

## On Teams and Winning

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Ethical  
Performance

**68 – 75**

**95 – 101**

**10 – 15**

What are the above? Scores of recent losing U.S. national sports teams in international competition. Specifically, the US National Women's Basketball Team lost last spring to Russia in the world semifinals, 68 to 75; the U.S. National Men's Basketball Team lost to Greece in the world semifinals, 95 to 101. And last summer I spent 10 days in London, Ontario, where I watched the U.S. National Men's Lacrosse Team lose to Canada in the world lacrosse finals, 10 to 15.

The U.S. team had been dubbed "possibly the best men's lacrosse team ever assembled." In terms of talent, there is no doubt in my mind that, position by position (except for long-stick midfielder and face-off man), that was a correct assessment.

Yet the U.S. lost the Gold Medal.

What happened?

I'm particularly interested because my son played defense for the U.S. team. Like most of the players, despite the fact he has a "day job," he worked virtually every

single day for over a year to prepare. He sought out a nutritionist and followed a diet to improve strength and stamina. He sought out a trainer and exercised according to a rigorous schedule.

The team itself played over 10 exhibition games, including one against the Major Lacrosse League All-Stars (at the time, called by one U.S. Team player, "the second best team in the world," because they were basically the players that were *not* chosen for the U.S. team). The U.S. won the latter game handily.

So, again, what happened? And can it inform how we think about teams in organizational settings? I think so. Let's look at several areas of team selection, operation, and evaluation.

### Team Selection

Was the process used to select this team appropriate? On the surface, it certainly looks like it. Ten high-profile college lacrosse coaches, several of whom had successfully coached past U.S. national men's teams, evaluated over 120 players last year during a grueling 12 "game" try-out held over five days (I went – it was, quite simply, the best men's lacrosse I had ever seen in my life).

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But the real question is, did this group of evaluators pick the best *team* or did they end up picking the best *players*? For example, there was some concern that too much weight was actually placed on each player's "body of work," which for almost all of these players was performance in the Major Lacrosse League (MLL), the professional outdoor league, which some say emphasizes high-scoring and flashy play at the expense of teamwork, ball control, and ball possession.

Also, in lacrosse there are two positions of enormous importance – goal and face-off. Arguably the best goalie AND the best face-off man in the world, both U.S. players, were hurt at the time of the try-outs and therefore, under the rules the U.S. sanctioning body set, were unable to participate.

Thus, with the benefit of hindsight at least, it looks like the evaluators picked the best *players* in the world (instead of the best team members) *except* for those two critical positions, where picking the best players was more important than picking the best team members! Thus, the evaluation process may have ended up producing the exact opposite result of what it was intended to do. And to me, in the eventual championship game against Canada, it looked like the best *team* – who also had at least one of the "best players" at face-off – won.

*Lesson #1: Star players may be important for special positions, and it is important to try to obtain them (within reason).*

*Lesson #2: Beyond star players, it is generally more important to pick teams based on "chemistry" (a qualitative assessment of attitude and team "fit"), rather than pure talent (somewhat like picking on the basis of emotional intelligence rather than IQ alone).*

### **Team Management**

The coach of the U.S. Team played every offensive player who could play in every

game, yet lacrosse is a sport that requires exquisite timing in passing the ball, unsettling defenses, and creating openings. He argued that it was too difficult to pick a starting offensive unit.

Similarly, the coaches also played most of the defensive players, despite defense in men's lacrosse being even more of a team effort.

Thus, *Lesson #3: Once a team is chosen, be willing to pay a price, including relegating some team members who play only a peripheral or very limited value-added role, to "non-playing" status.*

The U.S. played Canada in one of the so-called "pool games" before the final four best participants were chosen to play in the medal round. The U.S. barely won on a last-second shot. Yet little apparently was done to address the weaknesses that appeared in that game.

*Lesson #4: Pay attention to signals that all is not well within a team – if things don't appear to be going well, they probably are an early warning indicator that they may not go well in the future!*

Also, despite the weaknesses in the U.S. game during pool play, nothing was done to develop the "plays" that are so often the signature of great teams (these typically aren't secrets – everyone knows you are going to run them, you just run them so well they can't be stopped).

Thus, *Lesson #5: Think about what your players do well, and put them where they can maximize their contribution.*

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In conclusion, if you want a team to deliver on time, on budget, and against quality targets, pick it carefully, consider possible un-intended consequences of your management actions, and manage it for effectiveness, not equality.