



Mitigating the Effects of a Dispute Within a Team

The SDRCC, in collaboration with Luc Arseneau, Member of the Board of Directors

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An athletic career is so much more than selection or carding. It is important to talk to your athletes about the need to respect the entire path of a career and to not allow only one obstacle to end it."

Luc Arseneau, ChPC, Head Coach, National Cycling Canada - Atlantic Canada

Disputes within sport teams are common. At a national team level, these disputes often involve athlete selection, carding or disciplinary sanctions. Such disputes can have a serious impact on team chemistry when team members momentarily become adversaries in resolving a dispute that opposes them.

In many cases, disputes within a team are unavoidable. When faced with this type of situation, those in charge of the team play a key role in making sure that the impact of a conflict opposing two or more members is kept to a minimum and that it does not impede the performance of the team as a whole. The role of the coach, who must lead by example, is particularly crucial in the way in which the dispute will be handled by the team.

How one reacts to a conflict situation varies for each individual. Personalities on a sport team are as diverse as they are numerous, and athletes may find themselves divided not only over the dispute in question, but also over how it should be addressed. Each athlete on the team may react very differently to the conflict, so several interventions may be needed to reach out to all of them. To try to minimize the potential negative impact of sport-related disputes, the coach may choose from a variety of actions, depending on the situation. Here are a few examples.

When the Coach's Decision Itself is Challenged

Disputes associated with disciplinary sanctions or team selection are among the most difficult that face coaches, because in many cases it is their own decision that is being called into question. Without admitting an error or losing face, coaches can help the other team members understand that the situation, while difficult, must not affect the team's training and preparation.

- ◆ Demonstrate that you comply with the rules in effect and be the first to show your support for the appeal process adopted by your sport organization;
- ◆ Lead by example, even if it is your decision that is being challenged, and express confidence in the appeal process underway;
- ◆ Explain to team members that the athlete who launched the appeal is showing a lot of courage in defending his or her rights;
- ◆ Show openness to the possibility that the process you followed in making the decision may not have been perfect, but that you made what you felt was the best decision at the time;
- ◆ Anticipate and be ready to answer questions that may be asked by other team members, while making sure that you maintain the confidentiality of the appeal underway;
- ◆ Answer questions using positive terms in order to reassure team members who may have concerns about possible outcomes of the dispute.



When Two or More Teammates are up Against Each Other

Disputes involving carding can often create tension between two or more members of the same team. This type of situation can divide the entire team, with some members supporting the appellant and others supporting the athletes affected. The role of the coach is crucial in ensuring that such a rift does not occur and in maintaining a healthy team spirit despite the adversity. It is important to help team members remain focused on their collective results and performance.

- ◆ Underscore the fact that the athlete contesting the decision (of being refused carding or of not being selected) is exercising his or her rights. “The athletes affected must understand that this is just one aspect of the overall process and that the team and the performance of its members are much bigger than this single hurdle”, said Luc Arseneau;
- ◆ Remind members who are vying for the same carding opportunity that, despite being in competition with one another individually, they all are part of the same team on the field of play;
- ◆ Encourage athletes who are divided by the dispute to take part in the mediation process offered, if applicable, to better understand each other’s point of view and find common ground;
- ◆ If mediation services are not available, ask the athletes in question to recognize the reasons why another athlete may also deserve to be carded. Speaking in favour of the other person helps promote an understanding of their rationale and in doing so enables people to see the situation differently;
- ◆ Encourage other team members to withhold their judgment and to not take sides. Help them to understand that in the final scheme of things they are not the ones deciding, and therefore which teammate they agree with will have no impact on the final outcome;
- ◆ Do not tolerate any disrespectful comment or gesture towards an athlete who is appealing a decision;
- ◆ Remind all team members that athletes who appeal a decision do so for themselves and not against the team or against another teammate.

When a Member is “Reintegrated” Following a Ruling by an Appeal Committee or Arbitrator

If an athlete wins a team selection appeal, he or she must now be reintegrated into the team under conditions that can be less than ideal or even a little embarrassing for the athlete. Without necessarily rolling out the red carpet, all efforts should nevertheless be made to prepare a harmonious return to the team for that athlete.

- ◆ Welcome the athlete as a full-fledged member of the team;
- ◆ Talk about the positive contribution that this new team member will make, stressing the individual’s strengths and how he or she will complement the team’s existing strengths;
- ◆ If the arrival of the athlete has meant the departure of another, an specific intervention may be needed with team members who are close friends with the athlete being replaced;
- ◆ When the opportunity presents itself, comment on the legitimacy of the appeal process that led to the selection of the athlete who is joining the team;
- ◆ Take advantage of the situation to allow the team to draw positive conclusions from the experience and be better equipped next time, by giving feedback to team members and asking them to share their own experience.



Rallying the Right Support to Better Manage the Impact

A coach cannot be left alone to deal with a complex situation, such as a conflict that pits one or more team members against another or, worse, a conflict that sees the coach pitted against one or more athletes on the team. A coach's success is closely linked to his or her ability to rally other strong leaders associated with the team, such as assistant coaches, athlete representatives and team veterans.

- ◆ Identify individuals who have a lot of influence on the team, and ask for their help in maintaining a positive atmosphere within the team during the dispute. Be careful however that doing this is not perceived as an effort to rally the group around your own position in the dispute;
- ◆ Ask these individuals to refrain from representing the interests of one particular athlete and to instead represent those of the entire team;
- ◆ Because successfully overcoming obstacles and challenges can have a positive impact on team spirit, a well-planned response strategy with these leaders may even strengthen the bonds among team members.

An ounce of prevention...

Coaches play a vital role in preventing disputes on their team; the coach must therefore ensure that there is understanding by all team members and must also act as a role model on which his or her athletes can count.

- ◆ Communicate with each athlete to ensure that they all clearly understand the processes from the outset. They'll know better what to expect, how to behave or perform in order to be on the team, and as a result they will be less inclined to contest the decision if they have not respected the rules or met the criteria. "First and foremost, a good coach is obligated to clearly communicate his or her selection criteria," states Luc Arseneau. "Whether established by a committee or the coach alone, everyone, especially the athletes, must understand these criteria in detail. It's much easier to dispel doubts before rather than after the fact."
- ◆ Right from the start of the season, talk to your athletes about the possibility that disputes will arise, and prepare team members to accept that these kinds of situations will require that they make an extra effort to maintain a positive atmosphere within the team;
- ◆ Be open to explaining how you align your coaching decisions to the policies and regulations of your sport organization, before you render important decisions as much as afterwards;
- ◆ If you must communicate a decision that has the potential to not be well received, ensure that you also clearly communicate the reasons for such decision;
- ◆ Ensure that the members of your team feel comfortable enough to talk about their concerns in order to avoid an existing conflict becoming worse or a new conflict being created;
- ◆ Once a dispute has been resolved, debrief with the athletes in order to gauge the positive and negative effects of the experience on the team and to identify the lessons learned from it to prevent or better respond to a future situation. Team members must be capable of taking responsibility for their behaviors during a

An Inspiring Story

The SDRCC heard an appeal by an athlete who believed he had the right to be carded by Sport Canada. The filing of his appeal required the identification of a number of his teammates as affected parties, who risked losing their carding status if the athlete was successful. In this case, the appellant and the affected parties trained together almost every day, a situation that makes most of these cases difficult to the point of becoming unbearable. After several weeks of defending his case, carding for the athlete was denied. Bitterly disappointed with the decision, the athlete nonetheless had to go to the training site as usual, where that morning everyone was already busy preparing equipment for the session. When the athlete arrived, all of his teammates stopped what they were doing, turned towards him, and gave him a warm round of applause to acknowledge the courage he had shown in defending his rights and beliefs, demonstrating to him that, carded or not, he was still an important member of their team.

Editor's note: This situation actually occurred, but is being shared anonymously. Those involved will no doubt recognize themselves. The SDRCC wishes to thank them for this touching gesture, which demonstrated extraordinary maturity and team spirit.



conflict and for any positive or negative repercussions that their actions had on the team.

Have you dealt with conflict situations on your team that were successfully resolved? Do you know other strategies to help prevent or manage disputes that occur within a sport team? Share them on our [Facebook](#) page. ■

References:

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