

How to Coach a Winning Team

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Introduction

As an instructor I have had a wide range of experience and success in instructing/coaching teams for Taekwon-Do tournaments, ranging from club teams for regional tournaments to New Zealand teams for Junior World Championships.

I view success as not only winning medals and getting results, but also in building a team spirit and atmosphere that team members enjoy being a part of and remember fondly. Coaching a team is a very challenging experience, but is also immensely rewarding if it is done correctly.

In this thesis I have attempted to pass on the approaches and methods that I believe create a successful TKD team.

The Five Key Aspects

When being put in charge of coaching a team, a new coach can often seem overwhelmed by the role that has been handed to them. There are seemingly so many aspects to coaching a team that a coach may not know where to start.

I believe that there are five clear aspects to training a team that a coach should focus on. These aspects are fitness, skills, mental conditioning, nutritional advice and injury prevention. I explain each aspect as follows:

Fitness

In terms of fitness each discipline of TKD competition has both common and differing requirements. This reflects the fact that the three energy systems of the body (anaerobic alactic, lactic acid, aerobic) overlap and work together to provide energy for activity. Different proportions of each energy system are used during differing disciplines.

Common to each of the TKD disciplines is the need for an adequate aerobic fitness base, as aerobic fitness enables the body to distribute oxygen around the body efficiently. An adequate aerobic base allows anaerobic and plyometric training and activity to be undertaken with more intensity by ensuring a good level of stamina. Thus initially the team members aerobic capacity should be assessed and addressed on an individual basis as necessary.

This need not be done through long runs, a good alternative is to put a team through a gruelling patterns session lasting more than 45 minutes. Those that are still performing patterns with good power and technique at the end of the session will likely be the most aerobically fit. Those that die after only a few patterns will be lacking aerobic fitness.

Sparrers require an excellent level of anaerobic fitness to see them through the short bursts of intense activity required for sparring matches. There are two forms of anaerobic systems; the anaerobic alactic system and the lactic acid system. The anaerobic alactic system provides the energy for 100% effort over a period of 0-10 seconds. Thus during flurries of attacks and defence during a sparring match the alactic system is activated. This system can be trained in sparrers through interval training based on a 1:10 work/rest ratio eg all out attack flurries on pads for 6-10 seconds followed by a rest period of 1 minute, repeated 15-20 times. Such a session should ideally be performed two times per week, separated by 48 hours. As most clubs train at least twice a week, separated by at least a day, club trainings are ideally times for sparrers to undertake their anaerobic training.

The lactic acid system provides the energy for activity at 80-90% of maximum effort for activities lasting three to four minutes eg a sparring match. This system is important as it will increase the time it takes for a sparrers anaerobic threshold (the point at which lactic acid begins to accumulate in the muscles) to be reached and will increase the sparrers tolerance of lactic acid once it has built up.

When sparrers start to get "heavy legs" and their footwork and handspeed slows they have reached their threshold, thus if the threshold point can be increased and tolerance heightened a sparrer will be able to keep their speed and agility for longer during a match this increasing their chances of winning.

This system can be trained in sparrers through interval training based on a work/rest ratio of 2:1 eg constant padwork for 2 minutes followed by an active rest (eg moving around in a sparring stance to simulate dancing around the ring or similar) of 1 minute, repeated 4-5 times. Such a session should be required of sparrers three times per week.

Specialty technique competitors should be set plyometric programmes, however they will require an adequate aerobic base before the plyometric programme can properly be performed. Anaerobic alactic training should also be required of the specialty technique competitors to ensure that their short bursts of maximum effort can be performed efficiently.

Power competitors need to be coached as much on their mental skills as their physical skills. Without mental strength and discipline a power competitor will not be able to achieve the level of focus and accuracy required for competition. The need for conditioning of attacking tools is vital in power destruction and should be stressed to power competitors.

Patterns competitors should be expected to practice patterns daily. Their aerobic and anaerobic fitness should be monitored because fitness is still important for a patterns competitor to allow them to perform all patterns (and especially the longer ones) with maximum effort and precision.

Specificity of training is important and should be adhered to in the training of the team. The exercises that the team are required to perform during fitness sessions should be largely specific to the movement, muscles and energy systems used in TKD.

It should be impressed upon the team members the need to perform their fitness training regimes consistently. Issue all of the team with training diaries at the outset of selection and require to fill

in brief entries after each training session (be they alone or at organised team sessions). These diaries should be required to be handed in regularly and this will help coaching/instructing staff to monitor adherence to training programmes. Much of the fitness programme for each team member will need to be done in their own time.

Athletes need to taper for competition. Begin your teams taper for competition two weeks prior to the date of competition itself. During the taper period the duration and frequency of training sessions required should decrease but the intensity should remain as before.

Skills

If you are coaching a regional or national team, you will not actually have that long with the team as a whole, perhaps one weekend every 3 to 4 weeks for national teams and perhaps one training per week for regional teams (depending on how geographically spread out your region is). During these times when you have the whole team together try and focus on skills and technique training, with only a small amount of specific fitness work done for monitoring purposes (the bulk of fitness work should be done in the team members own time).

For sparrers, concentrate firstly on improving any weaknesses in footwork, evasion skills and stances. Identify and work with those people that have a tendency to plant themselves in one spot and be overwhelmed by an opponent rather than using footwork to evade the opponent and thus create more opportunities for scoring. Look for those sparrers that have a tendency to have too much weight on their back foot which inhibits movement. Coach the sparrers to adopt a more balanced stance to allow them to make movements in any direction faster and more efficient.

Reaction time is important for sparrers. Windows of opportunity for scoring are few and far between the higher the level of the tournament and sparrers need to be able to take advantage of those opportunities. Drills with both pads and against opponents in a semi-free and free sparring situation should be employed to improve reaction time and thus the reflexes of the sparrer. With faster reaction time will come faster and more effective counter attacking ability, which is crucial for success when sparring.

A good way to use padwork to help reaction time is to use a small pad that can be held in the hand or on the forearm, and have the partner with the pad throw sparring techniques at their partner. At random intervals the padholder will "flash" the pad for the partner to attack. The partner without the pad must evade the techniques being thrown at them and only attack when the pad is "flashed". The attack that is to be thrown will be prearranged so that the padholder knows the best way to face the pad when they "flash" it.

For example, the desired technique to practice may be a simple double punch combination eg jab/cross. The padholder holds the pad face down horizontal to the ground at chest height and throws techniques, and then flashes the pad to face the partner (keeping it horizontal with the ground) at when they want the partner to attack.

The padholder should be encouraged to try and draw out premature attacks from the partner by pretending to flash the pad.

Such drills allow a sparrer to develop the mental thought processes and physical speed necessary to attack only when genuine opportunities present themselves. Those that cannot control themselves to only attack when a real opportunity is available will quickly find themselves outwitted by an opponent.

Sparrers should be coached to spar simply but effectively, and to spar to their strengths. A coach should not however try to coach the "personality" out of a sparrer, but to channel their natural energies into techniques that have a higher percentage of scoring points and being seen by the judges. For example, spinning techniques such as back kick, reverse turning kick are best not performed unless the sparrer can do so with extreme speed and control. Without speed and control the use of such techniques merely present an opponent with an opportunity to close the distance and score heavily or force a warning.

Power and specialty competitors should be examined for any slight weaknesses in technique that may inhibit their power or height/distance production. Require the destruction competitors to adopt a systematic method of measuring up, setting for, and conducting each break. Having a standardised approach to each break will allow the competitor to better handle mentally and physically the intense pressure that often exists during tournament destruction events.

At the outset, analyse your patterns competitors for weaknesses of technique or specific movements or sets of movements in patterns. These should be listed and the competitor should be set training tasks designed to improve the required aspect(s). For example, if a competitor is unable to gain adequate height with side kicks from bending ready stance A, set them a stretching regime that focuses on hip, groin and upper leg flexibility.

The importance of correct intermediate positions for generating power and accuracy of final positions should be stressed to the patterns competitors.

Mental Conditioning and Training

This is just as important as any physical training the team members will do. Without mental strength the most talented and well prepared competitor can fail when the pressure comes on. I believe that one of the reasons that the 2002 New Zealand Junior World Championships team did so well was that we spent a good deal of time working on their mental attitude and building their self confidence and belief.

Get to know your team members. Watch them when they prepare for competition, note their demeanours and body language. A successful coach needs to identify those team members that need arousing (or "firing up") before competition and those that needed to "have a lid kept on them". Try to identify those that may have self confidence problems, and work with those people to build their confidence levels.

Teams should be trained mentally to adopt a professional approach to the competition itself. With the 2002 New Zealand Junior team we stressed that the trip away to Puerto Rico was a "business" trip until after the tournament had ended. Their business was the competition, and this approach worked extremely well in keeping the team focused and their minds on the job. There are many things that can distract a team member (especially juniors) from the main purpose of a

tournament preparation and journey eg travelling to new cities or foreign countries, receiving new sparring gear, new doboks, the team tracksuit etc. Team members must constantly be brought back mentally to the task at hand of competition.

An important mental attitude to impart to team members is not to concern themselves with matters that are beyond their control. Many junior (and adult) competitors spend too much time worrying about their opponent prior to a match when they would be better off focusing on their own performance and how to maximise it. Likewise many people become worried about crowd noise, heat inside the stadium, who the referee or judges are and the like. Those things are totally out of the competitors control and worrying about them is pointless. That nervous energy would better off channelled into focusing on the task the competitor has at hand of competing.

Visualisation is a great tool that can help team members control performance anxiety. If they have been at the event venue previously get them to imagine themselves in the venue, the noises, images and feelings they will face. Imagine themselves competing and doing well. If your team has never been to the competition venue before, make sure that you try and get them to the venue prior to the competition so that they become familiar with it. Visualisation can help a team member better manage anxiety levels at the time of competition which will help them retain their competitive focus.

Nutritional Advice

Team members (and also their parents when it comes to junior members)) are commonly very ignorant of nutritional needs, especially when in hard training. The team members and their parents (because it is they who cook the meals for juniors) should be instructed into nutritional requirements at the outset. Stress the need for carbohydrate and fluid intake, as well as need for protein to aid muscle recovery from hard training sessions. If you do not have a great nutritional knowledge, make sure that you get someone to help you that has.

An athlete's body is a closed system, that is, the quality of the output has a direct relationship to the quality of the input. So, if an athlete has a poor diet, it is likely that over time their training and competitive performances will be poor also.

An important consideration when coaching juniors in dietary matters is to remember that they are growing adolescents and need to be fed accordingly. Under no circumstances should a healthy and fit young team member who is growing rapidly be placed on a restrictive diet that may be injurious to their growth and development simply for the purpose of making a lighter weight division. One of the hardest things a coach must do with a junior team is to try and predict how heavy a growing team member may be by the time of competition. Something that helps in this regard if you are coaching a junior team over a long period of time, is to weigh and measure them fortnightly or monthly and keep a track of their height and weight on a graph.

Injury Prevention

Injuries can create major disruption to an individual and teams preparation, especially in disciplines like team event. Many students, and especially juniors often have less than ideal habits when it comes to warming up and warming down. At the outset take your team through full

warm ups and warm downs and stress the importance of these practices. Over time, as their attitudes become more professional, warming up and warming down becomes second nature to the team members and they can be relied upon to do this themselves under supervision from the coaches.

Any injuries, however slight, should be required to be reported to the coaches as soon as possible, whether they occur at organised trainings or in the team members own time. Team members should be required to seek professional treatment of any injuries that do occur and professional recommendations as to recovery times and treatment should be adhered to at all times.

People Management

When you take on a coaching position, you are taking on more than just being a coach of physical skills. You also have to become a people manager. There can be a myriad of different personalities within a team, and you have to make sure that you have an effective relationship with all your team members. The following are points to remember when it comes to effective people management:

- Respect your team members/students. Talk to them and treat them like you would like to be treated yourself. The respect that you show your team members will be returned to you, and will help to create a positive and open relationship between you and your team members.
- Set down the ground rules for the team at the outset. Stick to them. Make sure that the consequences of stepping outside the rules of the team are clearly communicated.
- Be stern when you need to be. If your team members are slacking don't be afraid to crack the whip, and crack it hard if need be. Work them hard - they may hate you for it during the training but come competition time the benefits of the hard work will show. Don't be stupid or cruel about it though, pushing people so hard that they injure themselves or otherwise jeopardise their training programme is not doing anyone any good. Push their limits but don't destroy the team member in doing so.
- Have a sense of humour. Training and competing can be a serious business, and a good laugh every now and then can do wonders for a team members frame of mind and motivation at training.
- Create a "no surprises" team environment. Constantly communicate with your team members (and parents when dealing with junior teams), and make sure that they feel free to communicate with you. Everyone should know what is going on at all times. Such an environment fosters good team spirit and synergy.
- Reassure your team members of their ability. They all will have self doubt at some stage (some more than others), especially if you are taking them to a big event. Let them know that you believe in them 100%. Constant reassurance is a big help for an athletes confidence.
- Know your team members. Talk to them about what their goals are. The more you know your team members the easier it will be to come up with ways to motivate them.