

## GROUP COHESION: THE GLUE THAT HELPS TEAMS STICK TOGETHER

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### YOUNG REVIEWERS:



**LIAM**  
AGE: 10



**OLIVER**  
AGE: 12



**PALOMA**  
AGE: 10

Playing together with other people can be an extremely fun aspect of taking part in sports. It can also be challenging when some people are not team players. This article focuses on the topic of group cohesion, which we describe as the glue that helps teammates to stick together. We might also define cohesion as the amount of unity or harmony in a team. Sport teams can be cohesive in terms of how well they play together during practices and games (i.e., task cohesion) as well as how well they get along away from their sport (i.e., social cohesion). Both types of cohesion are important because they lead to better individual and team performance, and athletes are more likely to be happy with playing on the team and to continue taking part. We suggest simple strategies that you and your coaches can use to help your team become more cohesive over time.

## COHESION

The unity and harmony within a team.

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence A. A 2016 football moment to remember: Iceland light up Euro 2016 [internet]. The Guardian; 2016 Dec 29 [cited 2021 Mar 1]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2016/dec/29/2016-football-moment-to-remember-iceland-euro-2016>

<sup>2</sup> Steenkeste C. USA Basketball team to play exhibition games against top women's college teams [internet]. Sports Illustrated; 2019 July 27 [cited 2021 Mar 1]. Available from: <https://www.si.com/wnba/2019/07/27/sue-bird-diana-taurasi-team-usa-basketball-college-exhibition-games-tokyo-olympics>

## GROUP INTEGRATION

Group integration beliefs about the degree to which teammates are unified.

## ATTRACTIONS TO THE GROUP

Attraction to the group beliefs about how much each athlete wants to be a part of the team.

## TASK COHESION

How united team members are during practices and games.

## SOCIAL COHESION

How united team members are outside of practices and games, such that they develop friendships and relationships.

## WHAT IS GROUP COHESION?

Many popular sport accomplishments have been celebrated because a group of individuals was able to work together to overcome major obstacles. Playing together with other people can be an extremely fun and rewarding aspect of taking part in sport. That special feeling of harmony in a team is called **cohesion**, and it helps teams succeed. For example, cohesion was a major factor in the success of the underdog Icelandic men's football/soccer team at the Euro 2016 championships. As their manager explained, "If you have been around this team, you see it is fantastic how everybody has a part to play, everybody is friends, everybody is willing to work with each other. That is a mentality you need for a small country to achieve things. You can not do it with individuals. We are a family."<sup>1</sup> Also, USA women's basketball coach Dawn Staley reinforced the importance of having the time to bring players together to successfully unite the group. In her words, "This program gives us an opportunity to keep a core group of players together and to build chemistry and cohesion."<sup>2</sup>

Cohesion is not something you can touch and it is also not something you can do. Rather, it is a set of beliefs that team members hold about the group and their membership in it. Researchers propose that athletes hold two sets of beliefs related to cohesion [1]. First, athletes have beliefs about the degree to which their teammates are unified. This is called **group integration**, and it could be thought of as the glue that helps teammates stick together. Athletes also have beliefs about how much each athlete wants to be a part of the team. This is called **attraction to the group**, and you could envision this as a magnet that initially draws each member in and keeps members interested in what the team is doing.

Furthermore, there are two contexts that draw people in (the magnet) and motivate them to work together (the glue). First, sport teams can be cohesive during practices and games. How well a team plays together is called **task cohesion**. Second, athletes may interact with one another away from the sport environment, and they may develop relationships and friendships. The way athletes get along outside of sport is called **social cohesion**. The two beliefs (group integration and attraction to the group) and the two contexts for cohesion (task and social) interact to create four dimensions of cohesion by which researchers can examine sport teams (Figure 1).

## WHY IS COHESION IMPORTANT?

Many researchers have attempted to understand how athletes think about group cohesion. To do so, they can give questionnaires to the athletes. Other researchers have tried to estimate the level of group cohesion by examining members' interactions via social media, or through observing and documenting team behaviors. Regardless of

**Figure 1**

Athletes can have beliefs about their own attractions to the group and their group's integration, and these beliefs are held for both task and social contexts. These factors interact to create four dimensions of cohesion [1].

**Figure 1**

which research method is used, there is evidence that cohesion is associated with improved individual and team performance, and with continued participation in sport. Team cohesion and performance have a circular relationship. In other words, higher levels of task and social cohesion contribute to better performances, but better team performances also lead to increased feelings of task and social cohesion [2]. Interestingly, cohesion is not just important for team sports—it is also important for individual sports, like cross-country running [2]. Athletes in individual sports spend a lot of time together, train with the same coaches, and share the same training space and equipment. This requires them to get along as much as (or more than) team-sport athletes [2, 3].

People who feel like they are part of a group, who are close with group members, and who are attracted to the group's task and social activities will have a stronger desire to remain with the group and may show longer commitment to a group or a sport. If a group is cohesive and a person enjoys being a member, the likelihood of experiencing positive emotions increases [3]. Finally, cohesion can also reduce attendance issues, such as lateness or missing practices and games, and it can encourage greater effort [3].

Although cohesion enhances the group experience, it can sometimes create negative consequences. On one hand, high levels of social cohesion can sometimes cause group members to have difficulty focusing or committing to performance-related goals [3]. This may happen because group members who really like each other may spend more time socializing than focusing on the task at hand [3]. Additionally, communication problems within a team might arise when friends avoid having tough, sport-related conversations with one another, possibly because they do not want to hurt someone's feelings [3]. Some team members can also become isolated outside of the main group, or feel pressure to fit in, if they are new to the team or if they see themselves as different [3]. On the other hand, teams with very high levels of task cohesion can become overly focused on achieving their goals, which may make social relationships very tense. Players may not experience as much personal enjoyment, or they may feel excessive pressure to perform [3].

Even though cohesion can have negative consequences in certain situations, the performance benefits and happiness generated by cohesion outweigh any potential disadvantages that may arise [3].

## **PUTTING THE “TEAM” INTO TEAM BUILDING ACTIVITIES!**

Now that we know what cohesion is and why it is important, the next step is to learn how to help teams become more cohesive. In sport, coaches, sport psychologists, and athletes use team-building activities to help teams become cohesive [3]. Team-building activities take many forms and can include games played with teammates, puzzles the team must solve together, or activities that involve sharing feelings or ideas with teammates [4]. All team-building activities involve working with teammates to build the skills needed to create united sport groups [3]. We will describe three easy-to-use team-building activities to help build group cohesion.

The first team-building activity is called the birthday balance beam [4]. In this challenge, all athletes stand on a small balance beam and work together to avoid falling off, as they move around each other to line up from oldest to youngest. This may just seem like a fun game to do with your teammates, but it also builds cohesion. To move around the balance beam and end up in the right order without anyone falling off, teammates need to listen, talk to each other, and work together to win. These are all skills that athletes can transfer to sport to build a united team [4].

Group goal setting is a second team-building activity. When a team works together to create goals for the season that everyone agrees on, they get excited to complete those goals [3]. There are several steps to setting team goals. First, a team chooses their long-term

(season) goals, for example to win a championship. Then, as a team, athletes plan shorter-term goals by which, step-by-step, they can achieve their long-term goal. Shorter-term goals help a team track its success and gain confidence along the way! For example, in basketball, a short-term goal could include all team members shooting 50 extra free throws at the end of practice. Teams should put their goals on a poster in their locker room or other common area, where the goals can be seen frequently. Once a week, the team should come together to talk about their progress, what is going well, and where they could improve. This activity helps athletes practice sharing ideas and reaching agreement regarding goals. These skills are important for cohesion because teammates can use them to work as a unit [3].

A third team-building activity is to develop a distinct team identity. Some teams have special team gear or create routines that are unique to them. This may be as simple as working together to create a special and creative cheer for the team. A team cheer should be fun, exciting, and use words that are important to the team. For example, in the team huddle before a game in the 2013 National Basketball Association finals, the Miami Heat chanted, “nothing’s difficult, everything’s a challenge, through adversity, to the stars!”<sup>3</sup> ([Video](#)). Having a team cheer to say before or after practices and games is a great way to practice teamwork, and it gets everyone excited to play. A fun and special cheer also makes a team unique from other teams; the cheer is something that all teammates can share and that helps all athletes feel like a part of the team [3].

<sup>3</sup> Passe Dec. NBA Wired - Miami Heat hype-huddle: “We Fight”

## CONCLUSION

Overall, participating in a cohesive sport team is a very rewarding experience. Also, being united around the goals of the group (task cohesion) and developing positive bonds and friendships (social cohesion) can have important consequences for the team. It is worthwhile to try to develop these bonds, and team building activities are a fun way to build cohesion. These activities get athletes working together and thinking together, all the while making them excited to play as a team. An important point to remember with team-building activities is that practice makes perfect! The more teams value and practice working together, the more cohesive—and successful—they become [4].

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## YOUNG REVIEWERS

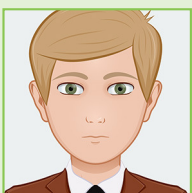
### LIAM, AGE: 10

I am in fifth grade and I like animals. My favorite animal is the lion. When I grow up I want to be a biologist. I also like stuffed animals.



### OLIVER, AGE: 12

I am in the 7th grade. My favorite subject is science and I want to be an astronaut. I have run at least a mile a day for the past year. I love downhill skiing.



### PALOMA, AGE: 10

I love science. I love asking questions and having them answered. I like knowing how things work and why things happen. Just today I was asking my mom about why we dream and why the rainbows are curved instead of a complete circle or



a triangle. I also like doing experiments. From 1st to 3rd grade I had a really good science teacher and we did so many experiments. Some of them involved Bunsen burners which were so fun.

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Taylor Coleman is a second-year Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at Wilfrid Laurier University (Canada). From Riverview, New Brunswick, Taylor completed her B.Sc. at the University of Prince Edward Island (Canada) with a major in Kinesiology. In 2019, Taylor completed her Masters of Kinesiology at Laurier, where she examined the relationship between cohesion and role commitment in youth sport. Taylor's current research interests include parent influence on youth physical activity and sport experiences, physical activity programming for newly immigrated Canadians, and group dynamics.



### TRAVIS CRICKARD

Travis Crickard is a first-year doctoral student in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at Wilfrid Laurier University. From St. John's, Newfoundland, Travis completed his B.Sc. at the State University of New York at Potsdam and his M.A. at the University of Ottawa, where he explored the learning experiences of high-performance ice hockey head coaches who played goaltender. Crickard's current research interests include coaching, coach learning, and how coach communication styles influence athlete and team outcomes. Travis has coached in the Canadian Hockey League, with the Canadian National U17 men's hockey team, and in New Zealand.