

Building a Cohesive Field Hockey Team

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There is much more to becoming a championship field hockey team than the skill level of each player. The amount of communication, working together, and mutual respect is crucial in becoming a high performing field hockey team. A vital component of winning the mental and team game of field hockey is the cohesiveness of your team. While winning a championship ring is awesome, the most vivid memories and feelings that stay with a team are the special relationships that are developed throughout the season. The challenges they faced together, the successes they shared, and the tears they shed. When it's all said and done your players will look back not just on the number of wins or titles but the relationships they formed with teammates and coaches. I have found from both professional and personal experience the more cohesive a team is, the more your players will reach peak performances. Team cohesion will help your team rise to greater levels because they will be playing not just for themselves but for each other. I have found that teams who have a high level of trust and support within the team, will feel safe enough to take risks on the field and as a result they will play to win rather than worrying about making mistakes on the field.

Developing team cohesion is something that takes time and effort. When teams are formed they go through stages of development. There are 5 distinct stages a group experiences no matter what their level of play, experience or sport. A team can go through each stage only once or multiple times. The 5 stages are:

Forming

In the *Forming* stage, athletes are introduced to each other. Freshman and/or transfer players are introduced to the rest of the team. All the members find out a little more about each other as well as themselves. This stage is fairly short-lived compared to the rest of the stages.

Storming

The *Storming* stage occurs when the players start to compete with each other for positions or roles on the team. This could occur with a freshman or sophomore taking an upper classman's position or when players compete for leadership roles on the team or when the team experiences trouble or difficulty (such as a loss or an injury). This stage is usually very tense and emotional because of the competition for positions. It is within this stage that the leaders of the team will emerge.



Norming

Norming will occur once the focus of the team shifts from an intra group (competition within the group) to an inter-group (competition with other groups) where common efforts of the team are focused on. Coaches play a crucial role in this stage to make sure all the players know their roles and responsibilities for successful competition.

Performing

Performing comes when the players come together and ultimately become one and compete against other teams. The athletes have accepted their roles on the team and all members work toward their responsibilities for the team. Each player recognizes the importance of their teammates and focuses on all the physical and emotional efforts that necessitate success.

Adjourning

In the *Adjourning* stage of a group, the group disperses for the season. It is important that the athletes have closure in this stage. Having an end-of-the-season get together or dinner to recap the season or to say good-bye to those who may be graduating is a great way to end the season and to get everyone thinking about next season.

Tips on enhancing team cohesion

1. **Get everyone on the team on the same page (Set team goals/Team mission).** When everyone is striving towards a common goal this will help team cohesion develop. Goals must be challenging, specific, realistic, and focus on the process. Teammates should be aware of each other's individual goals so they can support each other in achieving them. Teams that I have worked with who have performed on a high level have created Team Mission Statements and Team Themes. A team mission statement is a way to clarify team dreams into goals. Once the mission statement is created, the team should post it on the locker room wall as a daily reminder of where they want to go and how they are going to get their. Also, at the end of the year you can create the Mission Statement Award. The player who most represented the team mission receives this award at the end of the season.
2. **Facilitate open, honest, and respectful communication.** A highly cohesive team will create a safe atmosphere where each player can talk openly and honestly with one another and among coaches. Coaches should keep an open door policy when communicating with their athletes as well as check in with your athletes to see how they are doing and feeling. One thing to remember about communication is communication is more than just sending someone a message. The skill of listening is vital to the communication process. Listening shows that you care about what your teammates and team members are saying and this is important in building team cohesion and trust between teammates.
3. **Well Defined and Appreciation of Roles.** High performing teams have players who are willing and take pride in doing the tough and

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underappreciated jobs. Successful teams take the time to appreciate the role players on the team. Each member of the team should feel they are part of the team and that they contribute something important. Some roles that players may assume:

- Team Leader (vocal leaders, leadership by example),
- Team Moms/Counselors—these players help struggling players and often mediate during times of dissension.
- Social Leaders—these are the athletes who are always planning ways to get together outside of field hockey.
- Team Motivators—these are highly spirited players who can get the team up for a game or practice.
- Team Clowns—these players have a great sense of humor and frequently provide some comic relief to help make practice and competitions more fun.

4. **Create Team Distinctiveness.** You want your team to feel like it's a privilege to be a member of the team. Creating special team bulletin boards, team t-shirts, team slogans/themes will help each player feel unique and this will promote unity. It's amazing how a team can have a sense of pride from a t-shirt that has team slogan written on it. One field hockey team that I worked with had a theme of "Hold the Rope." Hold the Rope was special story written on what it takes between teammates to win a championship. This team thrived on this theme and went on to win a national championship.
5. **Team Activities.** Having a preseason retreat is a good way to help your team bond for the upcoming season. Many teams bring in a

team building/sport psychology consultant such as myself to facilitate this experience. Many teams that I have worked with have utilized ropes courses, had many team dinners, went on team hikes, as well as planning other team social events.

6. **Create the Wall of Confidence.** This is a combination of ideas that I have learned from coaches and team building consultants. This is a great way to build appreciation and confidence within your team. Each player on your team has a secret psych pal (secret spy). Each player is responsible to write down something positive they did in practice or in a game that contributed to the overall success of the team. These notes are placed on the team bulletin board for each player to review. This can be done throughout an entire season.
7. **Circle of Confidence/Got Your Back.** Have your players sit in a circle. Give each of your players a sheet of paper or a large index card. Each player writes her name on the paper and under her name she writes down the word "strengths." Each player's paper is passed around the circle so each player receives strength from her teammate. The strength that is written must something related to the team. When your team completes the list, have each player verbalize at least 5-6 strengths using "I am statements." *Variation:* For Got Your Back place the sheet of paper on the players back.

REMEMBER: Success may not enhance cohesion, but cohesion enhances success.

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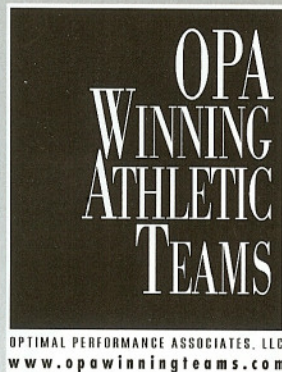
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Team Building Drill:

The Human Knot

Get all your players and coaches in a circle. First, have the players put their left hands into the center of the circle. Next, have everyone grab the left hand of someone else in the circle that is in front of him or her. Now have each person put their right hands into the circle and have them join right hands with someone else. Make sure that no one is holding both the left and right hands of the same person. Now the group has to untangle itself, without breaking hands, so that when they're done they are in one large circle. If the team is exceptionally large, make two circles and compare how each of the two groups accomplished their goal. To increase the level of challenge you can take away speech (mute the group).

Discussion: How did the group work together? What worked well and what could have been better. Who showed leadership? What makes a positive leader/follower? How did the group communicate together? What are potential knotty situations that you can face this season?

Any questions or comments about this article contact Keith Waldman at kperform@aol.com or (856) 988-2939. To get more information about Optimal Performance Associates and the services we provide you can visit our company website at www.opawinningteams.com.