responsibility must be clear.
- Expectations of players should be high, otherwise they will not be committed and disciplined.
- The focus should be on task and skilled performance.
- The collective work and cooperation should be accentuated, not individuality ('WE' before 'I' orientation).

DEVELOPING TEAM COHESION

Developing team cohesion is a long-term process. It requires every member of the team to commit to the team and its goals, and to take responsibility for his/her actions that help achieve these goals. It does not happen by chance, but needs skilled leadership, an understanding of team processes, but also care and love for people, dedication for the team mission, wisdom, good communication, and a lot of patience. In other words, it needs a knowledge of sport and psychology, but also personal skills and a 'feeling for people'. A coach's role is crucial in the process of a developing team's cohesion. His/her influence on the team environment includes determining and modelling values and behaviours that are acceptable (e.g., cooperation, hard work) and not acceptable (egoism, loafing). Also, it is impossible to force group of handball players to become a cohesive team; some may disagree with the team's orientation or their roles, a coach can try to fix it by punishments or warnings, but it does not have a long-lasting effect, force always produces resistance. A coach should create such an environment where players feel a team as their team, not only as the coach's team. A coach should present his/her vision in a way that is congruent to players' needs, making them willingly follow him/her. Open and sincere communication, and a coach's availability for players and showing care, always help.



The most used intervention for increasing the level of cohesiveness in any group is team building. It can be done with the help of a sport psychologist. Different methods and tasks can be used to improve emotional and social relations and communication within a team or team's effectiveness through a better coordination of team roles and responsibilities.

<p>DEVELOPING SOCIAL COHESION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - improve communication between players - introduce more pairs/small groups activities - encourage fun activities outside practice sessions - organise other common activities (theatre, volunteering, hiking...) - celebrate successes together - provide the team with unique identifiers (shirts, logos, sweatshirt) - create common team routines (common warm-up, entering to the court, team greeting, common relaxation practice, support from the bench) - encourage players to make sacrifices for the team (e.g., older players give more time on the court to the younger players) - play together (board games, escape room) - be supportive and encourage inter-team support - promote team norms, values, and mission, feed the pride
<p>DEVELOPING TASK COHESION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - explain each player's role, tasks, and responsibility, ask about his/her opinion about it and balance both - achieve role acceptance of all players within your game system, discuss expectations - help players believe in the importance of every role and their contribution to team success - define necessary interactions between players and make them practice it in different ways - encourage cooperation and the investment of effort - use situational trainings and exercises - accentuate positive aspects of the game in after game analyses (even if the game was lost), encourage communication about problems in the game between players

To conclude, in every handball team, players interact with each other all the time. A highly cohesive handball team would encourage players to accept their roles, to comply with team norms, to invest their effort towards a common goal. In turn, a player's actions can contribute to the team's behaviour and increase cohesion. The team's cohesion influences each player's cognitions, emotions, and behaviour, that in turn influences the team's cognition, emotions, behaviours, and the whole team climate. Players in a cohesive team breathe together. It does not mean that they cannot enjoy their company in small groups formed by players who relate better. It is normal when lots of people are together, especially for a long time in the same place. It means that every player should be comfortable in the company of any other player even though they are not best friends. A team is a living organism, and a cohesive team grows and strengthens better.

8. PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION FOR COACHES



"Never stop learning!"

8. PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION FOR COACHES

In contemporary sport, demands and expectations are high and the millstone keeps turning; coaches often do not have a break, and many of them are permanently under stress. Handball coaches need to be aware of the psychological pitfalls of high pressure because they can transfer their stress and emotional reactions to the team. Also, cumulative stress effects can be dangerous for health. There are gradually more modern coaches who pay attention to personal psychological preparation. A coach who has high self-monitoring abilities is more ready to evaluate his/her behaviour and decisions made; is more interested in relations to his/her athletes; is more ready to analyse the way athletes understand his/her messages, intentions, and acts, and is more ready to change his/her leadership strategy of some behavioural patterns. Such coaches are more responsive to their trainees, and more flexible in their own behaviours. They are motivated to work on themselves and cooperate with a sport psychologist for their athletes' improvement.



Also, there is one model of psychological preparation for sport teams that includes the sport psychologist's cooperation (education psychological preparation consultations, counselling about individual professional and team issues) with a coach who further works on same issues and topics with players and team.

8.1. PROFESSIONAL ROLE OF THE COACH

"To be a coach is a hard job. You should be "all-in-one", like a multifunctional kitchen aid."

To be a coach is a very demanding task. It includes many different roles. Every coach should be an expert in his/her sport, a good educator, communicator, and psychologist, but also sometimes a substitute parent, a teacher, a driver, a chef, a hairdresser, PR, and social media expert etc. Coaching job is one of the most stressful jobs, especially in top elite sport level.

To understand psychological demands of coach's complex role it is necessary to explain the concept of leadership.

Leadership

Many practitioners and researchers attempt to answer a key question – what makes a good leader? The concept of leadership is complex, it is like a puzzle. The picture is visible when all parts are coming together in the right way. The complexity of coaching could be expressed through the different personal and professional relationships a coach establishes with his/her athletes, i.e., the interactions between coaches and athletes determine the dynamics of sport domain. A coach's leadership style affects the emotional and motivational atmosphere in training sessions, and influences communication processes and interactions between all agents of a particular sport group or team. The abilities of a coach to construct an environment that fosters optimal learning and improvement is a key element of athlete development.

Definitions of leadership vary depending on the context with the changing criteria, such as personal traits, personal values, behaviour, group needs, and the situation. Leadership can be defined as the behavioural process of influencing individuals and groups striving toward set goals. To be a leader is a role that involves influence and interaction; directs towards goal achievement, and results in structural changes within a group. In a sport context formal leadership primarily means the coach's leadership behaviour, but it has to be considered as an interactive process flowing forth and back between a coach and his/her athletes. In a sport context leadership behaviour includes decision making processes, instruction, motivational techniques, communication, establishing specific and general short- and long-term goals, feedback giving, creating relatedness among athletes, and encouraging team's cohesion, etc. A coach must create a strategy to lead athletes towards the desired goals; he/she has to plan activities and procedures necessary for goals' accomplishments. A good coach must have a vision, has to be able to build trust in his/her athletes, and has to be capable of inspiring and convincing his/her athletes to follow this vision voluntarily, and to transform it, together with them, into the reality. In this way, he/she has to be ready to encourage, direct, help his/her athletes, not only in the face of difficulties or problems, but also in the choices and decisions athletes have to make.

Coaching has been usually viewed as interpersonal process. It has been influenced by the coach's individual difference variables, situational determinants, quality, and nature of coach-athlete/s relationship, as well as outcomes and goal accomplishments. All these factors influence the coach's actual behaviour that may not always be congruent with the behaviour expected or required from the officials or the management structure, neither to the athlete's preferences for coaching behaviour. The degree of congruence between those facets of leadership behaviour determines group performance and member satisfaction.

To find the answer to question ‘what makes a good leader’ means to consider different antecedents of leadership related to the coach’s and players’ individual difference variables and contextual influence.



ANTECEDENTS OF COACH’S LEADERSHIP

Antecedent variables influence a coach’s behaviour, athletes’ evaluations, and preference of these behaviours, as well as their perceptions and recall of coach leadership. There are three groups of antecedents.

1. COACHES’ INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES VARIABLES

Individual difference variables are key factors that affect both the actual and the perceived leader behaviour. Those variables include personality traits, coach’s motivational structure, coach’s attitudes, expectations, behavioural intentions, values, and goals, as well as age, gender, or experience.

- *Personality traits* are considered to be the most important among these variables. Research of the coach’s personality were initially directed towards identifying certain traits that differentiate the successful from the unsuccessful coaches, or the actual from the ideal coaches. Most of the research assumes that leadership qualities are innate and that a successful coach may be born with certain traits related to leader effectiveness. However, no universal leadership traits have not been identified. The list of important traits was very extensive and varied. One of the most consistent and important traits according to player’s evaluation is emotional stability. A coach has to be an emotionally stable person, capable to control his/her emotions, and show a stable pattern of emotional reactions. It means that a coach in stressful sport situation should be capable to react calmly, in a ‘cold-blooded’ manner, not letting his/her emotions take control over him/her because,

in the latter case a person cannot react and think rationally. Uncontrolled and too intense reactions lower the player's level of trust to their coach. Also, good leaders seemed to be dominant, highly intelligent, independent, reliable, honest, inventive, and ready to take responsibility. A good coach is sensitive to the changes in environments, takes personal care for his/her athletes, must have good communication skills, and be capable in building good interpersonal relationships to his/her athletes. Additionally, players like when a coach has a good sense of humour and knows how to diminish tense situations. The personality traits of a coach relate in general to his/her decision-making style, communication processes, and social interactions with athletes.

- *Behavioural intentions* imply decisions on how to behave in a sport context related to roles a coach accepts in the sport environment. It is related to personal values and influences different behaviours that a coach will manifest, as well as goal establishment and decision-making processes. If, for example, a coach views his/her role as a teacher, he/she will put the accent on learning, cooperation, promotion of fun, personal development, etc. If a coach believes that his/her mission is to 'create winners', he/she would be much more severe, authoritative, even punitive.
- The coaches' *beliefs* and *expectations* also influence his/her leadership behaviour and response to their athletes. If, for example, a coach perceives their athletes to be intrinsically motivated and self-determined, he/she would allow him/herself to be informational towards those athletes without risking losing him/her being in control of the situation. On the contrary, if a coach perceives athletes to be extrinsically motivated, he/she will act in a controlling way in order to ensure that expected or required behaviours are properly executed. Coaches evaluate athletes' values and motives differently and are less ready to invest in those who are less perspective due to their abilities, motivational structure, attitudes, or any other feature that the coach may consider important. Psychology states that the coach's expectations strongly predict the athletes' achievement, not due to self-fulfilling prophecy effects, but mainly because they are accurate. The coach's opinion about a player can be recognised from the coach's behaviour, without words. If you want to have more successful players, find a reason to believe in them.
- A coach's *motivational structure* also influences his/her leadership style, the way he/she interacts with athletes, and the way of shaping the psychological or motivational climate in a sport team. Research shows that if coaches are more intrinsically motivated for coaching, it is more likely that they will be more self-confident, more oriented towards learning and mastery. They will more often use a democratic, rather than controlling, leadership style and create a cooperative motivational climate.
- *Age, gender, coaching experience, and education* may also influence a coach's leadership behaviour. For example, women tended to adopt a more democratic and supportive style and a less autocratic or directive style than men did, women preferred to teach, men preferred to coach. It can be explained in terms of gender differences in social behaviour. More male players than female players believed that leadership style was dependent on the coach's gender and that coaching opportunities were more limited for females. Some scientific results showed that both male and female athletes had stronger preferences for male coaches. Coaching experience and education level positively influence the coaching process. More positive experiences are reflected in the coach's self-esteem, goal establishing procedures, athlete's career planning and shaping effective strategies for coaching. Higher education, especially in the coaching area, allows the coach to be more flexible while coaching, protects him/her better from 'trial and error' procedures, because expert knowledge provides him/her with a wider range of available strategies or coaching behaviours. Also, an educated coach is more ready and prepared to consider other factors that influence the athlete's performance such as like psychological factors. These coaches are more ready to cooperate with a sport psychologist.



PLAYERS' INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES VARIABLES

Players' individual differences variables such as age, gender, level of competition, motivational structure, beliefs, and personality are presumed to affect athletes' perceptions of coaching behaviours and their responses to those behaviours. Consequently, coaches may respond differently, changing his/her leadership behaviours in regard to those differences.

Players' preference for social support has increased progressively with age, i.e., from cadets to senior level. The players' need for the coach's instruction decreased with age. Young female basketball players preferred more social support and democratic behaviour, and less autocratic behaviour than older players.

Girls and female athletes prefer reinforcement and encouragement more than boys. Also, girls expressed greater dislike for nonreinforcement, punishment and punitive technical instructions than boys. Female players preferred positive feedback behaviour more than their male counterparts, who preferred coach's autocratic behaviour as opposed to the females. Many coaches do not understand gender differences, although they should; it is necessary if one wants to use the best methods for his/her athletes' preparation, especially for female athletes and especially because the sport system in general is more adapted to male minds and roles. A sensitive approach and education about this theme may help coaches to supersede potential gaps. Adopting leadership behaviours congruent to athletes' specific needs and expectations aids success and satisfaction and diminishes risk of discrimination.

The athletes' level of competition may influence their expectations and preferences for coaching behaviours. Players who competed on the lower level of competition preferred coaches who provide

more positive feedback than the players who competed on the higher competitive level and need a coach to be a benevolent autocrat. Higher level players need more of the coach's support because of the different sport success evaluation criterion than less experienced and lower quality players. The athlete who competes on the higher levels and achieves results needs authoritative feedback information and confirmation about his/her competence. They need the most competent source to evaluate their performance and that is the coach. Other sources such as parents, peers are not considered as a relevant source for giving feedback anymore.

Players' beliefs and motivational structure influence their choice of sport environment. Players will feel better and be more compatible with a coach who possesses a similar motivational structure. Those with normative success criteria would probably react more negatively to a coach's criticism or punitive behaviour because they will be translated into the feeling of failure, incompetence, and inappropriateness, thus diminishing the athlete's motivation more than in the case of athletes who adopted the self-referenced criterion.

Anxiety and self-esteem. Anxious athletes perceive their coaches as less reinforcing and encouraging and as more punitive than they actually are because of greater vigilance to threatening stimuli and due to their tendency to generalize threat even when it objectively, does not exist. It is more likely that coaches who foster cooperation and try hard to build team cohesion will have less anxious players, who will evaluate coach's behaviour more positively. The low self-esteem players respond more positively to coaches who are reinforcing and more supportive, and less positively to the non-supportive, less caring coaches in comparison to the more confident players. players who have high-self-esteem. The level self-esteem influences the players' perception of the coach's leadership behaviour, and also that it can be increased by the appropriate approach of the coach towards these players; it has important repercussions for the sport practice, especially when one works with children and young athletes.



2. SITUATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

There are several different situational factors that are likely to influence the manner in which a coach behaves and interacts considering players' individual differences variables. We may distinguish between the nature of the sport, task type, practice sessions vs. games, organisational goals and officials' influences, and culture.

The athletes involved in interdependent tasks (team sports) or variable tasks (open sports, as are team sports) preferred more training and instruction than did athletes in independent and invariable tasks (individual, closed sports). The latter preferred more democratic behaviour than their respective counterparts who preferred the autocratic behaviour more.

Leadership behaviour varies depending on if a coach leads a training session or a game. Some coaches are freer to behave uninhibitedly during practice sessions, and do not allow themselves to react impulsively during the game due to the presence of other people who watch them. On the contrary, some coaches may completely ignore others during the game and react freely (positively or negatively) that depends on his/her personality, athletes' performance, game outcome and situation on the court or field. This may be influenced by previous successes or failures, desired goals, pre-competitive arrangements with the athlete(s), etc. Players may also perceive their coach's behaviour differently due to the game outcome. For example, if a coach criticizes players, it is more likely that they will accept it and think that they deserved it if they lost the game. On the contrary, it is possible that some athletes may interpret the same message more personally when they won.



Interactions between coaches, officials and management, especially in elite and professional clubs, may influence the coaching approach and leadership behaviour. If a coach operates in the stressful environment, and if stress is caused by managerial pressures and demands, he/she may experience burn-out and a conflict between his/her opinions, realistic possibilities, athletes' reactions, and officials' goals. Coaches who experienced higher burn-out symptoms were perceived by their athletes as less instructive, less supportive, and more autocratic than democratic in their decision-making processes.

Some research shows cultural influences on leadership behaviour; with an Eastern culture players preferred more autocratic behaviours, social support and perceived their coaches to be more autocratic. With a western culture, players preferred more training and instruction, and perceived their coaches to be more instructive, rewarding and more democratic. It is also possible that the type of sport or some other individual difference variables may moderate cultural influences.

Different leadership styles also may have different impact on players' reactions, sport experience and behaviour, on team processes, and finally on the team's success.

COACHING STYLES

Leadership in sport is a process that involves the interaction of a coach, an athlete, and situational factors. The coach's leadership style determines the way he/she interacts with his/her athletes and on his/her decision-making processes.



The coach's social interactions consist of several different processes such as: the coach's instructiveness, supportiveness, and rewarding behaviour. Instructiveness relates to coaching behaviours aimed at improving athletes' performance by emphasizing and facilitating hard and strenuous training, instructing them in skills, techniques, and tactics of a particular sport, clarifying athletes' roles and their mutual relationships, and structuring and coordinating athletes' activities. Supportiveness relates to his/her readiness to give social support to athletes. Coaching behaviour is characterized by the concern for the individual athlete's welfare, positive group atmosphere and warm interpersonal relationships with athletes. Rewarding behaviours reinforces an athlete by recognizing, praising, and rewarding effort exerted, improvement, and good performance.

Making decisions consists of two different processes: cognitive and social. The cognitive process is concerned with the rationality of the decisions, i.e., with identifying the problem, defining the problem and its relevant constraints clearly, generating and evaluating different actions needed for problem solving, selecting the best alternative to achieve the desired end. The social process of decision-making refers to the extent to which the coach allows players to participate in the cognitive processes of deciding. We distinguish between autocratic (a coach alone makes decisions, he/she does not allow athletes' participation) and the participative decision-making styles (coach includes athletes in decision-making processes).

In the most general manner, we may distinguish leaders as more or less task oriented or people oriented. In sport, we usually distinguish between autocratic and democratic coaches.

DEMOCRATIC COACH

A democratic coach is more player-oriented than task-oriented. Those coaches are more supportive, more instructive, and more ready to reinforce, encourage and to give positive feedback to their athletes. They use a less controlling leadership style, ask their players about their opinions related to planning training sessions, also solving some problems that may appear during training or competition. Sometimes, they consult with athletes individually or with the whole team, and then make decisions by themselves. Those coaches, together with their players, make some plans and permanently evaluate, redirect, and help players' actions towards the desired goals. A democratic coach approach to players is more individual, and their personal care of each player is more manifest. They care about conflicts in the team and try to help players in solving them. They sometimes take the role of the 'compromiser' trying to find common features when half of the team chooses one option and the other half another one. Even though the coach is the leader, sometimes these coaches are ready to negotiate to reach agreement to reduce conflicts and increase team cohesion.

The democratic coach takes care of quality of communication between players and tries to build warm interpersonal relationships with each of them. He/she is more socially sensitive, takes time to talk with players about their personal life. The democratic coach is, in general, more oriented towards players as persons and good interpersonal relationships. He/she is not imperatively oriented towards outcomes, results, or winning, but that does not mean that this is not important. In the case of any failure, it is more likely for the democratic coach that he/she will first talk to the players, trying to analyse their performance and even trying to comfort them. Punishing athletes for bad performance, manifesting anger for losing the game or failing to accomplish a particular goal, shouting or humiliating players are not characteristic of the democratic coach's behaviour. For the democratic coach, all athletes are valuable and contribute to the team's success. Consequently, players perceive such a coach as a parent, a teacher or even a friend, and tend to have closer interpersonal relationship with him/her. This leads to a good coach-athlete relationship and to better performance. This coaching style is more appropriate for senior teams, and high-level quality players.

Coaches are sometimes apprehensive to demonstrate the democratic style, thinking that they could lose authority within the team. Asking for opinions does not mean that the coach is insecure. It means that he/she respects players as active participants in their common story and tries to see different perspectives, which is clever and helpful. In younger ages such behaviour does not include talking about game tactics but giving young players opportunity to choose the play or content for the closing of training sessions. Both democratic and autocratic styles of coaching have some advantages and disadvantages.

ADVANTAGES OF DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP STYLE

- Helps reduce anxiety when the task has been completed unsuccessfully.
- Better for insecure athletes who need a more supportive approach.
- Such coaches are able to elicit input in decision-making process.
- Supports a cooperative motivational climate, enhances players' motivation, players are more independent.

DISADVANTAGES OF DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP STYLE

- Less effective in highly stressful situations when it is necessary to react immediately, to take full responsibility and in which great power of the leader is needed (critical moment of the match).
- Sometimes shows a lack of concern about the successful execution of the task.
- May overreact to players' interpersonal conflicts, giving them too much importance.
- May cause anxious responses in players who are highly oriented towards task accomplishment.

AUTOCRATIC COACH

Autocratic coaches are more oriented towards task accomplishment and outcome than towards people. They are less supportive, less instructive, less rewarding; use a more controlling leadership style. They are predominantly oriented towards performance and outcomes, and less concerned with players. Autocratic coaches are more directive, they are not ready to allow players' participation in decision-making, also sometimes even the assistant coaches. Those coaches work relatively independently from their players, they usually do not explain their actions, neither do they report how they handle issues or make decisions. They usually solve the problems by themselves, using the information available at the time. Their approach is authoritative, they think that players are not here to think, just to listen and work. The autocratic coaches are less flexible in comparison to the democratic coaches; they are also less innovative, less ready to try new training or teaching methods. Also, autocratic coaches are not open to criticism and often arrange situations to their benefits.

The autocratic coach influences players through authoritative leadership, a severe approach, and his/her position power. Those coaches establish goals for their athletes, sometimes giving them limited time for their accomplishment, thus creating time pressure. The autocratic coaches punish for bad performance, failure, or insufficient effort investment, but at the same time, some of them are more tolerant towards high achievers, i.e., high ability players who may be treated like stars. The consequence of this approach may be the development of fear of the coach. Autocratic coaches demand respect and obedience. They are less oriented towards and interested in individuals, and they often clearly separate the players' sport and outside-of-sport life, in which they are not much interested. Many autocratic coaches are ready to help or to give support to their athletes only in case of severe problems (as are, for example, injuries, illness, and family members' death). They are more ready to label competent athletes as worthy persons, because sport abilities are instrumental for their main goals - winning or good performance. On the contrary, they are less ready to invest their capacities, time, etc. in less competent athletes, they can easily replace them because they are of low importance for the team.

They create a competitive motivational climate in their teams; this way abilities and personal differences between players are magnified. It may endanger athletes' cohesion. The autocratic coach approaches coaching professionally and acts rationally. Some autocratic coaches react impulsively and

emotionally during competitions, when their players play poorly or lose, primarily due to their strong orientation towards results and winning.

Autocratic leadership is more appropriate when athletes are less mature, and the preference for autocratic behaviour also increases with the athletes' sport experience. A rationally autocratic approach is necessary in coaching children and youth because they need a firm and clear structure to feel secure (despite that they will often protest against it). A coach needs to be a nice, calm, lovable person, but also firm and well organised, because young players respond good to such a working framework. In preadolescent years coach should have similar attributes as a good father. It means that he/she is always there, and sensitive to emotions and needs. The coach is interested in performance, and he/she will push young player to improve, but always care about human being first, athlete second. A coach wants to teach children fundamentals of handball plays but also to have fun and to fall in love with the game, to enjoy handball regardless of team victories or personal achievement.

ADVANTAGES OF AUTOCRATIC LEADERSHIP STYLE	DISADVANTAGES OF AUTOCRATIC LEADERSHIP STYLE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More efficient, energy directed primarily towards the task. • Most of time is dedicated to work. • Designates tasks quickly, clearly structures the training and situation. • More effective than democratic coach in unfavourable leadership situations (unstructured tasks, group resistance), effective for critical situations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May raise anxiety and develop a fear of the coach in some athletes. • Sacrifices personal welfare of the members for the effectiveness. • May not work well with important subordinates, does not allow secondary leadership. • Not sensitive enough for athletes' needs, ignores conflicts between athletes, sometimes stimulates intra-team rivalry. • May negatively influence players' motivation due to performance oriented climate. • Players often stop working in the coach's absence.

It cannot be simply said that one leadership style is better than the other. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Which style is better depends on the leader, athletes, type of sport, and situations. In some sport situations autocratic behaviour, for example, is not only appropriate, but necessary. For example, health and safety issues surrounding training or competitions should not be the subject of debate or democratic consensus. On the other hand, oppressive behaviours where the athlete is physically or emotionally intimidated by his/her coach, are not only unhealthy, but they are wrong. i.e., the right measure is crucial. However, players' participation in decision making processes, typical for the democratic coach, contributes to players' feeling of self-determination, leads to greater acceptance of the decision, and, therefore, to the more efficient execution of it, and higher motivation.

In sport there are teams who have two coaches, and very often they are 'compatible leaders', one is more autocratic, the other is democratic; one is more task oriented, the other is player oriented, that is a good combination. Some coaches, also, have characteristics typical for both leadership styles that enable them to be more effective and flexible, depending on situation. According to the literature on sport motivation, democratic leadership produces more adaptive responses of athletes and positively influences athletes' motivation.

Players' development and psychosocial growth as well as sport performance and behaviours in the sport context are significantly influenced by leadership style and the personal influence of their coaches. Because of that, coaches have a great responsibility, not only for the result, but even more for the people they work with. It is very important, especially when working with young people, to be a good role model.

Coach as a Role Model

Each coach possesses his/her coaching philosophy and certain systems of values. His/her coaching happens within that framework, not in the vacuum. As an educator, intentionally but also unconsciously, a coach transfers values, attitudes and behavioural patterns to the players who perceive a coach as a model. It always happens, not only in the moments when a coach wants to model something. The coach is a model to players simply by what he/she says, his/her mannerism, responses to the joy or stresses of competition, his/her reactions to mistakes or achievements, his/her relations with other people. One of the coach's important tasks is to encourage desirable values in players, not only by talking about them, but also by living them and demonstrating them through behaviour. Successful sport teams are characterized by clear and structured goals and people with different roles are arranged according to responsibilities. If a coach, as the leading person, wants everything to function well, he/she has to function well; have a clear vision of all duties, and invest permanent effort to make a whole from different parts. In the other words, a coach has to be everything he/she wants players to be, to show the right example. For example, if you request accuracy and hard work from your players, you are the first one who always has to demonstrate the same.

If a coach wants to use the huge potential of his modelling role to create the desired framework, his/her influence will be more useful if it is planned. Players learn from the coach through the social learning approach anyhow, but it will be better if a coach knows what he/she wants to transfer to the players and how.

Dominant channel humans get information in the visual form. No matter what you talk about as a coach, what are you doing will always have a much stronger impact. Players watch and adopt behaviours, attitudes, values, communication patterns, emotional reactions etc. When the coaching philosophy is congruent to his/her actions we can say that a coach is authentic; players trust authentic coaches more. Players do not like double standards. Do not ever underestimate the player's ability to understand and recognize your actions and what drives you, or what are you trying to hide. They will expose it even when they are not speaking about. If a coach struggles to practice what he/she preaches, eventually his players will find out. Once this happens, players will take the coach less seriously, which results in less effective coaching. Coaches with double standards are a digging hole for themselves. Players are motivated to understand the coach's behaviour and learn very fast the fine signs of coach's feelings and reactions, trying to adjust their behaviour.



Coaches are trying not only to teach handball techniques and tactics, but also to educate their players. This is a long-term process that needs persistence and patience, but it is very important. Sometimes it can seem that the players did not get any message, and no changes are obvious; in such moments it is important to remember that adopting new information or behavioural direction and to change yourself is also a process that needs time. Players need some time to internally process information, test it mentally and in real life, and when they see that it works, to adopt the new pattern that will be visible in behaviour on the court. It can be especially true when it comes to young players. They do not have enough experience and sometimes do not understand well what the coach is talking about ('repetitio est mater studiorum') or cannot find the way or situation where to apply it. It may seem that player is not coachable, but he/she is probably trying to integrate new instruction or message to his/her experience. It is important to remember that a big part of the coaching job is repeating the same things; so, in such moment is important to be patient and stay calm.

Coaches should be a good role model to the players, and they also should be a good role model to their collaborators, assistant coaches, support staff members, even to parents, especially during the game. With their behaviours, coaches set a standard that is valid and acceptable in their sport environment. Of course, the same mechanism of social learning is functioning also for unacceptable and less desirable behaviours.

WHEN COACHES TYPICALLY 'SLIP DOWN'?

Coaches can have a tremendous and lifetime impact on their players. Unfortunately, this impact sometimes is not positive. It often happens in different behaviours related to controlling emotions. It works in two different ways.

First, some coaches show negative emotions and behaviour when a player makes a mistake during trainings or competition. They show negative emotional signs (rolling eyes, hand waving, head shaking, yelling, and sometimes punishing) showing a player strong dissatisfaction. With time, players can

adopt such behaviours and start to react to others in a similar way. Some coaches act the same during the matches - they swear, argue with referees, throw bottles, hit chairs, sometimes even hit players, showing angry, aggressive, and violent behaviour. The outcome is that such energy will probably spread out to the whole team and players start to copy such behaviours (e.g., protesting the referee's decision or making pressuring a referee, or each other). The coach is sending a message that aggression is acceptable, even necessary, on the sport court. Some handball coaches use it as a tool, instructing players to be aggressive and hit the opponent 'in the heat of battle'. It can be expensive for the team because the coach or player/s can be punished by the referee, can lose the spectators' favour, and can have problems with focus that is reflected negatively in the performance (in players) or leading the game (in coaches).

The second mechanism occurs gradually over time. Aggressive coaches create anxious and pressured players. Also, players slowly internalize such behaviours and start to react to their own mistakes the same way, from the position of the 'internalized coach'. This is additionally harmful because the same effect doubles both from the outside (coach's reaction) and from the inside (player's reaction).

Coaches work with young people; this nurturing job requires that the coach not be aggressive or abusive to them. If coaches cannot control their behaviour, all the team rules in the world will not be enough to control players' behaviour.

Because they are strong models, coaches who have problems with anger management are responsible to resolve it, alone or with professional help. One of the characteristics of successful coaches is monitoring, not only what is going outside but also on the inside. Developing self-awareness is an important characteristic of effective leaders and it is necessary for successful and prompt behavioural regulation. If coaches cannot help themselves to stop their aggressive and uncontrolled behaviour, they should simply find another profession.

Every coach owes it to his/her players to improve, to become a better role model. Working on his/her shortcomings and showing improvement is a strong tool and one of the best examples.

8.2. INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

"At the end, players do not remember practice sessions, tactical solutions, exercises, and not even results; they remember how they felt with their coach."

Interpersonal skills represent a set of social skills that enable better and more meaningful relationships with other people. They include communication, understanding other's needs and emotions, empathy, leading potential, conflict management skills, skills of transfer knowledge to others. Many professionals and practitioners would agree that interpersonal skills are the essence of coaching. They are even more important in team sports where many relationships exist and the dynamic is high.



Communication

One of coaches I cooperate with told me: 'In coaching, communication is everything.' He continued 'Coaching is a specific profession. You are passionately devoted and trying very, very hard to prepare for certain events, to do the job, but the performance is executed by others. You are just partially inside. Everything you know, want, and see as necessary has to be communicated extremely well if you want them to succeed.' Most of the coach's job is based on teaching, educating, motivating, and correcting; players need to adopt right mind-set and to have an emotional state that allows their talents and abilities to show up in the handball game. All of this is delivered through the communication processes, and everything falls to the fertile ground (or not) depending on the coach-athlete relationship; that is also a matter of communication.

Within the social context of a group sport such as handball, every team has their communication system. It is mainly established by the coach and coaching staff, and then supported by the players. Each coach communicates in a way that is the most natural to him/her, be it a good or bad. In a handball team, communication takes place on several levels, and in dyads - between players and coaches, between players themselves, between coaching staff, between coach and management, between coach or players and media representative, between coach or players and referee, or at the group level, within a team, between a team and coach, with a crowd and fans. These many different areas, each need a specific communication approach to be successful and purposeful. Successful coaches keep their communication system permanently open for improvement. There are many examples in team sport where sport success did not come despite all necessary prerequisites related to quality, and it happened because one puzzle piece was missing - a good and efficient communication. An effective communication system presumes that players and coaching staff are able and free to communicate openly and honestly about team functioning and about their interpersonal relationships. Building an effective communication system is essential task for any coach, it is a foundation for everything what the coach does. This chapter will help the reader to better understand the logic of communication processes and gather information necessary to build an effective communication system within a handball team.

Any communication system, and each individual communication style, can be improved, but hard work, persistence and lots of self-monitoring is needed. Also, the changes need to be introduced gradually, implementing a few new strategies, and not changing everything at once. If you try too much it can be confusing, it is hard to follow and succeed, and becomes too demanding and demotivating; also, it will not look natural.

To start, try to reflect and think about your communication style. How would you describe it? What are your communication strengths and what would you like to improve? What do others usually say about your communication? Which segments you find challenging in communicating with players? What makes you emotionally too engaged in a way that it interferes with what you want to say?

Here is a self-assessment scale that can help you find some answers. Think how you communicate with others (coaches, players, officials, media), read each statement, think how it resonates or does not resonate for you, and how often you manifest the mentioned reactions or behaviours; evaluate yourself from 1 to 5.

1-almost never, 2-seldom, 3-sometimes, 4-usually, 5-almost always

1	2	3	4	5	I easily recognize when I am not in proper state for conversation.
1	2	3	4	5	I listen the conversation, so I can repeat what was said.
1	2	3	4	5	I carefully listen others, even when I understand the idea before the end.
1	2	3	4	5	I use short formulations and I am able to present my idea clearly and quickly.
1	2	3	4	5	I let players resolve their conflicts themselves.
1	2	3	4	5	I do not communicate verbally or non-verbally to referees or other officials.
1	2	3	4	5	If I have something to say or disagree, I wait till other side finishes what they have to say.
1	2	3	4	5	I am able to hold my need to criticize players who are repeating mistakes.
1	2	3	4	5	I let the speaker use their right to express himself/herself, even if I disagree.
1	2	3	4	5	My players ask me for advice.
1	2	3	4	5	I keep emotional control during practices and matches.
1	2	3	4	5	I remain calm when conversation goes in the wrong direction.
1	2	3	4	5	I adjust my professional vocabulary to the level of the person I am talking to.
1	2	3	4	5	It is not easy to distract my attention even when I am excited.
1	2	3	4	5	I can follow my idea while I start talking to players about something.
1	2	3	4	5	I prepare myself when I want to talk, I never only rely on inspiration.
1	2	3	4	5	I do not have problems with making and keeping eye contact during conversation.
1	2	3	4	5	I finish the thoughts of the speaker.
1	2	3	4	5	I keep the pitch of my voice level, as well as in tense situations.
1	2	3	4	5	I do not stop paying attention and correcting players, even if I am not satisfied with their behaviour or effort.

The total score shows the level of your communication skills. The higher it is, the more developed your communication skills are. But it is more important to identify your areas for improvement that are represented in all items where your given rating was 1, 2 or 3. This scale can be used also to get evaluation from others, i.e., your colleagues or players. You will get more authentic information if you guarantee anonymity and leave the room during the evaluation. It can be useful feedback on how others perceive the coach's work and the coach as a person. According to this evaluation, a coach can decide what he/she wants to improve and use this chapter to help.

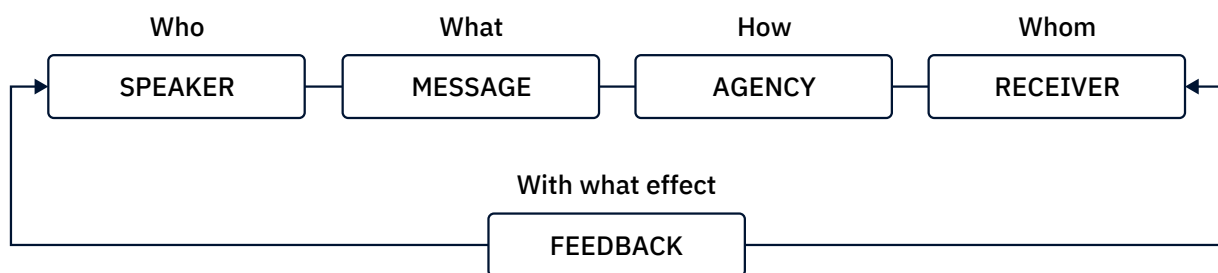
SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

Communication belongs to the innate characteristics of human beings. We communicate all the time when we are in interaction, even when we do not want to communicate (it is also a way of communication). We usually presume that we know how to communicate well, but successful communication is more often the exception than the rule. Despite huge progress in communication and information technology, communication problems did not decrease but increased with more frequent online communication.

Coaches communicate for several reasons:

- to get instructions and directions (players, coaching staff).
- to influence other people.
- to give feedback.
- to explain unclear situations and give additional explanation.
- to lead the game.
- to give information to third parties (parents, media, management).
- to analyse his/her actions (e.g., with sport psychologist or assistant coach).
- to socialize.

It is not necessary that the coach communicate the same way and effectively in all these situations; they need different skills. It is important to know who is talking, what is being said, in a which way, to whom and with what effect? This is the most simplified representation of communication process (Picture 26).



Picture 26. Communication process

Communication involves sending, receiving, and interpreting the message through different channels. Successful communication happens if a message from speaker to receiver arrives unchanged and if he/she understands it, believes it, and recognizes the level of importance. It is a complex process in which various problems may occur.

When talking to players, a coach should always ask:

- Do I have the players' attention?
- Am I explaining comprehensively?
- Did they understand me (careful, players 'nodding' is not evidence)?
- Am I congruent (verbally and non-verbally)?
- Do they trust me?

Positive answers to all these questions imply successful communication.

Within a handball team on all communication levels, effective communication is based on sending positive and constructive information and receiving and processing this information to help individual or team performance. Once when a message is sent it cannot be recalled or stopped. It will be always interpreted by the receiver, and many times it will be misinterpreted.

Unsuccessful communication happens when a message is not understood the same way from receiver as it was sent by the sender. It happens because:

A coach did not succeed to transfer a message the way he wanted.

- A coach's verbal and non-verbal communication were not congruent (players trust what they see, not what they hear).
- The message was too extensive, unclear, or inconsistent.
- Players did not listen, coach did not get their attention.
- Information was incomplete (parts were missing).
- The message was too short (coach relied too much on players' prior knowledge or instant understanding).
- The communication style was too offensive (non-verbal signs distracted players from listening).

VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Communication by the coach and between players can be:

- Verbal (specific information, instructions, feedback, praise, encouragement)
- Non-verbal (body or hand signal, positive or negative gestures, visual demonstration of technique, facial expression or bodily reaction to player's mistake or good performance)

Very often, on the sport court, communication is influenced by the situation or its meaning. While communicating to others we communicate two types of messages: informational and emotional. Depending on the situation both have different importance and can affect the communication process. Reflect on a time when you communicated with players during the time-out in a heated moment of the match or trying to give the same information during practice session, the difference is clear.

The informational message has been sent through words (sometimes gestures), the emotional message has been sent through our tone, intensity, gestures, posture, gesticulation, facial expression. It includes all reactions or behaviour that represent what a person thinks or feels in a particular situation or about other person. The informational message is mainly related to verbal communication and it is intentional; the emotional message relates to non-verbal communication and it is not entirely under our volitional control.

Psychological research confirms that 7% of a message is delivered by words, 38% by tone and 55% of the meaning of the message is delivered by gesticulation, facial expression, posture, and other non-verbal signs. Non-verbal communication is a complement to verbal communication and sometimes completely replaces it. For example, after the important goal players hug and give 'high-fives' to the goal scorer without words, or a coach sometimes rolls his eyes after a player's attempt of the task, expressing dissatisfaction with player's performance. As a coach, you may say a lot without using any words. It is very important to become aware of the tone, gesture, and other nonverbal behaviour the same way a coach is aware of his/her words. Many coaches are often unaware of the message they send non-verbally, but some coaches are very skilled in using non-verbal communication to communicate clearly and fast.

A coach should continuously monitor the players' non-verbal communication because that way he/she will get relevant information about what they think or how they feel much faster than waiting for them to say it. Understanding the non-verbal messages players send contributes to better understanding.

A ratio of verbal and nonverbal communication contributes together with the coach's intentions and communication skills to different styles of communication. The way how a coach communicates with the athletes directly affects how they perceive the coach and how they feel on the court in general and about themselves. There are different types of coaches with regard to communication styles (Picture 27).

Coach INCREDIBLE

- Never admits his error.
- Does not get respect, because he does not show respect.
- Does not follow what he says.
- Preaches rather than coaches.
- Not credible.

Coach NAYSAYER

- Negative; often hostile.
- Criticizes players frequently.
- Almost never gives prizes.
- Infrequently kind.

Coach JUDGE

- Continually evaluates players instead of instructing them.
- Blames for errors, not giving feedback.
- When there is improvement, does not know how to instruct players to advance.

Coach FICKLE

- Inconsistent; changes opinion and instructions frequently.
- What he says is not congruent with his actions

Coach GLIB

- Extremely talkative.
- Constantly gives instructions during training or the matches.
- Does not listen to players.
- Likes to hear himself talk.

Coach STONE

- Never shows emotions, verbally or non-verbally.
- Never smiles, gives pats on the back, never celebrates.
- You do not know how he feels.

Coach PROFESSOR

- Uses complicated language; unable to explain in a simple way.
- Talks above the players' head or in a roundabout way and confuses the players.
- Abstract; unable to demonstrate skill in a logical sequence.

Coach SKINNER

- Does not understand reinforcement principles, rewards wrong things at the wrong time.
- Does not deal with player's misbehaviour or punishes them too hard.

Picture 27. Coaches' Communication Styles

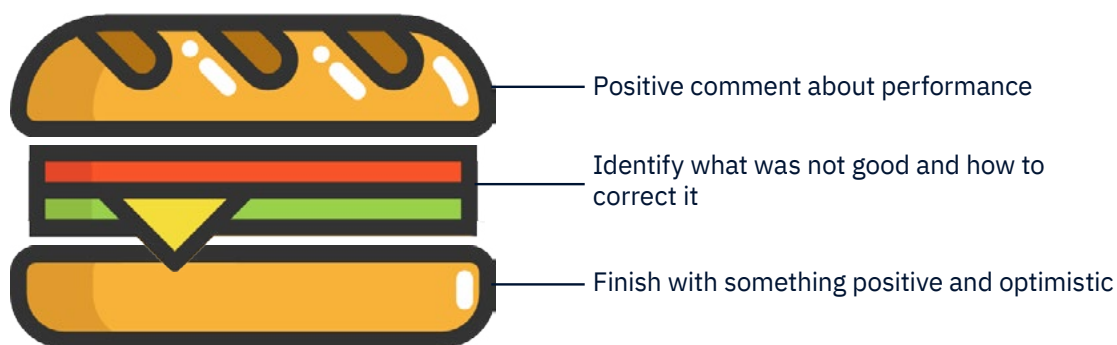
All these coaches have poor communication skills. You may identify with one or some of them, or you have been able to see some of the same characteristics in your own communication style. It can be helpful for you to recognize your area for improvement.

SENDING INFORMATION EFFECTIVELY

One of the basic rules of successful communication is: 'order in head - order on the tongue'. If a coach knows clearly what he/she wants to say it is easier to transfer the message. Also, following some recommendations on how effectively send the message leads to productive communication.

- *Define your message* - think about what you want to say in advance and say it precisely. Sometimes coaches want to say so many things and talk too much inspired by the moment and players cannot receive all the messages. Also, be direct and honest, do not let something get lost 'between the lines', players often do not think the same way and miss the point, and also such hidden messages cause mistrust. Do not talk about too many things at one time nor give more than two direct instructions, e.g., refer to the two biggest mistakes and, step by step, in the same way about others.
- *Communicate promptly* - immediate feedback is more effective and meaningful than delayed feedback. Players want to know what the coach thinks about their performance. If feedback would cause strong emotions and interfere with the communication process, be careful with timing and use the appropriate feedback giving principle.

- *Be honest, direct, and specific* - it is very important to have good coach-athlete relationship with your players that is based on trust. Telling the truth requires courage, integrity, responsibility, and a realistic awareness; coaches like this are respected by players. This needs a high level of stress related skills and emotional control. Many coaches do not use such an approach because they do not want to hurt a players' feelings or believe that they already know what to expect. Even if this is true, players want to hear it from the coach directly and personally. Players will better receive the information that is 'coloured' with some emotion (not too much); be authentic, share your emotions, but be careful not to become over aroused, especially in tense situation. A coach has to keep in mind that emotions narrow our focus, and there is a risk of not seeing the whole picture (or forget other things, for example, about player who made the coach angry). Also, many coaches have the intention to give general information without offering explanation, instruction, or solution. It is frustrating when a coach says: 'You are not in the game'. It would be much better to say something like 'Run back, try to be first in defence. Stick to your player, and watch to the right side, he has the intention to pass there after his teammate runs from the back'.
- *Always refer to behaviour* - when you are giving feedback to a player, always refer to the behaviour and not the person. Be careful referring to things that are under the player's control, otherwise it is very demotivating. For example. 'I watched you running back to counter, and I already knew that nothing would happen, you are simply not explosive enough for the sprint'. This is a very demotivating message that puts the label 'slow runner' on the player's forehead. Also, it is recommended to avoid sentences such as 'you always', or 'you never'. It is personally directed and offensive. It is maybe easier to say, but all these sentences can be said differently.
- *Be concise* - players usually do not like long monologues or coaches who love to listen their own voice and preach. Do not be extensive, focus on the most important things and shape them into a short, informative, and specific message.
- *Look for the other perspective* - for effective communication it is important to understand the other side. A coach needs to step into his/her players' shoes and to understand their perspective, their needs, values, goals, and ways of thinking. It helps to be realistic and helps the player to feel understood and appreciated, which is important for open communication. Also in this way, a coach shows a level of care for a player as an individual. Showing players that the coach cares for them makes them listen more attentively to the coach's words and follow him/her toward common goals. Knowing your players helps to build a better coach-athlete relationship and stronger team cohesion.
- *Use positive and supportive language* - every player will listen more attentively if coach is positive and empathetic rather than negative and offensive. Nobody likes to be put down and criticized. Using supportive language and gestures, speaking with a smile, and giving players hope, showing a belief in them and their performance is motivating, and this way makes players more open for listening and communication. It is recommendable to avoid sarcasm, harsh criticism, public negative comments about somebody, threats, and negative judgements. It is easier to be supportive and positive when everything goes smoothly, but the same is even more important when things are not going well. Players are already upset, they need support. Of course, negative feedback is real part of sport, but it has to be constructive, placed in the form of sandwich feedback information (Picture 28). Also, it is important to show respect for your players, this is not achieved by using insults and by shouting, but it is also not realistic to be soft and smiling all the time. Players need to learn to take responsibility for their actions, it is important to receive realistic information, but without an attack. A coach needs always to keep in mind the person in front of him/her, talk about performance, ask for more effort and encourage progress.



Picture 28. Principle of Giving Sandwich Feedback Information

Applying the ‘Sandwich Feedback’ formula when a coach wants to say something what a player would not like to hear, improves this situation. It means to start with something player did well, then provide specific feedback followed by instruction for correction and end optimistically, encouraging the player. Such feedback is motivating and there is better chance that player will receive the message without emotional involvement due to criticism.

Example - bad jump shot: ‘I see that you are trying very hard, but at the moment it is not technically correct yet. Try to prolong the first step and lift your knee high with more strength on the last one, it will help you get the height. But in comparison to last week, the progress is obvious, keep going’.

Also, it is important to not only give descriptive feedback; it also has to be action oriented, positively formulated, and prescriptive. This type of feedback is directed toward the performance that a coach wants to see, and not toward a performance that a coach wants to avoid (e.g., instead of saying ‘Don’t bounce the ball every time you receive it’, you may say ‘pass the ball quickly and speed up our offense’). This way a coach uses communication skills to set up players toward the desired performance.

- *Be a model* - many coaches put different rules in place for their teams, talk about them, but are sometimes not consistent in following these rules; such behaviour presents a bad example, and players always tend to follow what coach is doing and not what coach is talking about. The solution is to set the right example through behaviour.
- *Watch non-verbal cues* - a coach needs to follow the players’ body language to estimate their understanding of what he/she is trying to say. It is also useful to check them with questions or to ask them to explain how they understood what they heard. Also, to be more efficient in communication, a coach needs to harmonize his/her body language and non-verbal signs with the message he/she wants to deliver. This means to be congruent and more persuasive.
- *Choose words carefully* - coaches often use hard words such as ‘you must...’, or threats ‘if you don’t do it...’. It is always better to ask a player nicely to do something rather than to give an order, especially when a coach works with girls. Use ‘please, can you try this’, ‘I would like to see this’, if possible’ or something similar. Also, the word ‘but’ is something that often causes the information to be only half heard. Even positive feedback will be received negatively if a coach adds ‘but’ in the middle. It can be replaced with ‘and’, that enables a player to hear the whole message. For example, when coach gives feedback to a goalkeeper and says, ‘Excellent defence, but you need to work more on transition pass over the court’, the player mainly hears the second part of the sentence. If ‘But’ is replaced with ‘And’ he/she gets both parts of the information and that is more motivating.

- *Be patient* - the coaching job is based on repetition. It is the basic principle for building new handball skills, but also for everything. It is necessary to come to terms that lots of repetition is necessary if a coach wants players to hear and accept the message and follow the instructions. If we want players to remember things better, we need to be ready to repeat something over and over again, especially with young players. It is a part of the coaching job. The same can also be applied in teaching values or team mission and goals, players should be constantly reminded. It will be accepted better and faster if the coach connects it to some positive emotions, i.e., if he repeats it in a motivating and enthusiastic manner within a game, or with a smile, asking the same back from the players.

RECEIVING INFORMATION EFFECTIVELY

The other side of effective communication is listening attentively. If a coach wants to build effective relationships with players, he/she should listen to them. It is the only possible way to learn something about them. People usually appreciate those who are good listeners, it is pleasant to have such a friend; people feel understood and heard when they know that somebody is listening. This is a professional skill of every sport psychologist, but it also should be a highly developed skill in the coaching job.

Many times communication problems arise precisely because of bad or superficial listening. It is very frustrating when a person realizes that the other side is not really listening, and if he/she talks about something that is personally important, they can easily become disappointed. Have you ever found yourself forgetting the beginning of the content that somebody has presented to you? Have you ever become distracted during a conversation? Have you ever had an impression that the other side listens only that part that is congruent to his/her statement? Did you catch yourself planning in advance how to respond while the other person is still talking? All these things indicate the necessity to improve listening skills.

Many people think that hearing and being quiet for a while when somebody is talking equates to good listening; it is not the same thing. You may hear the message but without understanding and 'getting' the point. From the outside you can look like you are listening, but you are not really attentive or motivated to listen, or you are just picking some parts and getting ready to talk back. There are several recommendations on how to become a better listener:

- *Prepare yourself to listen* - sometimes we do not have enough energy or motivation to have the conversation. If you need to talk to your player, it is fair to leave some free time for it, to think about it in advance, in order to give him/her full your attention. If we are tired or irritated, it is better to leave the conversation for some other time because the chance to start conflict are high. Sometimes, the coach unexpectedly finds him/herself in a situation where somebody asks him/her to listen. It is recommendable to ask for two minutes, just to conclude what you are doing at that moment so that you can focus mindfully on the other person who wants to start the conversation.
- *Be empathetic* - it means trying to understand the other person's perspective, reasons, explanations, needs, feelings - being sensitive to all aspects of the message, both verbal and non-verbal, with an open mind and curiosity. We can remind ourselves to keep such an approach in advance, especially if we know that we probably will not agree with the other side. Such listening bridges the gaps and relates with opposite sides.
- *Listen actively* - practicing active listening helps to become a much better communicator. To be active in collecting different information, and to show the other side that you are not just passive trying to hear the message, can be improved. Active listening means investing effort to really hear what the other person is trying to say and to use certain behaviours to show your activity (Picture 29).

It means:

- Keep eye contact - if you are not looking at the other person's eyes, he/she will think that you are not interested, distanced, or that you are hiding something. You are listening using your ears, but others are evaluating if you are listening watching your eyes.
- Use encouragements - use your small comments ('A-ha', 'I see', 'Yes') or non-verbal cues (nodding head, facial expressions), to confirm to the other party that you are 'there' with him/her.
- Ask questions - from time to time ask about the content, check if you understood correctly, ask for additional information as it gives an impression of true interest.
- Use 'I' instead of 'YOU' language - using 'I' is less judging, more descriptive, and supportive (instead 'You are doing the same thing all the time' that is confrontational; instead, use 'I'm not seeing any change in your attempts today', such language is more supportive).
- Paraphrase - it means repeating in brief what you have already heard but in your own words, to make summary (e.g.: 'If I understood you correctly, you have just said that...' or 'Does it mean that...'). It shows to the player that you are truly listening and helps the coach to check his/her own understanding.
- Reflect emotions - show your understanding by recognizing the other person's emotion. You may just say what emotional reaction you see or presume that happens inside (e.g., 'I see it is hard for you to talk about it').
- Do not interrupt - let the other side finish before you start talking; be patient.
- Learn to be quiet - most people cannot stand silence; they feel uncomfortable and want to break it as soon as possible. But the silence is an important part of the conversation. It enables consolidation, emotional resume, a chance for the person to feel the emotional echo of the content of the conversation. It also can be a helpful time to prepare for a continuation of conversation. Silence between words can be meaningful.
- Avoid distracting movements - while you are listening do not do anything else, do not look to your watch, do not watch your phone, do not make an order to your table. Be present and focus to the other party, otherwise it makes you seem bored or uninterested in the conversation.



Picture 29. Active listening principles

Active listening represents supportive communication. In handball, many coaches believe that being sensitive will make players soft. They believe in harsh communication, provoking tension and even fear by personalized, often public criticism, and threats. One coach, who was strict and inclined towards punishing players for mistakes, explained this practice as “He has to be more scared of me, than going to counter and taking the shot” (a player inclined to avoid the shot). This style is traditionally used under the guise of building resilient players; from the point of sport psychology, it cannot be a solution. Of course, coaches must be strict sometimes, but their feedback, as explained previously, should be directed towards the performance, and not personal. Such an approach damages the foundation for building a good coach-athlete relationship.

To become a good listener, it takes time and effort. A lot of time, practice and lots of effort and energy. It is not easy, but active listening gives a good impression. If you doubt your motivation, remember that correcting misunderstandings and problems derived from bad conversations repeatedly takes more time and energy, and puts relationships at risk. If a coach learns and shows players that he/she listens, players will be more receptive to the coach’s idea and more likely to listen, too. Also, all coaches constantly try to encourage their players to do tough, frustrating, boring, and painful things that are not easy, but are necessary for sport progress. The same should be applied by the coach in the segment of communication, and the improvement of the coach’s communication skills is immediately noticed. It makes for a good example and motivates players to work on themselves, too.

COMMUNICATION IN PRACTICE

There are several key moments in practice which distinguish coaches as good or bad communicators. Those are related to communication on and off the court, with different purposes, i.e., communication on the court, with referees, during time out, with media, and parents. Several coaches endangered or even lost their coaching job due to wrong words and messages they have sent out in the wrong moment, due to their undeveloped communication skills.

COMMUNICATION ON THE COURT

On the court, during practice sessions and matches, coaches and players use both, verbal and non-verbal communication. For effective communication in such dynamic and stressful conditions, it is recommendable to practice communication skills consistently. It comprises of several components:

- *Instructional cues* - a coach should teach players certain keywords, short commands or instructions that will be used in real situations during the game, when there is no time for explanation. This means to progressively build different Stimulus Reaction (SR) sequences where a keyword will be a stimulus that will trigger a certain reaction that is conditioned during the practice. For example, it can be (‘back’ meaning run back fast, ‘less’ meaning there are more opponents than our defenders, run fast to defence, ‘more’ being there are more of us in offense, ‘again’ means repeat the attempt of an action, etc.). It should be clear that those keywords are directed towards a better performance, and not to criticize players. Also, those words can be used by a goalkeeper and other players as a part of the game. It encourages introverts to communicate with purpose, which helps to build a communication habit.
- *Encouragements* - such messages serve as motivation, inspiration, higher effort investment, and friendly comfort. It can be used after a mistake has been made, before or after a crucial moment in the game, or during a time-out. It can be verbal (Let’s go! Just calm.) or non-verbal (hug, high-five). Such messages can be introduced as a part of the routine.
- *Praise* - it is connected to a certain aspect of a play (excellent defence or save, counter, steal a ball, first time achievement of something). It affects individual and team confidence, feeds motivation, brings energy and increases cohesion. It is necessary to be careful not to exaggerate with praise, otherwise players, especially younger ones, can become dependent on the coach’s praise and

positive feedback. Coaches who develop a cooperative motivational climate, often educate their players more to praise each other, this supports good inter-team relations and motivation.

- *Awareness and acceptance* - are non-verbal communication skills related to a single player that shows through a certain sign that he understands what is happening and accepts the situation (e.g., in the case of his/her own mistake, a player lifts palms up showing to the team the apology sign, showing the 'that's on me' message) or shows to a teammate gratitude or satisfaction for a certain action (e.g. a player shows thumb up to a teammate who assisted him/her to score the goal, or claps to a goalkeeper for the save).

COMMUNICATION DURING TIME-OUTS

Sometimes during handball matches, especially in critical moments, we can see coaches shouting and criticizing the team during that precious 60 seconds. This is not the purpose of the time-out. It just shows the coach's inability to calm his/her nerves and to hold a game in control. By shouting in such moments, coaches are trying to cover their own insecurity (they are not necessarily are aware of it), it functions as a defensive mechanism. Also, they transfer the negative energy to the team. Sometimes a time-out can be called just to give players a short break, but mainly it is aimed to make a specific intervention to the team's behaviour. If a coach wants to use the time-out time effectively, he/she should send a clear message about technical or tactical segments of a play using 3-5 clear sentences where the task is clearly formulated; directions and instructions are given with laser precision to specific players. It can be ended with short motivational message or team salutation. Sometimes it can be a problem especially for young coaches or for coaches who have a specific communication style (Professor, Glib, Naysayer), but it can be planned and rehearsed in advance.

COMMUNICATION WITH REFEREES

The majority of coaches have a habit of talking to the referees during the game, despite there being no referee in any sport who changed a decision after it was made. But coaches do this for several reasons; they are trying to put the referee under pressure to get a future advantage (good decision in favour of their team), or they are trying to show their expertise and handball knowledge because they feel personally offended by a certain decision, or they just vent their emotions (in the wrong way). Such communication can also be directed towards other officials. This is not recommendable behaviour due to a few reasons; first a coach feeds his/her anger that elevates arousal and narrows attention. This makes leading the game more difficult. Also, such behaviour elevates the stress levels of the referee, which causes decreased concentration. It reflects in the quality of referee's decision. Also, such a coach is not a good example to the players who copy the coach's behaviour, risk their concentration, and increase the possibility to get punishments.

Such communication towards a referee is not efficient, because the other side usually does not listen and mainly tries to ignore what the coach is shouting or speaking about, so the point is missed. Also, if a coach constantly says something to the referee it increases the chance of being ignored. For this reason, a clever coach will take his spot, i.e., carefully select the moment or two during the game when he/she will calmly approach the referee and the chances to be heard are much better. Referees are trained not to respond to constant provocations and to ignore all those messages, most of them have the negative perception of pressuring coaches. A coach should be careful not to fit to that stereotype. Most referees will intentionally ignore coaches who are behaving inappropriately and aggressively. If a coach wants to be heard, his/her approach should be calm and the message specific, directed to the moment of play, and not to referee or his officiating personally. Also, there is not much sense in asking the referee to explain his call during the game, there is no time for it. Maybe a coach can approach to the referee after the match.

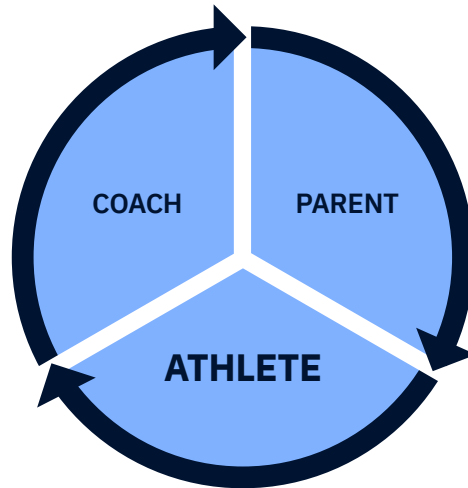
COMMUNICATION WITH MEDIA

This is very demanding part of the coaching job, especially in top elite handball. Many coaches have slipped up by using unskilled communication with media representatives, especially after 'hot' games that were lost. It is really hard to take to the microphone 3 minutes after the end of the game, when emotions are high, and mixed, and say something clever. Also, media representatives are always seeking for a catchy soundbite of specific information that can be used for a big headline, many times words have been taken out of the context and a different meaning construed. The best option for such situations is to be prepared for a press conference or interview. It means that the coach should know what he/she wants to say and to have a clear idea of how it can be said clearly and in a simple way. It helps the coach to have a control over interview; to expect unexpected is a rule, but the prepared coach will find a way to keep his/her direction. Also, one of the most important things is to stay professional and calm. It means to talk about handball and the plays in a calm manner, without high emotional engagement. It is always good to have a few general sentences prepared to offer as the answer to critical questions. If a coach is calm and clear it is harder to misinterpret his/her words and apply some other interpretation.

Being professional means maintain a professional posture, arrive in appropriate clothes, speak the official language and in a favour of the team and of his/her players. There is nothing more frustrating than a coach who does not take responsibility for the game results blaming his/her players instead. It is very demotivating and destroys the coach-athlete relationship and trust. The golden rule is to use 'WE' for good things, and 'I' for shortcomings. Using 'We' shows appreciation of the team, good team spirit, which increases team morale and cohesion. Also, it is very important to listen the questions; a coach overwhelmed by emotion becomes impatient and answers before thinking about the questions. Sometimes it can happen that something confidential comes out by accident, which becomes a problem. Whenever it is possible, offer short answers, keep everything simple, illustrate with examples and moments from the match. The best media reports come from the coaches who are confident and who are not playing any role in front of microphone but being him/herself. All these skills improve with experience and can be trained with a professional. It is also important that a coach takes care of his/her public image in general, keeping in mind that he/she is a public person. It also reflects professionalism and limits 'offering' to journalists intriguing reasons to open the topic in some undesired answers.

COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

On this topic, a whole new book can be written; for successful communication with parents a coach needs to know a few things. Despite many coaches wishing to remove them from the court, parents are an inseparable part of children and youth sport. Any coach who has young players must be aware that there with 'one' (the child/youth), there are 'two' more in the shadow, which are his/her parents. The athlete, coach, and parent are components of the sport triangle, and problems between any segments reflects on the court and influences sport progress (Picture 30). Each coach needs parents as partners; they spend more time with young player than the coach does, and their help and support in whole development is valuable.



Picture 30. Sport Triangle: 'Athlete-Coach-Parent' Relationship

Every coach needs to know that each sport parent has three needs: they need their child to be secure, they need an expert coach who will be motivated to teach their child and to improve his/her skills, and they need information about direction where their child is going and the feedback where he/she arrived. In the other words, they need a trusted coach who will invest his/her knowledge and effort in child's progress congruent to his/her abilities and they want to be informed about it. A coach who takes care of these needs will not have any problem with parents nor they will interrupt his/her coaching job.

The most important rule when talking to parents is to be honest, but careful and to be optimistic; all principles mentioned earlier may be used. It is extremely important to know that it is not allowed to talk bad to a player about his/her parents ever, even if they are completely wrong. This battle is lost in advance, parents will somehow get this information and probably take the child away. The best 'recipe' is to have scheduled communication via parents' meetings or 'opening hours' for parents where they will have opportunity to ask questions. There should be a particular relationship, even some informal communication, but the relationship should maintain the professional distance and not become too close. In case of inappropriate parental behaviour on the court, it should be promptly and directly communicated, and the education of what type of parents and what parental behaviour in sport are desirable for sports success, is always a good solution.

Coach–Athlete Relationship

It may be said that there is no influence or consequence of a coach's leadership behaviour that may be studied outside of the coach-athlete relationship and its dynamics. The relationship established between the coach and his /her athlete plays a central role in the athletes' physical and psychosocial development. Athletes' testimonials and comments either published in press, or in their biographies, makes this statement true. Many successful athletes emphasize that they would never succeed without their coaches.

The effective coach-athlete relationship enables coaches to influence athletes in a positive way. The ability of coaches and athletes to understand these dynamics and to use it to their advantage will determine the coach-athlete compatibility and whether this relationship facilitates or interferes with training and performance. It also determines the benefits that both coaches and players gain from the relationship. If athletes and coaches enhance their knowledge about psychological and social foundation of a healthy and effective coach-athlete relationship, both of them may use the advances of the successful relationship to accomplish their goals, and may also optimally contribute to the relationship, investing effort in the right direction.

This relationship influences both parts as sport performers but also as human beings; it is critical and essential to the development of athletes as competitors and people. The coach-athlete relationship is based on the definition of a two-person relationship whose emotions, cognitions, and behaviours are interrelated, affecting their closeness, co-orientation, and complementarity. The emotional component resulting from their interaction may have positive or negative effects on the athletes' behaviours, as well as on the affective balance of the dyad. Another approach considers sport team characteristics, and the coach-athlete relationship has been studied under the leader-player perspective, considering antecedents and consequences of the coach's leadership behaviour. Within team sport there are dozens of dyads, i.e., a coach has specific coach-athlete relationship with each player. It can be said that coach-athlete relationship has a significant influence on a variety of areas:

- Intrapersonal (motivation, self-esteem, satisfaction, enjoyment, dropping out)
- Interpersonal (communication, conflict, decision-making)
- Psychosocial (motivational climate, team's cohesion)
- Sport-specific (fitness, training quality, skill development, competitive performance).

This chapter illustrates the importance of the coach-athlete relationship and some of its consequences. Also, we tried to define the compatible coach-athlete relationship and some obstacles to the effective coach-athlete relationship.

THE NATURE OF THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

The dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship may be viewed through leadership and relational perspectives, and the main difference between those two perspectives is in identifying where the greatest influence of the relationship lies.

The leadership perspective supposes that the coach's leadership style determines the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. The relationship perspective assumes that the quality of relationship is affected by the continuous interrelating of the coach and athlete, i.e., the emotions, thoughts, and behaviours of the coach and athletes are interconnected.

Compatibility between coaches and their players influences the players' evaluation and their responses to the coach's leadership behaviour. Compatibility of the coach-athlete dyad is a function of their needs and the possibility for satisfying those needs. People have a need to both express and receive three types of behaviour: inclusion (a need to accept or deny socialization), control (a need to control or to be controlled), and affection (a need to exchange love and care) in their relationship with others. Compatibility exists if the behaviour expressed by one person is congruent with what the other person wants to receive. The degree of compatibility on the inclusion dimension was the main factor differentiating compatible and incompatible coach-athlete dyads (Picture 31).

COMPATIBLE DYAD	
<i>Coach</i>	<i>Athlete</i>
Needs to control athletes No need for expressing favour No need for making close relationship with athlete	Needs to be controlled No need for expressing favour No need for closeness to coach
INCOMPATIBLE DYAD	
A need to control athletes No need for expressing favour No need for making close relationship with athlete	Does not want to be controlled Needs coach's acceptance and favour Needs positive social feedback

Picture 31. The examples of compatible and incompatible coach-athlete dyads

Research showed that the players who were highly compatible with their coaches evaluated the coach's overall behaviour more favourably than those who were less compatible. Also, the players who felt more compatible with their coaches experienced fewer negative cognitive/attentional and somatic effects caused by the coach's behaviour during a game and felt more supported by their coach. Conversely, if the player is incompatible with his/her coach (i.e., if the player's and coach's goals, personality, and beliefs, are inconsistent), certain psychological needs may not be met. This leads to frustration and a loss of self-confidence.

The compatibility of the coach-athlete relationship may be also estimated by congruence of their perceptions of the coach's leadership. In general, coaches overestimate their leadership behaviour as compared to the same estimations from their players. The coaches perceive themselves more supportive, instructive, more ready to give positive feedback, and are more democratic.

Different types of the coach-athlete relationship exist; they are the positive and the negative coach-athlete relationship.

- *Positive coach-athlete relationship* - the athlete and the coach interact intentionally with each other during practice, competition, or in any other situation. Those interactions are accompanied with both verbal and non-verbal communication that express positive emotions. Coaches and their players enjoy spending time together on both the professional and the personal level; they interact often and care for each other.
- *Negative coach-athlete relationship* - athletes and coaches interact only when it is necessary, while working jointly towards specific sport goals. They do not make any additional effort to improve their communication nor to spend more time together. The relationship is fully professional, their communication is only formal, and their verbal exchanges are minimized, limited only to sport specific information. Players also feel pressure, avoid direct eye contact, rarely smile, and feel dissatisfied, bored; they report about hurt feelings, unfulfilled expectations, discomfort, lack of commitment, and the coach's lack of understanding.



BASIC COMPONENTS OF COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

The coach-athlete interpersonal relationship encompasses athletes' and their coach's emotions, thoughts and behaviours as mutually and causally interdependent. It contains three components: closeness, co-orientation, and complementarity (3Cs), selected in order to explain and define coaches' and athletes' emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. Recently, commitment, as the fourth component, has been added to the list:

- *Closeness* - reflects emotional tone that coaches and their athletes experience and express in describing their relationship. It is a function of interpersonal issues such as liking, trust, respect. Liking is associated with the ability to disclose and share information openly. Trust promotes self-disclosure, open communication, expression of needs, and facilitates problem solving. Respect implies a degree of acceptance and appreciation, the positive feeling that the other in the relationship is worthy of credit due to his/her position, knowledge, experience, and actions. These indicate a positive affective climate, show relationship stability, and members' satisfaction. Those qualities have been associated with successful and effective coaching. On the contrary, dislike, distrust, and disrespect lead to the negative coach-athlete relationship, increased competitive environment, negative and performance oriented motivational climate, where envy and negative emotions are cultivated.
- *Co-orientation* - occurs when athletes and coaches have established common frames of reference, namely shared goals, beliefs, values, and expectations. A positive relationship allows athletes and coaches to exchange experiences, thoughts, worries, expectations, what, in turn, facilitate the development of co-orientation in their relationship. A coach and an athlete perceive each other directly, but each of them has their own beliefs about 'how does the other part perceive me'. The level of agreement and understanding in this coach-athlete relationship reflects how much they will be able to work effectively together.

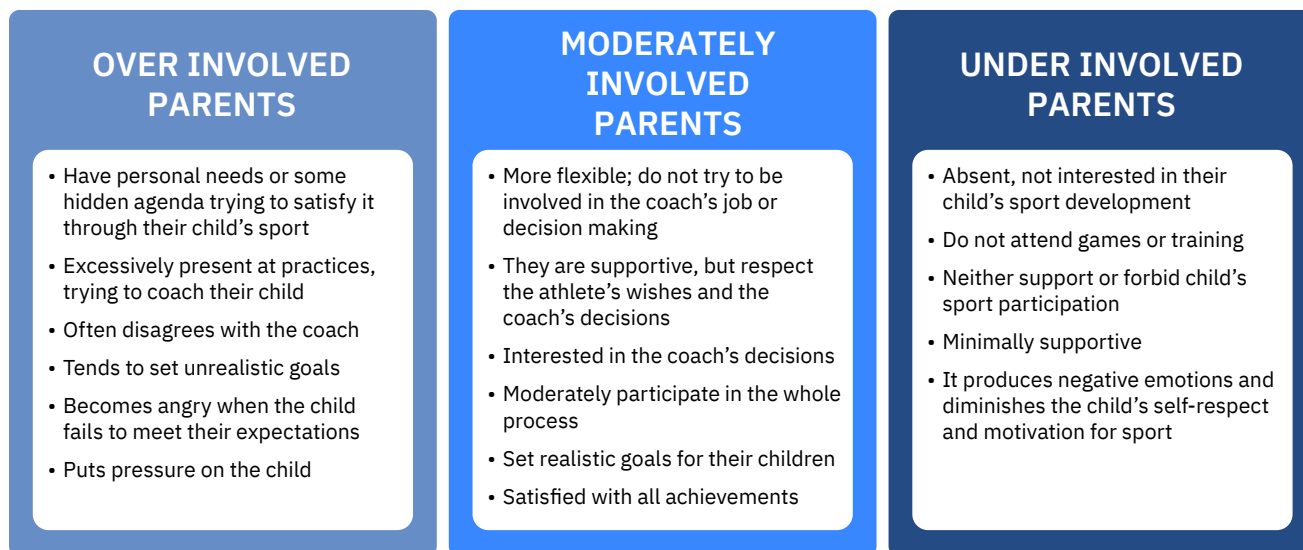
- *Complementarity* - type of interaction in which the coach and the athlete are engaged; it reflects their acts of cooperation. The main goal is to improve the athlete's performance; the coach provides instructions and athletes accept and follow them. Complementarity also refers to motivation and appropriate resources for developing relationships within the sport context. A coach, for example, creates such a climate that is congruent with the athlete's dispositional characteristics, and which enables the athlete to satisfy his/her needs.
- *Commitment* - refers to the members' intention to stay together over time. Commitment represents a long-term orientation towards the athletic relationship and includes the intent to persist, feelings of psychological attachment, cognitive interdependence, willingness to sacrifice, and favourable evaluations. It promotes tendencies to accommodate rather than to retaliate when the relationship members behave poorly, or disagreement arises. Higher commitment brings higher satisfaction, investments, and higher social constraints in comparison. Lack of commitment from the coach may lead to the member leaving the sport, and a lack of commitment in the coach-athlete relationship contributes to the relationship breakdown.

INFLUENCING COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

The coach-athlete relationship affects, but is also affected by, numerous variables. It is important to understand external influences on the coach-athlete relationship from the practical point of view. Several factors may be important: type of sport, competitive level, athletes' age, and gender of both coach and athletes.

- *Type of sport* - different types of sport, individual versus team sports, impose different requirements on the coach, the athletes, and their relationship. It is more likely that coaches who train athletes in any individual sport would develop deeper relationships with them, and that these relationships would be more personal; the coach and his/her athlete would be more interrelated, close, and interdependent. In team sport, on the other hand, the coach has to develop many interpersonal relationships with different players, and he/she cannot be equally interrelated to each of them. Those relationships would probably be more formal and less personal. Despite that, players do not desperately need their coach because they also build interpersonal relationships with their teammates, and those relationships may be more intimate, personal, close, committed, etc. That may compensate for the lack of these characteristics in the relationship with the coach. Sport psychology shows that the type of sport, even the philosophy of a particular sport and game organisation affected the communication processes and all relationships.
- *Competitive level* - the level at which athlete/s compete may affect the coach-athlete relationship. Older and higher-level players show higher preference for supportiveness from a coach. Lower-level players preferred more positive feedback than those who competed at a higher level. It seems that athletes and coaches who operate at the highest level of competitive sports may be more motivated to establish interdependent relationships because the risks are higher.
- *Athletes' age* - age significantly affects the coach's leadership behaviour. As it was mentioned before (Chapter 8.1.) coaches who work with young athletes need to adopt an authoritative approach, should be severe, controlling, etc. because young athletes must have a strong structure, clear roles, and an honest and expert professional as a role model. Some researchers from the field think that this approach may be counterproductive for young athletes' motivation and may produce less adaptive responses and negative emotions (especially feeling of pressure and a fear of the coach). Therefore, they primarily promote warm and friendly interpersonal relationships with young athletes, a more relaxed approach, more fun and greater athletes' participation. The solution is a rational and supportive autocratic style. The specificity of coaching youths lies behind

the fact that the coach-athlete relationship is not dyadic, but often triangular, because coach-athlete relationship depends on the relationship established also with athlete's parents. Sport psychology recognizes the importance of parental involvement in child athlete sport participation because this factor may facilitate, but also as well endanger, the athlete's development and performance. This triangular relationship can be intense and problematic, especially with certain types of sport parents (Picture 32).



Picture 32. Sport Parent's Types (Hallsted, 1987)

These behavioural variations may be important sources of conflict or non-understanding between the coach and parents. It may affect the coach-athlete relationship. The good relationship with parents will enhance success, but the poor relationship may destroy the coach-athlete relationship and, eventually, the whole sport career development process of the young player.

- *Gender of the coach and athletes* – the gender of the coach and athlete can play a role, especially in the case of opposite sexes. Some research shows that the players with male coaches preferred more social support than those with female coaches; the female players preferred more positive feedback behaviours, while the male preferred more autocratic behaviour. Female athletes tended to be more acceptable of the male coaches' mentality than that of the female coaches' mentality. Gender is mainly responsible for the players' perceptions of their coaches. The relationship between the female athletes and the female coaches may be characterized as more interdependent and more emotional. On the contrary, the male athletes' and the male coaches' relationship may be based on the transactions that aim to achieve the performance goals, without many feelings involved. The opposite sex dyads might be, on average, less compatible due to different needs, values, typical goal orientations, different communication style, and other factors related to gender differences.

OBSTACLES TO A SUCCESSFUL COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

Many athletes agree that the coach-athlete relationship is one of the most important parts of the sport experience. It contributes athletes' success, but, unfortunately, it also may be the biggest source of dissatisfaction, disappointment, and negative emotions. The coach is one of the most prominent reasons why athletes drop out from sport.

Difficulties in the coach-athlete relationship usually turns into a conflict or a series of them. It may be more or less manifest, but interpersonal conflict is usually defined as “experiencing discord between oneself and significant others”. This may happen due to the coach’s and athletes’ incompatibility, due to poor communication between coaches and athletes, and/or due to the violation of common relationship rules in the coach-athlete relationship.

INCOMPATIBILITY

A coach-athlete relationship is complex and characterized by mutual interdependence. A coach and an athlete do not have to agree about all things, but the way they solve issues may be essential for the effectiveness of their relationship. Also, even compatible dyad changes due to situational influences because it is not natural that equilibrium permanently exists. However, while both sides consider others’ needs and, while each of them tries to behave not only as it is necessary to satisfy his/her own needs, goals and wishes, and also considering the whole relationship framework, the discrepancy does not endanger the relationship. Incompatibility appears when one person (the coach) gives what the other (an athlete) does not want and or/and need, at the same time the not giving what the player needs. Handball coaches usually make several mistakes; they are obsessed by the result, they often try to motivate their athletes with inappropriate ‘pep-talks’ placing high pressure on their players, and it happens usually before an important match. Also, coaches tend to forget to be supportive, and do not provide a sufficient amount of positive feedback to their players. These lapses might be destructive; it diminishes players’ motivation and causes negative emotions. When players perceive their coach ready to give positive feedback and to lead them in the way they prefer, the relationship is likely to be viewed as compatible.

Incompatibility that appears from time to time does not have to be destructive at all. Sometimes it may be a useful indicator that warns of some segments of the coach-athlete relationship which has to be improved, repaired, or changed. It sometimes may open sincere communication between coaches and their players.

POOR COMMUNICATION

As it was explained in the previous chapter, good and healthy communication demands hard work from both the coach’s and the players’ side. Players cannot improve and develop with coaches who always express negative emotions, who mainly shout or who completely ignore them after mistakes or poor performance. Finding the best way how to communicate with the player after a defeat or poor performance needs an individual approach and a sport psychologist can help. The coach has to observe and ask his/her players about the past events. Some athletes do not want to talk about it immediately after, some need to argue about and to receive the advice how to avoid the similar in the future, some want physical contact and encouragement. The communication problem may be a serious limitation of the player’s progress. Insufficient and ineffective communication may result in misunderstanding or even in resistance. The coach has the impression that the athlete does not cooperate and that he/she is not motivated, or that the player does not trust him/her. The player has the impression that the coach does not really care for him/her, or that he/she is actually not important to the coach, or that the coach perceives himself/herself as stupid, lazy, or similar; all of this may produce negative emotions. This results in the discrepancy between the coach’s intentions and the athlete’s perception of his/her behaviour, as well as between player’s behaviours and the coach’s perception and interpretation of these behaviours. Poor communication leads to incompatibility in the coach-athlete relationship. It may result with a fear and anxiety of the coach’s reactions.

VIOLATION OF RELATIONSHIP RULES

The quality and effectiveness of the coach-athlete relationship is also affected by the type of the relationship. There is the typical and the atypical coach-athlete relationship. The typical coach-

athlete relationship refers to coaches and athletes who do not have any other relationship besides the professional one, the sporting relationship. In this relationship each side has clearly defined roles, and they have no other roles that might endanger the primary, athletic relationship. The atypical relationship is less common, and it involves dual roles in which the coach and the athlete are also related. It may be a family relationship (e.g., parent coach - child athlete), romantic dyad (boyfriend coach - girlfriend athlete, husband - wife), educational dyad (teacher coach -pupil athlete), correspondence coaching (coach and athlete communicate through phone, emails, the athlete executes the training program that coach sends to him/her). It seems that if the coach-athlete relationship is atypical, it may be a significant obstacle to the professional, coach-athlete relationship, i.e., there is a higher risk for the violation of relationship rules. The mutual influence of coexisting relationships rules may result in the role conflict; roles can be mixed up, which negatively affects the coach-athlete relationship. The relationship rules are means by which the coach and the athletes address goals and try to satisfy their needs. The rules define the expected behaviours, regulate behaviours aiming to minimize conflicts. Also, people use rules for interpretation of others' behaviour and also to choose their reactions. The rules are necessary for the feeling of security, especially in youngsters, who prefer stable and predictable environments for secure and healthy development. In sport, the rules assure discipline and responsibility towards others. A coach uses rules to establish the framework of expectation, to develop loyalty and to increase devotion to common goals, and the athletes are, as well as coaches, expected to follow these rules. Breaking the rules may be an important source of interpersonal conflicts and may also diminish team cohesiveness.

Sport psychology investigated the rules in the context of the coach-athlete relationship to explore closeness in athletic dyads. The coach-athlete friendship is always a relationship between unequal parties, as the coach always have authority and formal power. Also, it is governed by certain social conventions that are expected to be respected. Deep friendship between a coach and an athlete is problematic because the function of coaching requires an inequality between these parties, and deep friendship affects the ways the coach and the athlete view and treat each other, and a conflict of interest may arise. On the other hand, the utility friendship between coaches and athletes enables sharing information necessary for achieving common sport goals. It is recommended that athletes and coaches should be encouraged to develop deep friendships, but not with one another.

The coach-athlete relationship may also be analysed from the ethical issues perspective. The coach has formal power and authority, and sometimes some coaches use it for inappropriate purposes. Those may be distinguished from the recommendations to use illegal pharmacological substances (doping) for the improvement of athletic performance, to different forms of athletes' abuse, physical, emotional, or even sexual harassment. Abusive behaviours are forbidden by children's and human's rights. Each coach has to be aware that each behavioural act needs to be performed only for the athletes' improvement, development, or wellbeing, and that his/her role is to protect the athlete from other influences which might endanger these segments. There are eight forms of abusive behaviours in sport (belittling, shouting, humiliating, scapegoating, rejecting, isolating, threatening, and ignoring), and it seems that coaches more frequently and easily use these behaviours after athletes have been identified as prospective or elite players. Many coaches use some forms of these behaviours in order to discipline their athletes. Beside the fact that all of them are legally punitive, all of these behaviours destroy the coach-athlete relationship. A coach is expected to act ethically and in the best interests of the athletes whose care and development they have been entrusted with.

The relationship between a coach and his/her players should be carefully and continuously nurtured. It can be always improved, and it is wise to invest additional effort into it because the returns can be seen on the sport court and in the results. Sometimes a sport psychologist's assistance can be helpful, even necessary.

Toxic Coaches

Sport is always associated with physical endurance, mental toughness, sacrifices, struggles, victories, and losses, all of which affects the emotional experience of all involved, and everything basically happens within the framework of the coach-athlete relationship. The previous chapter highlighted some factors that endanger this relationship and diminish sport performance. Moving in the same negative direction and taking it a few steps further, we arrive at the harmful coach-athlete relationship, even bullying. Research from the field of sport psychology uncovers the dark side of sport, and one severe part of it are toxic coaches. They are persons who are constantly damaging their players' psyche for the sake of the sport, or due to their inner characteristics, motives, or problems - causing severe, often lifetime negative emotional consequences. It is usually realised by aggressive or passive-aggressive behaviour, by bullying that happens in the sport context, and in this case, within unequal relationship between coach and his/her athlete.

Within sport environment such behaviours that manifest as interpersonal violence are taking many different, mainly psychological, forms (e.g., ignoring, exclusion, name calling, humiliation, public comments, punishments, insulting). They are used intentionally by the coach directed at a player to hurt him/her, to discipline or to motivate a player to change something the coach is not happy with.

Manifestation of toxic coaches' behaviour:

- aggression
- passive aggression
- insulting
- exclusions
- ignoring
- name calling
- humiliation
- public negative comments
- bullying as proof of the coach's 'care'
- embarrassing punishments
- sarcasm
- shouting
- threats
- emotional blackmail
- 'Conveyor principle'
- using bullying as a natural selection principle
- manipulative communication

Each coach uses some of these behaviours from time to time. The difference between such a coach and a toxic coach is in the general approach to the players, and the players' reactions, both obvious and hidden ones. In their relationship with players such coaches have all the power, and their players possess a minimum to no power at all.

Toxic coaches' behavioural manifestations (Picture 33) often cause different short- and long-term damaging effects to the player's mental state such as fear, anxiety, shame, anger, disappointment, depression, guilt, sadness, and demotivation. It often causes worsening sport performance and finally leads to the player dropping out of the sport because of the coach. This is proven to be one of the four most frequent reasons for quitting sport.

Physical	headache, chronic fatigue, increased HR, stomach-ache, chronic pain, psychosomatic reactions
Mental	fear, anxiety, pressure, choking, mental exhaustion, shame, anger, guilt, sadness, low self-confidence, low self-esteem, irritability, distractibility, lack of motivation
Behavioural	skipping training sessions, avoidance of some tasks, violent behaviour & displaced aggression, worsening of performance

Picture 33. Consequences of the toxic coaches' aggressive behaviour

Such phenomenon happens in sport, but it is less recognized as something harmful because many coaches believe that is useful to use players' negative emotions instrumentally, in order to motivate them to perform their sport task more effectively. Due to the general sporting orientation where success is defined through results, this often happens, unfortunately, with tacit approval of parents. Although parents recognize that things are not going well, and signs of abusive behaviour are present, they remain silent. Sometimes, such coaches even form an alliance with player's parents, with the intent to build a top elite player in the future. This is long term and a traumatic experience where the player is exposed to a doubly toxic effect where the result and sport is put in front of the young person and his/her health development. Also, such players lose the significant source of support in the parents, who chose to trust a toxic coach unconditionally, playing his/her game. It gives additional power to such toxic coaches to continue using their Machiavellian approach to achieve sport results. Some parents need time to confront this behaviour, because of the coach's authority and because of the potential negative consequences for their child on the court (exclusion from the game). Driven by guilt, most of them finally start to speak and ask questions.

The additional characteristics of toxic coaches are their sophisticated manipulation skills. They are skilled to use their age and experience, as well as their coaching power to create a double fold relationship with young athlete, characterized with love and hate from both sides. It gives a nice excuse to coach to justify his/her behaviour ('I do it because I care for you and for your improvement. Be worried when I remain calm and are nice to you. I want only the best for you' are examples of typical coach's explanation). On the other side, it makes a player confused. Despite suffering, a player is often at the beginning, protecting his/her coach in front of parents, forcing them not to react, for his/her own good. And this mechanism works, for the sake of player's sport improvement. This reinforces the coaches' toxic behaviour.

Toxic coaches exist at all levels of sport, and their action is always harmful, but it is even more harmful if it is happening at levels dealing with younger age groups. Also, toxic coaching behaviour is independent of gender and of sport; you may find male and female toxic coaches. There are some presumptions that it can be found more often in individual, especially aesthetic sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, diving, etc. but it is also typical for contact sports, both team and individual.

It can be said that it is not the specific sport environment, but the coach and the sport culture as a whole contributes to the maintaining of this phenomenon.

CONTEMPORARY COACHING PARADIGM

Toxic coaches always find good excuses for their behaviour and the denial of the real truth is evident. The favourite excuse of such coaches is that they were trained the same way by their coaches, and survived, became more tough. As players', toxic coaches were not satisfied with their coaches, nonetheless, they repeat a pattern. It is a classic example of intergenerational transmission of violence. Nobody became more resilient by aggression and violence. It is just a 'highway to hell', to trauma, to long term deep bruises on one's self esteem and self-image. The solution is to say 'no' and 'enough'. This is the strategy to stop the damaging influence of toxic coaches. Another important thing is to name them and their behaviour by the right name and to talk about it, to warn the responsible parties or institutions about it, and to react. There is no excuse for abuse, and nobody will accept 'I didn't know that it is so problematic' explanation.

Being a coach is a wonderful and very responsible profession. It is not for everybody. It is privileged to those who love people, who trust in good in people, who want to build not to destroy, and who enjoy this job. It is also for clever people, who are aware of interactions and influences, short- and long-term ones. It is for those who understand that words are not unimportant and something by the way. Words are powerful tool, they shape messages, which are repeated daily and which have been written on the athletes' internal walls. If such messages are sent often and by somebody important, they are written by bigger and bold letters, and becomes the athlete's truth, his/her belief about him/herself, capacities, and actions. Words can heal, words can nurture our soul, but also words can be damaging, make deep scars on our deepest experience of ourselves, shaping our deep, basic beliefs about us and our world forever. It is necessary to choose words wisely. This is the mainspring of the coach's responsibility that each coach should be aware of, especially if coaching players in the formative years. To become aware of anything it is necessary to learn about yourself and about the world around you. Those who hold to these views are on the right track because education is the key.

Modern coaching includes a model of respect, empowering, cooperation and partnership, compassion, integrity, learning for life, and taking responsibility. It needs to be distanced from the traditional way of coaching, the way a coach was coached by his/her coach 30 or more years ago. Today, it is much easier to get evidence of toxic behaviour on the court (easy access to mobile phone with camera), and it is easy to publish it on a social network. Also, the legislation is much better defined, and adults and children are better informed about their rights. For coaching children and youth in the 21st century some additional skills are needed.

If you have recognized yourself in these lines, and if you found here some risky behaviour of your own, think about it, ask for guidance and support, cooperate with a sport psychologist, find a mentor. Everybody can change anytime if they want to change.

8.3. INTRAPERSONAL SKILLS

"To understand ourselves is a supreme achievement."

Intrapersonal skills are the ability to regulate our own reactions and behaviour, to become aware of our thoughts and emotions and their influence on us in any particular situation. It also includes the ability to make right decisions that are appropriate to the situation. Intrapersonal skills are necessary for intrapersonal communication, which is communication towards ourselves, but are also necessary for taking care of ourselves and taking steps to better manage ourselves, our inner world, and consequent outside reactions. It is a very important area for the job of a handball coach. In this chapter, we will look at certain intrapersonal skills necessary for efficient coaching such as the psychological pre-game preparation, emotional control, and balancing the professional and personal life of the coach.

Pre-Game Preparation

The central aspect of the coaching job in handball is to lead a match. Everything a coach does is focused to this direction and if a coach wants to do it properly, it is important not just to have a well-prepared team, but to be prepared for the match him/herself. Each coach has their own pattern of game preparation. Some are preparing more and systematically; some rely on their experience and ability to react in the moment depending on what is happening on the court.



As players need to prepare themselves not only physically, but also psychologically for the game, it is even more necessary for the coach, who holds all the strings in his/her hands. Leading a handball match includes revising the game plan, selecting players, making substitutes, calling time-outs, correcting and motivating players, continuous communication with others, anticipation of, and following, the time, and much self-regulation. It needs, as coaches usually say, a 'clear head' and a head can be better cleared by having a structured pre-game preparation, which should be a part of the coach's pre-game routine.

Pre-game preparation includes:

- expert analyses of the opponent and tactical preparation.
- psychological preparation for the game.
- psychological warming-up just prior the match.

After the opponent team is analysed and the tactics chosen and prepared, on the match day a coach needs to prepare psychologically for the game. This preparation can progressively start a few days before, narrowing the coach's focus to the upcoming match, reducing the space for other events in his/her life. It happens naturally, and sometimes it can be counterproductive to change the usual daily routine because it can elevate the meaning and importance of the match and cause additional pressure. It is recommendable to keep the everyday routine in pre-match days, and to have specific routine for mental preparation on the match day or the day before.

A coach's psychological preparation for the game may include:

- mental repetition of tactical variants for different situations.
- repeating your individual and team goals together with the main idea how to realize it within the game plan (not only related to the result!).
- decide on specific tasks for collaborators (assistant coach).
- mindfully watch upcoming thoughts and emotions related to the match and use positive, encouraging self-talk; this means to accept anything that comes, and let it go. Do not start the conversation with the anxious part of the mind, just pay attention to the task you are doing at that particular moment or make your mind busy with something more useful than a 'what if...' story.
- do a relaxation or breathing exercise (10-20 minutes)
- prepare the speech for the last team meeting and pre-match talk on the court and rehearse it (be short, direct, and specific, use some emotional words, but be aware that everything is already set up; some research shows that only 5% of pre-match talks can be recalled after the game!).

SLEEPING BETTER PRIOR THE MATCH

Sometimes coaches, as well as players cannot sleep before matches. It happens partly because a coach tries very hard to get a good sleep, goes to bed earlier than usual and disturbs the normal routine and sleep pattern. It can cause problems with falling asleep or terminal insomnia (waking up before morning and inability to sleep again). Instead of resting, coaches end up lying awake with worries about non-sleeping and also the active mind produces different thoughts related to upcoming game that can cause additional stress. An additional challenge can arise from being in a different bed on away matches, it will bother you more if you go to bed too early.

The important rule is do not break with your routine, go to bed as normal. You can also use some simple techniques to help yourself. You can:

- *Count your breathing*, all inhales and exhales, trying to breathe slowly. If you introduce such a technique (with 5 - 10 focused repetitions) every single day your mind will make a connection with this breathing and a relaxed body state, and it will help a lot when sleeping problems arise. The same logic is applicable with practicing breathing techniques and using a few breaths during the competition, when stress and arousal levels elevate.
- *Chaining* is a simple technique for drifting off, it can be very effective, but needs a lot of concentration in the beginning. The trick is to simply allow your mind to wander from one thought to another, from one image to another without asking why you are doing it, where it will finish, where the chain is going. It can be without logic, or circular, or any way. Just allow your mind to go further until you arrive to falling asleep.
- *Change a bed or position* - sometimes when you awake too early changing a bed or the position of the head in the bed (changing up-down) helps.

In general, it is recommendable to have some time (at least 30 min) to sit and calm down when you come home late, and to exercise at least 60 minutes before going to bed. Also, it is recommendable not to be on the mobile phone 45 minutes prior sleeping, otherwise it can make your brain too active and can make it difficult to fall asleep.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WARM-UP

Just like the players, coaches also need a certain psychological warm up prior to the game. It serves to shift the mindset into competitive mode, to put the full focus on the upcoming event and to switch-off from outside happenings, problems, or anything unrelated to the match. To warm-up his/her head prior the game a coach needs a little bit of time and space. It can be done through a short procedure, where a coach answers certain questions to him/herself to ground him/herself to a particular moment, space, and task ahead.

It is necessary to isolate yourself a bit, and it is recommended to be somewhere on the court (or somewhere else in the building, from where you can see the court). It can be possible to find if a coach arrives early enough. Place yourself in an isolated space (coach's chair, on the bench, somewhere above spectators' seats...) and answer the following questions. It is a really brief and concise report that needs a maximum of 3-4 minutes.

1. Where am I? What is around me? Put yourself to place and time; for example: Today is 1st of March 2023, 5.30 p.m., I am sitting on the bench on the right side of XY court in XY city; I am sitting next to chairs for coaches, in front of me I can see...on the right side there is...and on the left side there is... It is quiet and bright; I can see sunlight coming inside from the west...
2. Why am I here? Say the reason and repeat your individual and teams' process goals, e.g., we are playing against XY, my goal today is... and our team goals today are...
3. How will I do it, and how my team will do it? Focus on the performance, briefly repeat the game plan in a few sentences, and the way you want to behave to fulfil your individual goal.
4. Add some encouraging message to yourself e.g., Enjoy the game.

Then, keeping all that in mind, use 1 minute to mindfully follow your breathing and to 'feel the space'. After that, go back to your collaborators and to your team.

Emotional Control

Leading the game presumes much decision-making. Minute by minute, a coach's leadership efficiency depends on making the right decisions at the right time that can occur under various and stressful circumstances. It is necessary to have a 'clear head' to do this properly and many handball coaches are interested to learn how to control their emotions, how to 'calm their nerves' especially during matches. In chapter 6, different psychological skills are explained. By reading the different subchapters, a coach should already have learned something about stress management, as well as arousal regulation and its importance for concentration. All these principles can be applied when a certain emotional state arises during the game, and the truth is that a coach, together with players, can experience a whole range of various emotions during one match. Some of them bring much energy that can help, but also can limit the leadership process due to the mechanisms explained in earlier chapter. For a coach it is important to remember that his/her emotional energy is easily transferred to the whole team not only by social learning, but mainly by the coach's action, behaviour, words, and demands.

One of the most desirable characteristics of a coach, according to the players' opinion, is emotional stability. It means that players want to have a calm, composed coach who controls his/her reactions and behaviour; it gives them sense of trust and security. The coach's calm energy transfers to players and it is very welcomed in the most stressful moments of the game. It does not mean that players want a disengaged or stone-faced coach, but a person who possesses inner stability and trust in his/her ability and decision that makes him/her confident in their decisions and clearly directive toward players on the court. Sport psychology states that coaches who are able to perceive, understand, and regulate others' emotions and their own emotional behaviour are more effective on the court.



IS THERE ANY CONTROL AND WHAT CAN BE CONTROLLED?

Each handball coach has experienced how difficult it can be to control his/her 'nerves' during the match. When talking about emotional control people usually expect something that will function as a remote control. In the other words, they want to press a magic button on an emotional remote control to change their inner emotional state instantly. This is not possible. Simply stated, our mind does not work that way. The truth is that emotions are internal states that can be obvious in our facial and physical expressions and behaviour, but they are not completely under our volitional control.

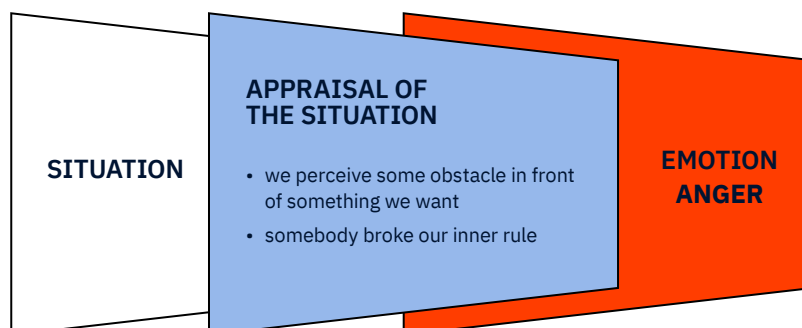
There is a part of our central nervous system, called the autonomic nervous system that controls our emotions. Its name 'autonomic' derives from its function. It is autonomous, a boss by itself, and controls the different functioning of organ systems in our body, as well as our emotions. It means that we cannot directly control our emotions (the same as we are not able to stop our kidneys' functioning), but what we can do is to control our behaviour in any emotional state. This is what coaches can learn to do. In the other words, it is possible to learn to control our emotions indirectly, through controlling our behaviour and by being aware and accepting of our thoughts. This relationship between thinking and feeling is complex, and related to different background factors, and sometimes it needs cooperation with an expert from the field of psychology, i.e., personal counselling.

In chapter 6, the mechanism of stress and how it arises was explained. The most common reaction during a stressful situation is that coaches shift their focus to something that is not under their control which makes them angry, anxious, even helpless, and additionally elevates the stress level. There are many people on the court during a handball match, but there is only one person who is under your control all the time - it is yourself.

As it was explained in chapter 6.3. and presented in Picture 5 (Cognitive Behavioural Model), every emotion derives from our thinking, and it can be seen in our behaviour. One of the most problematic emotional states for the coach on the handball court is anger. Angry coaches often shout, insult, use sarcasm, ignore, and punish, sometimes even hitting players. Anger is a very energetic emotion, and its energy can be useful if we know how to leave the negative content and channel the energy only. It functions very well for players, but intensive emotions in coaches are more problematic because coaches do not have a way to disperse this energy during the match. Players are running, shooting, getting into contact with opponents. Coaches do not have such opportunity. That is why we see many coaches running along the sideline, sweating and gesticulating vigorously. They are trying to exhaust the accumulated emotional and physical energy, but what they mainly do is additionally elevate their arousal level to an undesirable level. The first step when somebody wants to deal with his/her emotional reactions is to become aware of it and its background.

ANGER

The reasons for getting angry can be different, from players' behaviour to referee calls, but in the background is always the similar basic appraisal of the situation that can be twofold (Picture 34).



Picture 34. How anger arises?

In the other words, we are getting angry when something is not as we would like to be (e.g., players do not follow the game plan) or when somebody breaks our inner rule (e.g., a player does not hear the coach's instruction during the match). But the truth about anger is always the same: other people do not make us angry. We chose to become angry. We could also choose some other interpretation of the same situation (e.g., maybe he really did not hear me, maybe it is not true that ignores me) or some other behaviour (e.g., direct attention to the next offense instead shouting nervously to the bench players). Psychology says that anger is our choice that derives from our interpretation of the situation and future consequences.

Now, many coaches will be susceptible to such a reaction, because from their own experience they know that is very difficult to make another choice, it is very difficult to think about anything in anger-triggered situations; we are just reacting. This is the absolute truth and this is the key for the regulation of anger - stop reacting, start to make choices from the rational and consciousness part of your mind. It is hard to achieve, but it is possible to improve with practice. Once again, another excellent opportunity to become a good role model for your players!

It can be improved by understanding the mechanism in the background and by practicing certain techniques which can help to 'calm your nerves'.

How to 'deal' with anger (or any other emotion)?

There are several steps that should be taken; it creates the so called '4 A's' technique.

1. **Aware** - become aware of the situations where you usually feel angry and identify the triggers that press the 'play' button of anger.
2. **Acknowledge** - identify the emotion and name it (ok, I am angry now).
3. **Allow** - allow yourself to be with this emotion, accept it; allow the emotion to be there because it does not prevent you to act, which is the final step.
4. **Act** - take a purposeful action. You may undertake any action, but most of them are not purposeful in that moment. What is purposeful? Ask yourself if it is the reason that caused that emotion under your control. If it is not, which is most often the case, then direct yourself to deliberate action which is in the function of the game - follow the ball, check the time, focus to the present moment. If it is under your control, give the control back to yourself with something that helps - sit down, take a few conscious breaths etc.).

The **formula** is very simple = become aware of your thoughts and emotions, accept it and direct yourself to action.

Repeat this sequence as many times as necessary. The key is to practice being mindful that helps the process of awareness, and to become able to differentiate between purposeful and non-purposeful actions during the handball match. Something that is personally important to the coach does not have to be important for the match! Also, the match time is not the best time to be teaching players lessons. It is not necessary to react to everything, there is plenty of time later for the analysis when everybody is more ready to listen. Accept that a supportive approach always helps, learn to hear the tiny positive voice somewhere inside your head even in the most difficult moments.

Some coaches have certain problems with the idea of acceptance. They do not want to accept something they are not satisfied with. Of course, it is not right, but during the match is not the time to deal with it. Only insecure coaches have the inner need to show their dissatisfaction to everybody during the game. In the 4A model, 'accept' means to accept any emotion that comes. People naturally want their unpleasant emotions to disappear, and they try to erase them. But, as basic laws of physics confirm - force creates resistance. When you accept your emotion, energy changes, and you have the power again, not the emotion, you are free to make a conscious choice (act with purpose). Coaches must be skilled in emotional management, in this segment coaches are performers with a task.

It is important to notice the first signals, because it is much easier to calm a breeze than a tornado. That is why coaches also should learn how to recognize and regulate their arousal. It can be improved by practicing the techniques explained in chapter 6.4. It can be useful to prepare for mistakes and unforeseen situations in advance and follow and use the body language to help yourself in emotionally sensitive situations.

Some issues related to emotional regulation need a deeper and more profound professional approach, because they derive from previous experiences such as a fragile sense of self-respect or self-confidence, inner self-image, or even from trauma. It is always ok, and especially in a such case, to ask for professional help. Having a sport psychologist for a collaborator gives you the opportunity to work on your emotional experiences and behaviours regularly, and to reach improvement much faster.

Balancing Professional and Personal Life

Being a sport coach is a demanding and time-consuming job that leaves little time for a personal life. Being a professional coach is the same as being professional player, it often causes great strain on personal relationships. Many coaches are too busy and dedicated to pursuing their coaching goals that they realize too late that their private and family life is suffering. Also, when they are physically present at home, with their family and friends, they are often mentally absent because they are emotionally engaged in their work. Some coaches say that they have two families - home and sport. This illustrates how much their coaching job means to them. But the same rule applies for coaches as it does for the players - everything in balance. Sometimes this imbalance causes such high levels of stress that coaches think about quitting the job. It happens more easily in critical life periods such as childbirth, illness in family, or a necessity to take care of aging parents.

If you want to be a better coach you have to have 'off-times' away from the sport, leave handball behind to spend some quality time with your family. Being able to rely on a stable partner provides you with an inner peace that becomes your source of stability. It is impossible to totally isolate the professional part of life from the personal part, one flows into the other. If you forget your family, e.g., if you do not dedicate enough time to your children, there is no wife who is patient and understanding forever, especially when hard times appear. Many coaches agree that having support in your family is greatest source of a coach's strength. Also, children need both parents, not an imaginary one who is there, but actually is not.

See this statement from a handball coach: "It is really not easy to come home at the end of the working day, after contacts, talking and interaction with many people who take a lot of energy, and being fresh to continue and be cheerful and active in family environment".

To create a work-life balance you must decide about your priorities and take care of yourself, too. As the coaching job is very stressful, it is necessary to have some time during the week to dedicate to something you love and what makes you happy and relaxed (beside handball). If you are not ok, feeling burned out and irritated, you will not be able to help anyone, and you are not a good company.

Some coaches do not even use their off-season time to dedicate it to their family and friends. Instead, they attend education, seminars, or handball camps, sacrificing their official free time for their job's sake. It is typical for ambitious and responsible coaches, especially younger ones, who are trying to invest a lot in their career development, learning, and building their professional status in order to become better coaches. But the power often lies in slowing down, not speeding up. Also, one example of a good practice is to use that time to take the family with you. It is important to organise their time while you are occupied, but it is necessary to plan some part of the day to spend with them and to extend that trip after the event to spend some free time with your family only.

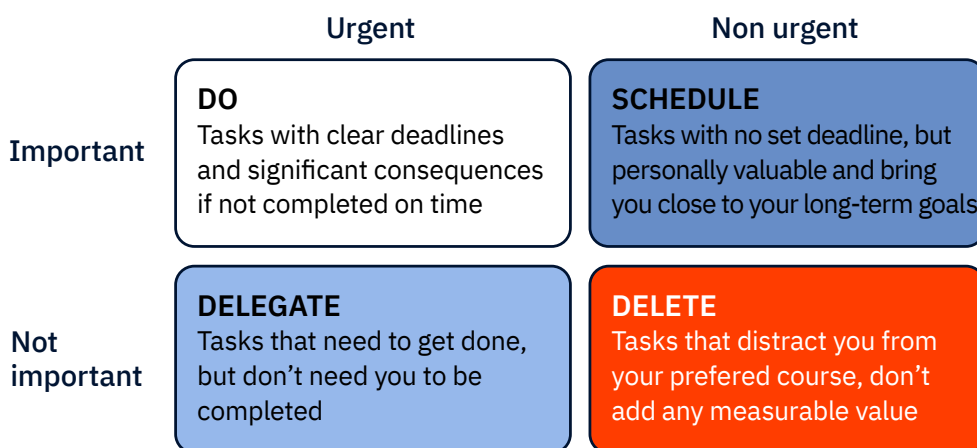
For better balance between the personal and professional life, prioritisation skills are welcome.

HOW TO SET PRIORITIES?

Handball coaches, as with all sport coaches, have the tendency to be 'tough guys', able to manage and control everything. These attempts to be 'a director of the universe' is often a road to burnout, frustration, and dissatisfaction. It is important to admit to yourself that everything you need to do in the professional or the personal life is not equally important, that it is necessary to create and set some priorities. The important part of intrapersonal skills are self-management skills. It includes ranking your goals and tasks, creating a realistic intervals, make a schedule and check it daily, record your success (put a red tick by something that is finished), plan the unexpected, have a plan B, support, and congratulate yourself.

The Eisenhower Matrix is a simple tool used to organise different tasks into four distinct categories according to the criteria of urgency and importance (Picture 35). It can be used to help a coach to make his/her priority list and schedule. It has to be congruent with personal and team's goals.

- *Urgent* are tasks that require immediate action and come with clear consequences for the non-completion of these tasks. They are unavoidable but spending too much time on them or taking too many tasks to heart, creates much stress and could result in a burnout.
- *Important* are tasks that contribute to long-term goals and life values. They require planning and thoughtful action. What a coach considers as important is individual, personal, and depends on his/her values and goals.



Picture 35. Priority Matrix

The priority matrix tool can help a coach to clarify and schedule his/her tasks. There are four different strategies that a coach can imply according to this categorization.

1. Important and urgent - tasks that are important and that we must do now.
2. Important, but not urgent - tasks that are important but can be done later without jeopardising the coach's ability to complete the task effectively.
3. Not important, but urgent - things that are not that important but that need to be done soon (coaches should try to delegate these tasks where possible).
4. Not important and not urgent - things coach often do, or thinks he/she needs to do, but have no value to his/her work or life (coaches should try to eliminate or discontinue these tasks as much as possible).

Delegating some tasks and responsibilities is an effective way for coaches to find a better work-life balance. Due to that, it is important to have quality and trusted assistants and colleagues who share a similar work ethic and dedication.

To summarize, here are short recommendations to achieve work-life balance:

- Define handball time and family time (off-times from the sport).
- Be present and mindful when you are with your family.
- Take care of yourself; find some time to do something that makes you happy and do it regularly.
- Take care of yourself; be active, exercise regularly, take care of your rest and nutrition.
- Make a priority list.
- Have a plan and schedule, be realistic.
- Delegate some responsibilities to others.
- Invest time to your psychological preparation and mental health.

When a sport psychologist talks about this topic with coaches, they usually say that having balance is something that would be 'nice to have', but that it is not possible in this particular case. Neglecting this serious topic might lead to burnout, which is a serious problem. Some coaches try to alleviate their stress level or the negative effects of the work-life disbalance with alcohol and drug abuse, gambling, or promiscuous lifestyle; it is non-adaptive way of solving this situation.

Coaches, as well as their players, must be aware that sport is only a part of their life, and the coaching role is only one of their life roles. If a coach can find an opportunity outside the sport, however small it may be, to recharge it will help on all life fields.



"The purpose of success is not to arrive at a certain destination, but to dare to travel. The journey makes us fulfilled and thankful."

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