

## **Impact of Personal Technology Devices on Team Building**

By Jaime Hickson

As coaches, one of the first things we try to establish when building our athletic programs is team chemistry. This connection to one another as individuals and as teammates is critical in team sport, so attention must be paid to developing a united sense of team. One of the most effective means of fostering a “team centered” culture is participating on a road trip.

Although the majority of all team road trips involve their own variety of obstacles and challenges, in most recent years, issues surrounding the use of personal technology devices have risen. While cell phones, laptops, ipods/MP3s and video games may be great time killers during extensive travel, they may also be team unity destroyers. Instead of spending time talking to their teammate seated beside them, you will find athletes locked down on their personal laptops, listening to their music, oblivious to their surrounding teammates and coaches. I believe these devices have their time and place, but that they also interfere with the development of team relationships and chemistry.

### **Cell Phones**

Today’s athletes live by their cell phones. How often do we see our athletes texting or talking immediately following a practice or game? Instead of de-briefing with a teammate or coach, athletes are debriefing with individuals outside the team inner circle. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it does limit the quality of conversation and relationships being fostered between teammates. Think back to the days before cell phones. Athletes may have spent a couple of minutes at the pay phone, calling home to reveal the results of competition but then returned back to their teammates in the stands or hotel. Nowadays, athletes will spend their time talking with parents, significant others, best friends and others in the team room, stands, bus rides, hotel lobby and hotel rooms. They remain in constant connection and interaction with the outside world and spend time debriefing their performance and events with others, as opposed to those involved with the team; their teammates and coaches. As coaches, we must recognize that this interference exists and we must make decisions about our philosophies on cell phone usage during team time. Below are a few suggestions of rules I have emplaced with a variety of teams I have coached.

### **Coachickson’s Rules**

- Coaches must role model ALL expected behaviors. Emergencies are the only exceptions.
- No Cell Phones at the table at Team Meals.
- No Cell Phone Conversations (including texts) on Bus or Vans to and from practices and games.
- No Cell Phones powered on in team room, training facilities or gym.
- No Cell Phones in Rooms After Lights Out. I couldn’t understand why so many of my athletes were tired in the morning when I had established sufficient “sleep and lights out” rules. It turns out that many of my athletes were staying up late sending and receiving text messages from their friends back home. And because of the time change, they were texting at 3am instead of sleeping. Not only were they not sleeping, and disturbing the sleep of their teammates, but they were actively involved in violating team rules. So I developed a new cell phone policy; at the end of each day athletes would “hand-in” their cell phones to the coaches’ rooms where we would power them off and plug them into power bars for the evening. The phones were returned to each athlete the next morning following team breakfast. We found that by waiting until after breakfast, we were able to achieve two things; 1. We facilitated the first conversations of the day to

include interactions with teammates, 2. We were able to ensure all of our athletes were eating a proper meal to start the day.

### **Internet Access and Personal Lap Tops**

The internet is a wonderful device that can be used to keep in touch with family and friends while traveling. Many athletes now have their own personal laptops and hotels now commonly offer free internet access in each room. But with the internet comes new challenges: highly interactive web pages and browsers including email, msn, blogs, myspace, facebook and twitter. These multi-media pages provide athletes with a variety of ways to stay connected to home. Remember, as coaches we are using road trips to create and stay connected to one another and one weekend away from facebook is not going to threaten the quality of life of our athletes. If anything, I would argue that it would enhance the quality of their team life and team chemistry.

As coaches we often create strategic room assignments that best compliment the team dynamic. For instance, my shy rookie may be placed with our team captain, so I know she will feel included in all activities. When our athletes spend "down-time" between training and competing sessions in their rooms, we encourage them to interact with one another as opposed to co-existing. I choose to monitor and limit my team's access to the internet when we stay in hotels with access. I designated one room with internet access and require my athletes to sign up for "internet time" up to a maximum of 30 minutes.

The internet has its place for maintaining communication when traveling, but it's important that when we coaches focus on building a "team centered" culture, we consistently promote this process. Limiting the amount of face time our athletes experience with their personal computers will increase the amount of face time they experience with each other. Now instead of walking into a room with four athletes locked down on their individual laptops, I find my athletes playing cards, studying, talking, interacting and building their relationships with one another.

### **Ipods/MP3 Players**

I believe that iPods and MP3 players can play a very distinct role in athletic competition and game preparation. I believe that athletes use music as a means of preparing themselves for competition as part of their mental preparation routines. Personally, I choose to not interfere with pre-game routines and rarely enforce rules governing iPod usage. However, I do believe that plugging in earphones is an easy way for many athletes to escape reality, conflicts, conversations and performance outcomes.

### **Coachickson's Rules**

- No iPods on bus following a game/training session. Take this opportunity to share and experience the team win or loss together. This time spent celebrating or reflecting with emotion should be done so together.
- Keep it to yourself. If others can hear it, it's too loud. Respect the athletes who choose not to listen to music, as they should be permitted to prep in quiet. Teammates illustrating mutual respect for one another will enhance overall team atmosphere in a positive manner.

### **Hand Held Games**

Hand held video games such as Nintendo DS and Gameboy systems can be great ways for occupying "down time" and the active athletic mind prior to competition. They can be a great way for athletes to escape thoughts, feelings and nerves about performance, however they too must have a limit when it comes to team building. Simply put, I believe that athletes by nature

are competitive and in my experience, more often than not, when one athlete begins playing a hand held video game it generates into a mass competition of record breaking and setting by the entire team. The only place I discourage their use is when the group becomes too loud in heated competition, in public places such as a hotel lobby or airport waiting area. My other rule is no video games at any team meal as the idea again, is to interact with each other, not a computer.

**Note on Academics**

Although I have been clear on addressing the impact of technology on team building, it should be noted that time spent on the internet surfing and talking, as well as cell phone texting, all interfere with time student-athletes should be using to study. If your athletes fall into the category of students involved in semester work, accommodations should be made to the team schedule to limit the interference of technology and include mandatory study sessions.