

FOCUS

SOFT TISSUE THERAPY

'...professional sports people are not necessarily professional athletes'.

Is Elite sport really that Elite?

This article will look into the elite standard provisions offered to the playing groups within the professional clubs that I have worked in and will also discuss how I found best to implement such provisions. A big part of this article will discuss the conflict between 'elite' professionalism and group morale and how these two often clash.

On a daily basis all players had access to Medical, Sport Science, Nutrition, Strength and Conditioning and Psychology provisions as soon as they entered the building. For example, players would often come into the medical room following a buffet style healthy breakfast in the club canteen prior to the training day commencing and had a variety of treatment modalities at their disposal. They may then head through to the gym and perform activation exercises with the help of an S&C coach or refer to their individualised plans. They also had access to GPS and heart rate data which could be provided by the Sports science guys and gals there and then. Rather like their Strength and Conditioning programs, players also had access to one or more Nutritionist who would tailor their diets to their training weeks in order to complement the requirements at that time.

All of this provision is excellent and the majority of the practitioners I worked with were very good at their jobs and keen to make the players as 'elite' as they could. In my experience however (in Football not Rugby), the soft tissue provision that I provided was only sought when it suited and often became more of a spa provision than an elite therapy tool to optimise tissue state and the benefits that stem from that.

In some cases players had to be manipulated into complying with the provisions set out by offering them 'choice'. Instead of instructing the players that they had to stretch and ice bath after training or on recovery days they were offered a choice of modalities in a Chinese menu structure and each modality was worth a certain amount of points. Thus, players could choose from stretching, mobility, hot and cold plunge pools, massage, yoga, pilates and cryotherapy (where available) and assuming they earned enough points they were done for the day. Some may say that actually the players should do as they're told because they're professionals and get very well paid but to some degree I disagree. As much as I felt it dismissive and disrespectful of some players to question the provision put on by staff I also felt that one size does not fit all and when you have a group dynamic its important to offer choice and an element or at least a perception of freedom to optimise compliance. However, as I will discuss below, sometimes you just can't please some people and you have to accept in all walks of life you are going to have a few 'bad eggs'.

A big frustration for a lot of the practitioners I have worked with is the worry that the hard work that goes into improving the players whilst they're at the training ground is being undone away from it. In my opinion, the players are ultimately responsible for maintaining and optimizing their own physical state as they are in control of their diets and lifestyle habits away from the elite provision laid on by the club. Thus, if players wish to optimise their performance and physical state they must work hard to maintain the hard work done at the training ground but again in my opinion, there is a balance to be struck.

One particular nutritionist that I worked with was and probably still is an exceptional practitioner and most certainly an advocate of professionalism and the 1 percenters. An issue arose when the playing group were keen to have pizza straight after matches in the changing room and the nutritionist was not impressed! On the face of it it's a no go for a nutritionist – the few hours following a game are crucial with regard to recovery and nutrition plays a huge role in this so eat well, get and stay hydrated and get a decent sleep, right? You would be amazed at the impact something as relatively minor as post-match pizza deprivation can have on a group's morale! All jokes aside the playing group raised an interesting point – if (big IF!) they are diligent throughout the week with their nutrition and they work hard making all the appropriate choices and sacrifices then what harm will a few slices of pizza do? Well I'll cut to the chase, it was decided that post-match pizza was a keeper and eventually players would walk in to have an ice cold beer on their places! This is not elite! But I genuinely believe that in this instance it was the right approach. In team sports you build camaraderie and a real team bond which is accentuated in my opinion by sharing positive experiences. Furthermore, I felt that win, lose or draw the guys spoke more about the game, maybe hung around the changing rooms for longer before putting their headphones on whilst they enjoyed their beer and pizza which I believe is conducive to a positive atmosphere which in turn is conducive to success on the pitch, but elite? No way!

When considering the backroom staff in a professional sports club you would be forgiven for assuming that everyone there is working seamlessly in harmony with one another and if ever you were to experience conflict it would be between staff and players and not amongst the staff itself... From my experiences 'infighting' amongst backroom staff wasn't hugely common however, there was always an undertone or a 'Cold War' if you like.

Big personalities are what you get especially in the backroom staff at Football clubs so it is only natural that you will get clashes of opinions and conflicting aims. In all of the clubs that I have worked at there would be a set distance and workload output required during each session that the players must complete in order to be optimally prepared for match day, however, on more than one occasion and at more than one club the Head coach or Manager would overrule this and this of course was his right. This was one of the more common gripes throughout the playing group as some, if not most, felt that they were being 'flogged' and this would often happen in amongst a bad run of results as a form of punishment. This illustrates a lack of cohesion and understanding and there were also instances in which medics and Sport Science staff would be closely monitoring the total distance covered and high intensity efforts of certain individuals who may be fresh back from international duty or reintegrating from injury or may have just hit high numbers throughout the week but the coach running the session would perhaps inadvertently disregard this concern placing a greater focus on the session content and his need to have that particular player out there

on the training paddock. I can see both sides of this issue, however player welfare is paramount so in order to be 'elite' there must be a compromise which puts the player first and ego's second!

At one particular club the Sport Science department that monitored the player's GPS units live during sessions had little or no power to limit player output and the head coach would carry out whatever he had planned!! This led to a drop in morale which in turn led to a perceived or perhaps real, increased sense of fatigue which puts players at increased risk of injury which of course cannot be considered elite.

Despite repeated efforts though, some players will never be happy so trying to generate a compromise based on these people is pointless as they often bitch and whinge in the background and can become a cancer within the group. From experience it is vital for coaches to seek out well respected, senior players who offer an accurate and measured barometer of player morale and can often mediate within the process enabling a realistic player compliance whilst maintaining morale.

A massive misconception that took me only a couple of months to realise is that professional sports people are not necessarily professional athletes so you need to understand the beast! Don't get me wrong, the majority of the players I worked with (vast majority in Rugby Union) were very diligent in their physical preparation, maintenance, diet and skill development and it is no coincidence that many of these players had much longer careers than others. However, as both Football and Rugby are team sports the group must be handled as a whole and this appears to be a very tough job. Sometimes the diligent players get fed up with the slackers especially at a time of poor form or collective poor performances whilst the slackers get fed up with the 'regime' and what they perceive to be a rather dogmatic authority.

Camaraderie and morale are basically why professional sport still keeps its amateur edge but a 'lack of' can often hold teams back from being successful. When you get a group of people who all share a desire to be the best and will stop at nothing then that's when you get your memorable teams that dominate their sports and if managed well the ethos of that particular group of players becomes the ethos of the club and success then breeds success.

Crucially, for me it is impossible to have a top flight team that dominates their sport who have an elite sporting provision and no team spirit. There has to be a balance. If teams become too clinical and almost sterile you remove the emotion from the game and the desire to perform for those around you which is vital. The majority of clubs nowadays have players that have no direct affinity to the clubs they play for so it's never been more crucial to bond the group and create a common goal.

From my experiences, team sports are very professionally organised and the provision laid on for players could be considered elite. I do however feel that more could be done to push those last one percenters to really drive player conditioning but that may well be to the detriment of group morale. As I said, professional sports people are not necessarily professional athletes and the provision needs to be laid on for a group which has its complexities. So, is Elite sport really that Elite? For me it's up to the individual within the team to utilise the elite provision at their disposal but on the whole it can't be considered as such. Top class individual sports however, may well be considered Elite but that's for another day!

Thank you for reading and there's much more to come!

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