

LESSONS FROM THE SPORTS WORLD



Answer these questions to see how to turn your organization into a winning team.

By Mark Mitchell & Robert Orwig

Just as Shakespeare believed that “all the world’s a stage,” so 21st century America could echo his sentiments with “All the world’s a game and all the men and women merely players.” In our culture, athletic competition has become the national amusement and, like Elizabethan theater, serves as a unifying force that crosses economic, social, educational, ethnic, and gender boundaries.

We can learn a great deal about a society by observing the games people play. And we can learn about ourselves by looking at our performance in those games. For example, are you a relaxed golfer or a tense one? Do you want to hit first or last when playing in a captain’s-choice golf tournament? Do you bet the favorite or the underdog at the horse track?

Athletics provides valuable lessons in other aspects of life. This is particularly true for managers in today’s dynamic nonprofit environment. Let’s look to some popular American sports for personal and professional direction. Answer the questions in each category to see if yours is a winning team.

LESSONS FROM THE GRIDIRON

Football is a powerful game, two teams plotting separate strategies and implementing them in a series of controlled collisions. Next time you watch a football game, take time to consider the management lessons to be learned from the gridiron. The competition for donors, resources, and media attention is fierce. The price of a mistake is high. The gratification of success

is sweet. Let’s talk about what we can learn from watching a football game.

Be Ready to Take One for the Team.

In a football game, one defender is assigned the role of wedge buster, that unselfish act of throwing one’s body into the blockers’ path in an attempt to disrupt their unity. The wedge buster takes one for the team.

So it goes in today’s ever-changing environment. There are times when managers must be willing to sacrifice personal gain for the well being of the organization. Ask yourself these questions:

- **Do you balance** personal goals and team goals so that both are possible?
- **Do your associates appreciate** the need for unselfish acts of professionalism?
- **Are employees willing** to “take one for the team”?

Prepare Others to Make Decisions.

Coaches must train players to make quick decisions amid the chaos of the game. At the core, a coach is a facilitator, arranging players into positions of probable success.

- **Are you a thoughtful facilitator** who prepares and empowers associates to make quick and appropriate decisions?
- **Do you delegate** responsibility, letting others make choices? Or are you a control freak, guarding all important decisions as your own?
- **Do you remember that your success** is in your staff’s hands?

- **Do you cultivate a sense of teamwork** that builds on existing strengths and allows for the personal development of your team?

Appreciate the Unknown Heroes.

Everyone recognizes the name of the 100-yard rusher, the 5-reception receiver, the 200-yard passer, or the 3-3 field goal kicker. But what about the folks up front blocking to make the successes of those individuals possible? What about the decoy receiver who allows the other player to draw single coverage from the defense? What about the guy who snaps for the field goal? These players sweat the details to ensure the success of others. Ask these questions:

- **Do you recognize** the unsung heroes in your organization?
- **Do you acknowledge** the thorough custodian, the pleasant receptionist, and the accurate data entry person? Do you keep in mind that their success makes the work of others possible?

Seek Improvement Constantly.

Rarely will you find a coach who is 100% satisfied with the team's performance. Coaches are always looking for ways to improve. That's a good thing! Leaders in the quality movement point out that the road to high quality is a never-ending journey as the environment and critical success factors continue to change. The quality movement hit the gridiron long before it hit the nonprofit sector.

- **Do you assess** performance and recognize strength?
- **Do you build** on positions of strength and improve areas of weakness?
- **Are you continually looking** for ways to do things better?

Keep Your Old Fans Coming Back.

The coach accepts the responsibility to deliver a game that's competitive and entertaining, knowing that's the way to sustain fan support. This is relationship marketing in action. It is less expensive to maintain existing donors and clients than to cultivate new ones.

- **Do you focus on developing fans** for your organization?

- **Do you provide donors and clients a value-added experience?** Do you give them a reason to keep coming back?

LESSONS FROM THE HARDWOOD

Basketball, a truly American sport, provides numerous lessons for nonprofit managers.

Keep People on Zone Defense.

In a zone defense, each defender covers an area rather than a specific player. Think of the delegation of your employees as basketball's zone defense.

- **Do you carefully assign** each person a particular task?
- **Do you keep people focused** on their assigned task? Do you make sure they don't wander into other areas unless doing so won't jeopardize performance in their domain?
- **Do you cultivate** each person's special strengths?

Use a Motion Offense.

In a motion offense, players work aggressively without the ball, creating diversions and screens to free up teammates for open shots. The key to success is the willingness to do the "little things" resulting in open shots for all. Does this sound familiar? Don't you need your supporting cast? Ask yourself this:

- **Do all employees understand** how they contribute to the larger picture — the success of your organization?
- **Are you careful** not to take anyone for granted?
- **Do you make sure that employees** appreciate the contributions of everyone in the organization?
- **Do you keep in mind** that the activity behind the scenes (non-donor or client contact) makes the moment of donor and client contact possible?

Run the Fast Break.

A fast-break opportunity results when members of the offensive team beat the defense back up the floor for a momentary advantage (such as two offensive

players against one defender). An effective break scores quickly before the defense recovers to erase that momentary advantage. Isn't this another way of viewing the sudden changes in the marketplace?

- **Are you alert to windows of opportunity** for success in your local service area?

- **Can you act quickly** before that window closes and your opportunity is lost?

- **Do you act decisively** rather than react defensively?

- **Are you ready** to "run the court" and "beat the defense" to your goal?

Protect the Back Door.

An aggressive attacking defense should open the offensive passing lanes. When three offensive players are on (say) the right side of the court, the offense may sneak a player along the left baseline to take a pass and make an easy score. This is referred to as a back-door play. In essence, the defense over-commits, and the offense exploits the opportunity. You face the same scenario daily.

- **Do you prioritize** your activities so as not to over-commit to less productive activities?

- **Do you allocate** your time based on the projected return for your time investment?

Free Throws Should be Automatic.

When a player is fouled, a free throw shot may result. Here, the offensive player is given an uncontested 10 seconds to shoot from the free-throw line. The line doesn't move. The basket doesn't move. Each free throw is the same. Yet modern players struggle to be successful over 70% of the time. Think about it. They know they will shoot from the same spot under the same conditions. Yet the success rate is relatively low, and getting lower each year.

How well do you make your free throws? Ask yourself these questions:

- **Do you prepare your staff** to respond to all reasonably foreseen happenings?

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- Do you empower your team to handle people's requests at the point of contact?

- Do you have contingency plans ready to activate when problems arise (as they inevitably will)?

LESSONS FROM THE DIAMOND

Baseball is the consummate chess match with human game pieces creating numerous metaphors for nonprofit managers.

Wait for Your Pitch.

Great hitters study the pitchers. They wait for the pitch that meets their needs. When they get their pitch, they hit it with pinpoint accuracy.

- Are you patient and disciplined?

- Do you adhere to your long-range plans? Or do you abruptly change course given a new funding source?

- Do you evaluate the goodness of fit between your organization and potential partners?

- Do you "wait for your pitch" and move your "runners" into scoring position?

Call It in the Outfield.

A fly ball anywhere on the diamond requires teamwork that's not necessarily recognized by the crowd. Inevitably, some balls will find the seams between defenders. Sometimes, players collide for lack of communication. To avoid this mishap, someone must make decisions and communicate them to affected parties.

- Do you take charge and direct action with confidence?

- Do you communicate important issues clearly and directly?

- Are you conscious of what you say and how you say it?

- Do you clarify expectations so that all employees know what you expect of them?

- Do you have a communications policy in place?

- Do you have a mechanism to explore conflicts in the workplace?

Execute the Hit-and-Run.

One of the most exciting plays in baseball is the hit-and-run. As the pitcher winds up to make the pitch, the runner at first base dashes for second. Ideally, the batter directs the ball toward the gaps created by the middle infielders so that the player on second makes it to third base. Trust is the key, making it more likely that the runner will score.

Fear and lack of trust are the most destructive practices in the workplace. As trust grows in an organization, more opportunities to deliver in the clutch will arise.

- Do you use encouragement rather than criticism to motivate employees?

- Do you instill unity and encourage teamwork?

- Does everyone in your organization understand and support the mission?

- Do you give employees input in decisions that affect them?

- Does your organization's culture inspire loyalty, trust, and team spirit?

- Do your employees know they can count on you and believe what you say?

Never Make the Third Out at Third Base.

Third-base coaches perform a key service. They make split-second decisions on whether to send runners from second to third or from third to home. Too few runners advancing is too cautious while too many runners thrown out is too aggressive. In essence, the coach must balance the desire for aggressiveness with safety.

- Do you balance aggression with caution, risk with reward?

- Do you analyze possible actions and move on those that contribute to your overriding goals?

- Do you postpone actions till the right resources are in place?

- Do you know how much risk you and your board members are willing to take on behalf of your organization?

- Can you tell in an instant which risks are too great?

LIFE'S LESSONS

Effective coaches put players into position to be successful. While coaches encourage intensity, they use people skills to remove tension. Excess pressure keeps people from performing up to their natural ability. In the workplace it saps creativity and confidence. Manage your time, your personnel, your resources, and yourself for maximum performance. Envision yourself as a coach and your signature events as your Super Bowl, NBA Final, or World Series. Prepare yourself and your team for a run at the title! ■

Resources

Adams, Tom, "Do You Need a Coach?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 5.

Glasrud, Bruce, "Being Proactive Means Being Pro-Future," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 5.

Neck, Christopher & Robert Ashcraft, "Inner Leadership: Mental Strategies for Nonprofit Staff Members," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 3.

Piersall, Joanne, "Contingency Planning: Facing Disaster and Surviving," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 11, No. 3.

Vitale, Katherine, "Teams: the Essence of Quality," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 3.

These resources are available through the Society's Resource Center. The articles from Volumes 14-23 are available free on-line at www.snpo.org/members, and articles prior to Volume 14 are available on CD-ROM at www.snpo.org/publications/articles.php.

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