

How to Get on a Roll by Understanding and Accepting Team Roles

Adapted from an article by Jeff Janssen, M.S., Peak Performance Coach

Sometimes a player's greatest challenge is coming to grips with his role on the team. Not everyone can be the superstar player. Every successful team needs grafters, tacklers, fighters, those who do not seek the glory and the limelight but who rather revel in a job well done. They are the first to realize that a team is a unit of many different parts and each is required if championships are to be won.

Understanding and accepting roles is one of the biggest areas for developing a successful team. The obvious problem with getting individuals to play roles is that certain roles have more outside appeal, more glamour, than others. Who gets the most praise, pats on the back, and interviews after the games? Too often it is the player who scored the most goals, not the one who does all of the tackling and feeding him the ball in open spaces. Coach, parent, and media attention to the "glamour" roles is one of the biggest obstacles for getting individuals to accept and embrace less popular roles. However, these roles are absolutely critical to our team's success.

Accepting Roles

Each player must accept and embrace the role that they are given. When each player accepts his/her role and takes pride in playing it the team will have its best chance of being successful. For example, Makalele, the great center midfielder, formerly of the French National team and Chelsea's football club, was universally acknowledged as one of the best midfielders ever and he hardly ever scored any goals at all. Instead, Makalele earned his reputation as one of the greatest ball winning, tackling midfielders the game had ever seen and all of the teams he played on recognized his value as a great player. Real Madrid was the one team that did not and upon losing Makalele, they failed to win a La Liga championship until many years later, despite having a team of superstars like Zidane, Ronaldo, Figo, Cafu and Roberto Carlos.

Each player should have one or two primary responsibilities that when executed successfully, propel the team toward its ultimate goal.

Two Ways to Define & Clarify Team Roles

1. Individual Meetings with Each Player

There are a few ways that you can help to define and clarify your individual player's roles.

One is to have an individual meeting with each player discussing their role. It usually is best to begin the meeting by asking the player about the roles or contributions the player is making presently. Find out how satisfied they are with their present role as they see it as well as any future roles that they would like to play. Either the player sees things the way you do or you need to bring in your perspective as a coach. If a player would like to play a greater role, discuss what you think it will take for the player to have a chance to play their desired role. It may range from extra practice to transferring to another team to a reality check. **The key is to have honest and open communication between you and each player.**

2. Teammates Clarifying Roles for Each Other

An excellent and effective way of clarifying and appreciating roles is to have your team define roles for each other. Our men's team at Arizona has found this exercise to be quite beneficial. Have your players sit in a circle and describe each player's role. **Ask the team, "What does Jason bring to this team? What do we need from him in order to reach the team goals we have set for ourselves?"** If the person is a starter, the players will probably discuss his strengths and help him see her role more clearly. If he is a sub, players will talk about the need for him to push the starters to get better as well as appreciate the "little" things he does.

Nails and Glue Awards

Coach Rick Pitino says, "Recognize the people who get less attention in the group because they're not in the glamorous positions. Thank them publicly for their unselfishness and do it in front of their peers."

One such award that I have developed with teams is called the "Nails" award and the "Glue" award. We created the Nails award to acknowledge and appreciate the mental toughness of the player(s) who is **"mentally tough as nails."** The award is given on a weekly basis and is voted on by the team. The players are not allowed to vote for themselves. The Glue award focuses on team aspects and is symbolized by the **"glue that binds the team together."** The players vote for the teammate who had the best team attitude demonstrated by encouraging his/her teammates and/or making individual sacrifices.

You can create various awards for whatever roles you deem important to your team's success - like recognizing the player with the most tackles, assists, shots, saves or clean sheets. Let your players come up with the names for the award. You can either determine your award based on objective stats or have your team vote for the player they felt did the best job. Announce the award at practice, put up a sheet on the player's locker, and add his/her name to the main award list in the locker room.

The Lesson:

Not everyone can be the goalscorer, or the mvp, but everyone can find what they do best and contribute their best effort to the team. Not everyone will take the freekicks, or be captain, or be quoted and mentioned in the newspaper, but true genius lies in the ability to sacrifice oneself for the greater cause, for the greater good, for the championship.

It is often said that true championship teams are those that best manages their egos, their pride and envy, and who work together to accomplish that one goal that will forever be remembered by those who come after.