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COLUMN: Psych! F. Hockey doc works

RICK HAGGERTY (THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PENN FIELD HOCKEY TEAM'S WIN OVER VILLANOVA ON TUESDAY.)
September 16, 1999

Courtney Martin shot two balls into the cage. Maria Karas scored the game-winner in the second half.

And coach Val Cloud and assistant coach Donna Mulhern scouted the Wildcats extensively.

But one contributor to the win just sat in the Franklin Field bleachers and watched. His name is Keith Waldman -- and anyone on the team would tell you he played a part in the team's victory.

"Last night was the culmination," Cloud said. "Everyone played so hard and had fun."

What Cloud is referring to is the relationship her team developed with Waldman during the preseason.

Waldman is a psychologist. He currently works for Optimal Performance Associates and helps various sports teams that are having difficulty with things unrelated to skill level or knowledge of the game.

Last season, Penn finished with an 8-9 record. Although the Quakers' 4-3 mark in the Ivies was nothing spectacular, it was also not something that would typically sound off alarms.

But all was not well with the Penn field hockey program. "There was a lot of frustration," tri-captain Leah Bills said. "We expected to do a lot better than we did."

And tri-captain Maureen Flynn added that there were "a lot of issues that came to a head last year."

Cloud saw the environment around her team and knew that it was not one conducive to attaining a championship. The level of trust and respect that most members of good teams have was nowhere to be found among members of the Quaker squad.

So last spring, Cloud and Mulhern gathered with the six seniors on this year's team in what Cloud described as "a meeting of the minds."

They needed a way to establish that missing component -- the much-needed trust and respect -- before the '99 season.

And that is where Waldman entered the picture.

Waldman has worked with numerous sports teams in the recent past, including various squads at Temple, Rutgers, Rowan and other colleges in the northeast.

Penn softball coach Carol Kashow had dealt with Waldman before and recommended him to Cloud. And Cloud consulted Penn strength coach Rob Wagner, who also gave Waldman's work high praise.

So Cloud made the call.

What was in store for the returning players was a preseason unlike the ones they had experienced in recent years.

The regular schedule of running, lifting, practicing and watching film was expanded to include team-building exercises.

"Some of the games were silly, like playing with hula hoops," Bills said. "It was stupid kid games but you can see that the other people trust you."

What Waldman is doing is nothing new. Bills and Flynn spoke of the exercise in which a person falls back freely, knowing her teammate will catch her.

It's a simple exercise, one that has been performed many times before. But it was something the field hockey players needed.

The players needed to know that they can trust a person to catch them while falling, so they know that same person can be trusted in an important game situation.

Waldman met with the Quakers in six preseason sessions and has made himself available to the team for contact by e-mail or phone throughout the year.

Waldman will readily admit the team that beat the 'Cats earlier this week was not the same one he met in August for their first session. That group had the talent, the knowledge and the will to compete, but it was missing two important characteristics needed for team success -- respect and trust.

"Their mission, which bonded them together, was to get on the same page," Waldman said.

And after six team-building sessions, that page features every member of the team.

Waldman is not a revolutionary. The things he says can be heard from coaches across the country.

He speaks of the "Cs of Championships," which include cohesion, commitment, communication, composure, common goals and complementary roles.

These phrases are a part of every coach's vocabulary. Have a conversation with any coach of any sport at any level, and you are bound to have one of these terms spit back at you.

But the Quakers needed to hear it from someone new. Hearing Cloud say these things just wasn't the same as having a third-party offer a new perspective.

Bills and Flynn readily point out that this year's team is by far the best they've played with in their four years and that that is due to more than Keith Waldman.

The impact he had, however, is evident to anyone who speaks to the team members.

Could a similar experience help other teams at Penn? Maybe, but a psychologist is not something that all teams could use right now.

When situations like the one the field hockey team had last year do arise, however, perhaps other Penn coaches will take a lesson from Val Cloud.

As Waldman watched the Quakers defeat Villanova, he could see the impact he had when the Wildcats tied the game at two.

"Rather than getting down, they came out and scored right away," Waldman said, referring to Karas' goal six seconds after 'Nova tied up the game.

Would Penn have beaten Villanova if they had never met Keith Waldman? Possibly.

But would they be a satisfied and focused team whose members trust each other completely? Probably not.

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