1. Psychological elements in team- and player preparation

E. Hahn\(^1\) refers to three different means of modifying attitudes of young players for a match: guidance, counselling and coaching.

**Guidance**, as he understands the term, is the development of an adequate mental attitude in training and competition. **Counselling** defines all measures to advise a player in sports and non-sports situations. **Coaching**, according to Hahn, is a means to affect the attitude of a player in order to optimize his achievement in competitions.

The following analysis will concentrate exclusively on coaching young players.

2. Origin of the term “coaching”

The name allegedly recalls the multitasking skills associated with controlling the team of a horse-drawn stagecoach\(^2\). Thus the term “coach” refers to an instrument to enable somebody to get from one place to another. Against this background, coaching can be understood as a means of development, a means which raises a player to a higher level of ability to understand things, to a higher level of technical and tactical competence.

The coached defines the target; the coach accompanies the coached on his way as a neutral companion. In handball the coach is not only a trainer of technical and tactical abilities and skills, but also motivator, advisor, and developer of the mental abilities of his players.

Thus in coaching, the coach does not offer pre-fabricated solutions for problems, conflicts, or technical-tactical difficult situations, but is a partner who helps a player to develop his playing competence, i.e. to understand what a handball game is all about. This is not only true for mature players but also for youngsters depending on their level of experience. Young players should be encouraged to think, draw conclusions, and then act accordingly, even if this sometimes means losing a game.

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\(^2\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coaching
3. Definition of the term coaching

Coaching is a method of directing, instructing and training a person or group of people, with the aim to achieve some goal or develop specific skills. Coaching in handball is the sum of all the trainer’s activities which aim at increasing and optimizing the players’ performance, the sum of all measures to establish a working relationship between the trainer and his team. Coaching is the act of setting a social and intellectual learning process into motion.

4. Competition coaching

Competition coaching is the pedagogical-psychological process of guiding, advising, and looking after athletes before, during, and after a competition. By this process the athlete will be enabled to release his/her optimum efficiency potential. To achieve this aim, the following factors have to be optimized:

- The flow of information.
- The knowledge of psychological reactions and attitudes of the individual athletes in stress situations (symptoms, ways of intervening).
- The knowledge of mechanisms which cause athletes to mobilize their ultimate capacities (motivation).
- The trainer’s/coach’s own performance.

Therefore, the successful coach will have:

- Sensitivity
- Theoretical and practical competence.
- A clear idea of what is going on at any time of the competition.
- A clear and understandable way of communicating (language used).
- Knowledge of the most important aspects of stress regulation (realization and intervention).
- Knowledge of motivation mechanisms/techniques.
- Control of his own performance.

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5. The “action vacuum” before a game

Every player, but a young and inexperienced player in particular, faces a subjective mix of various conflicting emotions the moment he enters the handball hall, emotions which are the answers of the body to the strain of the events to come. Depending on the degree of experience, of the player’s routine in handling this “action vacuum” until the effective beginning of play, various forms of emotional stress can be discerned.

![Diagram showing emotional stress, mental tension, ANXIETY - FEAR, PERSONAL PREDISPOSITION, REALITY, psychovegetative regulation disorders, muscular tension.]

To help players master their anxieties/fears the following measures can be taken:

- Train a player in such a way that he is convinced he is physically, technically, tactically and mentally well prepared for the match to come. Thus a growing degree of self-confidence will develop, which will by and by replace feelings of anxiety or fear.
- Make a player play the oncoming match in his mind (spectators, playing hall, opponents, own actions on the field in defence and offence, tactical tasks set by the presence or expectation of danger).

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6 We have to distinguish between ANXIETY = an uncomfortable feeling in the mind usually caused by the fear or expectation that something bad will happen and FEAR = an unpleasant and usually strong feeling caused by the presence or expectation of danger. Longman: Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1987, p.36 and p.372.
the coach etc.) and connect that process with a gradual learning of relaxation techniques such as mental training, PMR (progressive muscle relaxation), or autogenic training. By doing so the player will mentally, step by step, reduce his anxieties/fears. If this process is then connected with reality the player will gradually relieve his anxieties/fears.

- Divert your players’ attention from the factors which cause anxieties/fears by giving them some specific tasks which demand their concentration.

6. Measures before the match

- When players enter the sports hall, preparations assume almost ritualistic character. Rituals are good for the team because rituals mean stability and security. Players get to their changing room, put down their sports bags on their usual places (if it is their home turf), prepare bandages or taping devices if necessary, and go about a number of other minor tasks. These seemingly meaningless activities are important for the players because they provide that amount of “mental space” they need to concentrate and to stimulate their “system” for the competition. A coach will be well advised to accept and tolerate this particular phase before the real preparation for the match begins.

- Only the coach and the team are present. Nobody else is permitted to be in the changing room (officials, players’ friends or parents, etc.).

- For the team meeting (tactical instructions etc.) the trainer makes the players sit in a coachman’s position close to one another to create a team feeling from the very beginning. In addition, he himself chooses a standing position which enables everyone to see and to hear him, and vice versa.

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8 Cp KÖNIG, H.: Bio dynamics and Methodology of Games, University of Vienna, 3rd edition, pp 74ff
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• The coach explains the team’s match strategy, lays down the tasks of the players in offence and defence, nominates the basic seven players, talks about substitution, describes the referees and their way of refereeing, etc.

• This address must be short and to the point. The language used should be adequate to the age and experience level of the players.

• When describing the opponent’s team it is very important to choose the proper wording. Statements such as „They are unbelievably strong”, “They can score whenever they like because their shots are extraordinarily powerful and precise”, and “You can’t penetrate their defence because...” are absolutely counterproductive because they may cause anxiety/fear or create a feeling of resignation before the match has even begun.

• The experienced coach will describe the opponent’s strengths and weaknesses in a neutral way, will portray the opposing players as beatable, and will concentrate on the own team’s strengths. He will use group dynamic “tricks” and various means of motivation to equip players with the necessary self-confidence for a successful performance in the match to come.

• Players are then addressed individually.

• It might also be helpful to invent a slogan as a stimulus.

• The structure of his address will look like a pyramid. Step by step concentration is focused on the match.
7. Measures during the break

- If the changing room is far from the playing field, no time should be wasted going there. A quiet corner nearby to lay down tactics for the second half will do.

- A break is what the term says, “a break”, i.e. a period for rest and for gathering new strength. Thus the first 2-3 minutes of a ten minute break are used for relaxation. There must be no quarrels between players, no discussions on tactical matters, and no disturbance whatsoever.

- After the players have stocked up their energy reserves, the coach outlines tactical measures for the second half. It is not a good idea to dwell too long on mistakes made during the first half, because time is precious and negative reflection influences concentration on the tasks ahead.

- The coach’s address for the second half follows a strict three step pattern:
Objective criticism paired with clear short instructions of what has to be done tactically, plus positive motivating statements get the team ready for the second half.
8. **Measures after the match**
   - If the team has won the game adequate praise should be given.
   - In case of defeat the coach does not allow players to allocate blame to others, prevents aggressive behaviour due to frustration, tries to calm down the team, and does not permit players to storm out of the changing room.
   - One must not forget that the mood the players are in before leaving the sports hall influences the first training session of the week.
   - Analyses of the technical tactical aspects of the game, interpretation of video sequences, statistics, or notes taken by the coach take place before this first training session.

9. **Model schedule for a match -18.00 beginning of the match (home match)**

   16 30       team arrives
   17 00       players (having changed) sit in coachman’s position
                every player sees the coach
                coach’s address:  -  own strength
                                  -  opponent’s weakness
                                  -  talk to individual players
                                  -  talk to groups of players on
                                    neighbouring positions, etc.
   17 15       coach says 5 important things (A, B, C, D, E)
                individual warm-up without ball
   17 25       warm-up in groups with ball + goalkeepers
   17 45       assemble players, coach says 3 important things (A, B, C)
   17 50       warm-up continues: 1:1 actions with body contact, position
                specific shooting + goalkeepers, and play: offence against
                defence
   17 55       players on the bench, take off tracksuits, coach says 2
                important things (A, B)
   18 00       match begins
10. Ten “golden rules” for coaching

1. Reduce stress to guarantee full concentration of your team.
2. Address as many senses as possible.
3. Coach rationally and emotionally.
4. Limit the amount of information.
5. Focus information and keep repeating important aspects.
6. Use clear and simple language.
7. Establish eye contact and call players by their names.
8. Use positive statements.
10. Refrain from talking too much thus boring your players.

Helmut König, August 2008

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