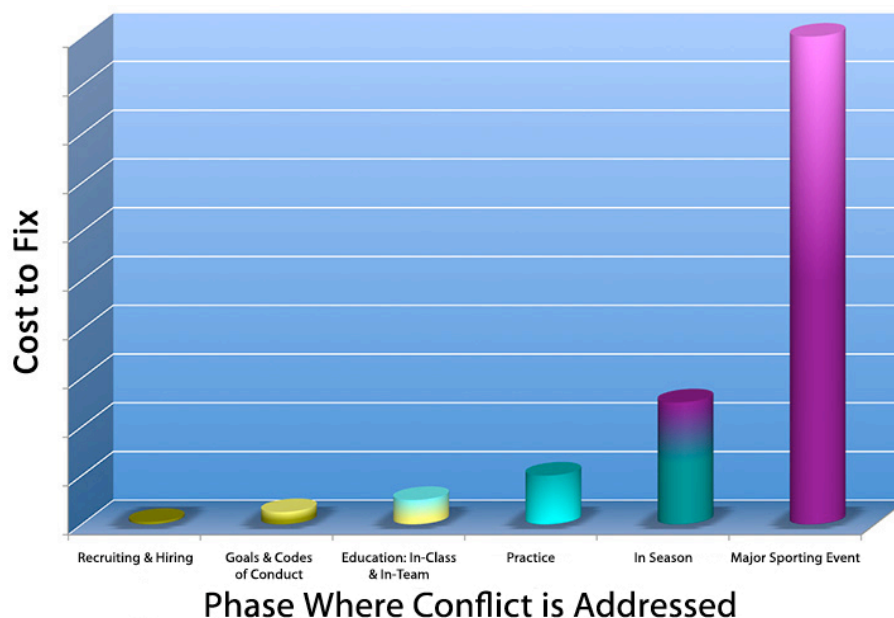




## PREVENTING SPORTS CONFLICT

More often than not, organizations seek to develop conflict prevention and resolution strategies after destructive episodes of conflict have transpired. This is a worthwhile and necessary reason to employ conflict management skills; however, it is not a particularly cost-effective approach. In *Understanding Conflict In Sports “A Systemic Problem,”* we discussed the cost benefits of assuming a proactive as opposed to a reactive approach to managing conflict. The chart below demonstrates the escalating costs of conflict when it is allowed to progress over time.



\* Adapted from *Managing Software Requirements: A Use Case Approach* by Leffingwell and Widrig (2003).

In recognition of these escalating costs, we will discuss conflict prevention before introducing strategies for conflict resolution. Resolving current conflicts is imperative. If, however, we only learn to address the most destructive episodes of conflict and we neglect to learn strategies to prevent future conflicts, we will only reduce the associated costs by a mere fraction of that which is possible. If we focus all of our attention on extinguishing the forest fires, but we leave the embers of our campfires burning while we sleep, we are setting the scene for a blaze—one that could have been quickly and easily stamped out if we had taken the time to look around and address it.

## WHY PREVENT CONFLICT IN SPORTS?

### Preventing Conflict Prepares for Optimal Performance

The “fallacy of the angry athlete” reinforces the common misperception that volatility is an athletic attribute. Science, however, has determined that although an angry athlete may be able to throw the ball harder, he is much less likely to hit the target. What is the role of emotion in sport? We talk about athletes playing with heart. Coaches and athletes cry tears of joy when accepting gold medals and championship trophies. Some shed tears of sadness after losing a hard-fought playoff game. It is only human to experience emotional connections to things we care about. The way we handle our emotions, however, bears an enormous impact upon our behavior and, in sports, upon our performance.

Psychological studies have determined that emotions play a complicated role in athletics. While high levels of arousal associated with certain emotions may increase anaerobic power, they are also known to heighten muscular tension and significantly inhibit coordination.

***Inside the Lines:*** At the most basic level, athletes who possess the necessary skills to prevent and resolve conflict are able to stay in the game. When confronted with frustrating or challenging situations, they abstain from behavior that would result in a red card, an ejection, or time in the penalty box. Even the most valuable players are of no help to their teams once they’ve been removed from the game.

Additionally, athletes who possess conflict management skills are able to remain focused on the game in high-pressure situations. They can effectively manage conflict when it arises in the heat of the moment without allowing it to negatively impact their human performance. Athletes and coaches who are easily distracted by disappointing or frustrating moments on the field (e.g., teammate errors, spectator comments, aggressive opponents, missed scoring opportunities, etc.) do not perform at the same level as those who possess the skills to maintain focus upon personal and team goals. Off-field conflicts within teams can also negatively impact on-field performance. Hall of Famer John Hannah discusses the all-consuming nature of contract negotiations:

*Fans think it's about the money, but it's really about respect. It's about being consumed by something that you believe in your heart is completely unfair. Once you're consumed by it, it affects the way you play, the way you prepare for games, and everything else you're doing. You can't get away from it.*

These conflicts are not consuming by nature. They are consuming because they are allowed to grow and persist over time, and the associated costs—both on and off the field—are allowed to multiply. With the appropriate tools, they can be prevented.

***Outside the Lines:*** When players and coaches are able to prevent and resolve conflict in their personal lives, they are better able to focus during training and on the field. In a 2009 survey conducted by researchers at Penn State University, 86.4% of student-athletes said that an “unhappy personal life” negatively affects their athletic performance. Athletes’ and coaches’ ability to prevent and resolve conflict in their personal lives is also increasingly important in light of technological advancements and increased media coverage of athletes’ lives beyond

sport. High-profile athletes and coaches are repeatedly questioned about incidents of conflict at every opportunity, especially surrounding the most important athletic competitions. Conflict prevention and resolution skills can preclude such interrogations from taking place, allowing athletes and coaches to remain focused on the task at hand.

Athletic organizations need to recognize the need for services that may not seem native to sport in order to address these issues. Professionals in every field must possess the skills to manage personal conflict in order to excel in their chosen profession. Professional and intercollegiate athletes, coaches, and administrators are not exempt from this necessity. The ability to manage conflict in their personal lives will prepare them to excel in the arena of sport or in any other career field.

### **Preventing Conflict Enhances the Quality of Competition**

Conflict prevention skills enable athletes to achieve the zone of optimal performance, to find the sweet spot in which the athlete is fully engaged and performance is uncompromised by unwieldy emotions or outside distractions.

We cannot expect athletes or coaches to sever their emotions from the game or from their personal experiences, nor would such measures be of benefit to athletes or the sport. The most effective approach is to channel athletes' skill, talent, and ambition in the most efficient, constructive way possible to ensure the long-term success of the individual, the team, and the industry. Conflict prevention and resolution, properly understood, is a means of enhancing the competition.

Conflict prevention is, in essence, a distillation process. It helps to eliminate unnecessary distractions so that players can fully concentrate on the game. Eliminating destructive conflict will not dilute the competition spectators relish. It will free the game from the clutter—sharpening performance, tightening team play, and heightening suspense.

Psychological case studies involving professional athletes have established that strong conflict management skills increase competition and benefit sport as an industry (Jones, 2003). Professional and intercollegiate teams across the country are beginning to recognize the devastating toll that destructive conflict has taken upon their performance, statistics, revenues, morale, and image. Many are ready for something different, a revolutionary approach that will redirect the focus onto the field and back to the heart of the game.

### **How Do We Prevent Conflict in Sports?**

Measurable growth and meaningful change require time and diligence. The problem is embedded deep within the system, and it is the system itself that produces and reproduces the problems year after year after year. This pattern will continue until we change our approach. The problem is not that athletes are inherently angry or that coaches mistreat their players. It is also not a simple problem that can be addressed with a few team workshops or a little recommended reading.

Greg Bell, leadership coach and former award-winning University of Oregon basketball player, likens this process to watering giant timber bamboo: "In the first year you water bamboo, nothing happens. In the second year you water it, nothing happens. In the third year you water it,

nothing happens. But in the fourth year...90 feet in 60 days.” Our approach to sports conflict must possess this level of patience and resilience. The initial growth will happen slowly, but a thorough, ground-up approach will secure the foundation for durable results.

*“Reform in intercollegiate athletics is a journey, not a destination. It is not the case that once new rules are adopted, reform is completed for all time. Over the approximately 100 years of the Association’s history, there have been a number of major reforms. But the environment changes, new problems arise, and old ones, which appeared resolved, reemerge in an altered form.”*

*- Myles Brand, State of the Association 2004*

## **A Systemic Problem Requires Systemic Attention**

Destructive conflict occurs at all levels of skill and participation—from the field to the stands, administrators to spectators, sponsors to the media. We generally attribute responsibility to players (and occasionally to coaches). These highly visible participants should be held accountable. So too should the other responsible stakeholders.

If athletic administrators and coaches fail to adopt a systemic approach to preventing and resolving sports conflict, the industry will continue to experience what Larry Susskind calls “predictable surprises”—the disasters we should have seen coming that have plagued the industry for decades. There will be more LeGarrette Blounts, Elizabeth Lamberts, LaVonda Wagners, and Ryan McFaydens. We cannot know their names, what they will look like, or when they will arrive on the scene, but we can be certain that, if we do not take action, we will meet them one day soon. We will likely be surprised, but we will have no reason to be. If we continue to take the same actions, we cannot rightfully expect different results.

Conflict prevention and resolution must also extend to athletic leadership. Coaches, administrators, managers, and officials set the tone for the players and teams. Effective conflict prevention requires that these role models and authority figures demonstrate and uphold the principles and policies they intend players to follow. Too many coaches rely upon the hammer approach when dealing with their players. If the only tool one has is a hammer, everything around him becomes a nail. Coaches who develop skills to prevent and resolve conflict will discover an arsenal of specialized tools at their disposal that allow them to respond constructively in the most nuanced situations.

## **The Limitations of Conflict Prevention Trainings**

Workshops introduce conflict prevention and resolution as intellectual concepts to talk through while sitting around a table, but they neglect to address the skills necessary for its effective implementation in high-pressure, real-time situations. Workshops, while well-intentioned, are not equipped to prevent sports-related conflict.

Coaches and administrators generally assume a reactive approach to conflict. The regular practice schedule focuses strictly upon physical training. When a destructive conflict erupts, coaches react by introducing a workshop on substance abuse, domestic violence, or teambuilding, etc. in an attempt to smooth things over. Then it’s back to business as usual

...until the next time. Despite the precious time and money spent on workshops and trainings, the destructive conflict persists.

While workshops and other related approaches often impart valuable information, they rarely prevent future conflict in athletic situations. They promote awareness, which is a necessary first step, but they do not enable athletes and coaches to build conflict prevention skills they can utilize on and off the field.

Workshops are a logical approach to addressing conflict that arises in offices or classroom settings. If, however, the conflict to be prevented occurs in radically different environments from that of the workshop and the players do not receive any further conflict prevention education, the conflict will likely continue as though the workshop never took place.

Athletes and coaches may understand this better than most. If, for example, a football coach wants to teach his offensive line a new play, he might sit the players down briefly to draw a diagram of positions, but he won't waste much time before heading to the field to run the drill. They run the play over and over for many days or weeks to practice and refine their technique. Kinesthetic learning is a critical element to achieving excellence in sports. Every great coach knows that he or she cannot introduce a new play in the locker room at halftime and expect players to execute it with finesse in the second half. Players need to engrain the motions in their bodies. They also need to learn to anticipate opponents' counter-strategies and maintain focus through distractions or setbacks. An all-star offensive lineup that never meets a defense line in practice will never successfully maneuver around defenders in a game situation because they haven't had the opportunity to practice doing so.

Developing conflict prevention skills requires this same level of applied practice. In sports, we must do more than talk about conflict prevention if we are to effectively prevent conflict. The training must involve a kinesthetic component if players and coaches expect to prevent conflict in active situations on and off the field.

*“Just as preparation and practice are critical to developing physical skills to the point that they can be performed automatically, so too is preparation and practice of the mental skills that go into automating problem solving, the flow of ideas, and the identification of new ways to think about and/or do things.”*

– Robert M. Nideffer, author of *The Inner Athlete*

### **Assessment: What it is & Why it Matters**

The first step in addressing any conflict situation is to conduct an assessment. Assessment attempts to establish a complete picture of the situation. It is a critical step toward understanding the layers of conflict and identifying the parties (or stakeholders) involved. The assessment provides an organization with a map of the issue and enables its members to implement conflict prevention tools that effectively address context-specific issues. When all the variables are on the table for consideration, parties are generally able to develop solutions that are durable and agreeable to all.

How do we go about determining the best approach to solving a systemic problem? We may know that conflict is likely to occur in particular situations, but how can we effectively prevent it? Context is key. Although we would like to be able to present a step-by-step remedy that will enable any reader to effectively manage every type of sports-related conflict, we cannot honestly offer a standardized protocol to manage an issue so complex and nuanced. While conflict may manifest similarly across many situations, the causes are varied. For this reason, it is critical to consider contributing variables when identifying appropriate methods to prevent conflict in a particular situation or sport. We must develop a new, deeper level of understanding in order to develop effective strategies for prevention.

An assessment should ideally be conducted by a neutral outside party. This ensures impartiality when attempting to construct a large-scale picture of the landscape. It also enables stakeholders to speak openly and anonymously about sensitive issues. While an involved party may feel he or she is able to conduct an objective assessment, other stakeholder parties may disagree. The assessment process may involve a number of diagnostic tools to ensure that the written summary represents all relevant viewpoints. Because some groups or individuals may be resistant to ideas associated with particular groups or individuals, anonymity is critical to ensuring that the interests—and not the associated positions—are represented. Non-attributable interviews and anonymous surveys are common methods of gathering information from a range of constituents. It can also be useful to analyze past examples of conflict to understand the contexts from which the issues emerged and the ways in which they were addressed.

When the individual conducting the assessment feels that he or she has obtained all of the relevant information, he or she should circulate the written assessment among the various parties involved to ensure that all relevant interests are accurately presented. If any party proposes revisions, the individual conducting the assessment should incorporate the suggestions and re-circulate the document until all parties agree that the assessment completely and accurately represents the issue at hand.

While this process may seem tedious, it has proven more efficient and cost-effective than traditional approaches. The primary reason is that thorough, accurate assessment takes into account all relevant stakeholder interests. Conflict prevention strategies that evolve from such assessments generally do not encounter the powerful resistance that frequently spoils well-intentioned plans developed by only a small percentage of stakeholders. When all the variables are on the table for consideration, parties are generally able to develop solutions that are durable and agreeable to all.

We cannot expect that a blanket approach to conflict prevention will effectively address all types of conflict. A women's golf team faces very different challenges than a men's football team. Intercollegiate coaches have different concerns than professional coaches. The approach to preventing conflict must reflect these differences in order to meet the needs and goals of various organizations and individuals. If we fail to conduct an assessment, we are essentially embracing the hammer and nail approach to conflict. We can go to the hardware store and purchase an array of the best tools, but if we do not possess an accurate understanding of the problem we are trying to fix, we are at risk of wielding those tools haphazardly and inflicting more harm than good.

*“We must not be lured into forced algorithmic solutions... Rather, there needs to be a process by which experienced, objective, and careful judgment resolves the issues.”*

*-Myles Brand, State of the Association 2009*

## Diagnoses

More specifically, the goal of the assessment is to obtain answers to the following questions, which are well-articulated by Ury, Brett & Goldberg in *Getting Disputes Resolved*:

- 1) *What kinds of disputes occur? Whom do they involve? How frequently do they occur?*
- 2) *How are they addressed?*
- 3) *Why are these procedures used to address the dispute as opposed to others?*
- 4) *What prevents the existing system from successfully resolving disputes? Is there a lack of procedures, skills, motivation or resources?*

The answers to these questions will help to inform necessary changes. It is also important to understand the specific costs and benefits associated with the dispute situations identified when answering the questions above.

There are a number of approaches to addressing conflict, each of which can be associated with particular costs and benefits. In general, these outcomes can be divided into four interrelated categories:

- *Transaction costs – time, money, energy, lost opportunities*
- *Satisfaction with outcomes – frequently associated with perceived fairness*
- *Effect on the relationship – may include improvement, damage, dissolution, etc.*
- *Recurrence – may involve one party, both parties, or different parties within the same organization*

When the assessment is complete, the group is well positioned to begin devising a dispute system that will effectively prevent and resolve the conflict situations identified in the assessment.

## Dispute Systems Design

What should this new approach to conflict look like? In order to address the many types of negative conflict and the various contexts from which it emerges, we must take an appropriately comprehensive approach to its prevention and resolution. Janet Martinez and Stephanie Smith, lecturers at Stanford Law School, present an analytic framework for creating specialized dispute resolution systems to meet the needs of particular groups and institutions. This framework rests upon the following five principles: goals, structure, stakeholders, resources, and success/accountability.

**Goals.** What types of conflict should the system address? What is the system intended to accomplish? What are some examples of goals the system could reasonably achieve?

These goals should:

- Define success
- Be as specific as possible
- Include both team and individual goals
- Establish measurable success criteria to enable system evaluation

Some possible goals could include:

- *Reduce instances of conflict by \_\_\_%*
- *Reduce hours dedicated to resolving conflict by \_\_\_%*
- *Reduce hours dedicated to conflict-related public relations by \_\_\_%*

**Processes & Structure.** What methods will be used to prevent and resolve conflict? How does the system interact with other systems (e.g., the NCAA and the formal legal system)? What are the advantages and disadvantages to participation in the system?

A thorough assessment enables the organization to determine the methods best suited to prevent and resolve conflict specific to a particular sport or context. For example, an ombuds may be well-suited to prevent and resolve intra-team conflict, but he or she may not be as effective in preventing other types of conflict.

**Stakeholders.** Who should be involved in system design? Whose interests does it represent (e.g., coaches, players, fans, administrators, etc.)? The more stakeholders included in the dispute system design, the more likely that it will gain the credibility necessary to endure over time.

It is important to understand the cost of a single episode of conflict in relationship to winning, dollars, career development, etc. The overall cost of any conflict is dispersed among a number of stakeholders. In sport situations, these groups could be roughly divided into the following categories: administrators, coaches, athletes, and supporters.

The cost to each stakeholder group may include (but is not limited to):

- *Administrators:* Loss of revenue streams, loss of good will, brand damage, time, stress, liability, reputational damage, job termination
- *Coaches:* Team losses, financial losses, job termination, damage to future career opportunities, reputational damage
- *Athletes:* Sub-optimal on-field performance, suspension, career ends prematurely, loss of scholarship, defamation, damage to future professional opportunities, damage to personal life, loss of product endorsements, criminal sentence
- *Supporters:* Loss of good will, dignity and spirit in connection with “their” team’s performance or personal behavior; reputational damage

While all of these stakeholder groups may not be involved in designing the dispute system, it is important to acknowledge the many people affected by a single episode of conflict and to

consider all of them (and potential others) when determining who should be included in the system design. As an assessment progresses, the organization may find that there are far more stakeholders than previously anticipated. While it may initially seem like a great deal of work to include so many individuals at the beginning of the process, it will actually save time in the end. The system will possess greater possibility of success when all parties who could potentially support or block an issue are included from the beginning. If they are overlooked, there is a greater possibility that the best-laid plans will fail during the early stages of implementation.

Stakeholders are frequently discussed in terms of concentric circles to demonstrate their level of connection to the issue:

- *First circle stakeholders* are the obvious participants directly involved with the issue.
- *Second circle stakeholders* are individuals whom the key stakeholders identify as other involved parties during the first stages of the assessment. These individuals may not be central to the issue, but they may be in a position to block or advocate for specific plans of action.
- *Third circle stakeholders* are not directly affected by the issue, but they could potentially help to solve it. The third circle may also include those individuals who may be affected but are not able to advocate for themselves.

**Resources.** Does the system have adequate financial and human resources to meet its goals? Are there enough trained neutrals? Is there sufficient access to conflict prevention and resolution education? Are the available procedures appropriate to prevent and resolve the disputes that occur? The investment should be cost-beneficial and should reflect the level and frequency of the organization's experience with destructive conflict. The system should not introduce a new cost burden; in the end, it should help the organization save money and other valuable resources.

**Success & Accountability.** What is the level of transparency? Consistency? Is the system able to meet its intended goals? How is the system evaluated? By whom? How do the system implementers utilize evaluation to continuously improve the system?

The structure of the system will determine its level of success. If the assessment identifies the organization's strengths and weaknesses, the stated goals specifically address those weaknesses, and stakeholders at all levels feel they have been afforded an opportunity to shape the system, it will have a good chance of success. Identifying the organization's strengths creates an opportunity to align incentives with the stated goals. What are individuals or organizations doing well? How can we recognize progress and reinforce constructive behavior? While it is critical to address destructive behavior, it is equally important to reward success.

Transparency ensures that the system is serving its designated purpose. In the event that a dispute system is not successful, transparency enables evaluators to efficiently identify shortcomings and, when appropriate, recommend improvements. Transparency also helps to maintain a consistent approach across a multitude of situations. When the system is clearly outlined, all stakeholders know what to expect. A detailed system design also serves as a template from which to act and establishes a consistent method to address particular instances of conflict. This

will help to prevent common instances of conflict that arise as a result of perceived favoritism or inconsistent treatment among teammates.

Accountable conflict prevention systems also help to dissipate the academic-athletic conflict that plagues many university campuses. When the athletic department can publicly demonstrate that it has established specific tenets to effectively prevent and resolve conflict, it may elicit more respect and empathy from the community at large.

*“It is far too risky to take athletics outside the normal lines of accountability at the university. When there are major problems or scandals in athletics, the entire university is affected.”*

*-Myles Brand, State of the Association 2006*

### **Establishing a Consensus Building Approach**

While coaches and players likely share the same goals and may even agree upon the steps necessary to achieve them, a top-down approach prevents athletes from actively contributing to and taking ownership of these goals. Consensus building is critical to developing successful athletic teams because it enables all parties to contribute to the goals, rules, and culture of the team. When the solutions reflect the culture of the organization, they are more likely to be durable and successful.

Athletics maintain several layers of rules. The rules of the games themselves are well-established and generally accepted by all. Team rules and motivational goals, however, can present complications. In many cases, they are developed by well-intentioned coaching staff who, as team leaders, provide them as guidelines for team members to follow. While these goals and the plans to achieve them may be surefire strategies for success, they are not as successful as they could be due to one critical component: they were not developed in partnership with those they impact most. The Association for Applied Sport Psychology states:

*It is important that athletes feel in control (self-determined) of their goals. Ensuring that athletes accept and internalize goals is one of the most important features of goal setting. If athletes set their own goals, they will most likely internalize them. Sometimes when coaches set goals for athletes, they aren't taken seriously.*

When administrators and coaching staff establish team goals and rules in isolation, student-athletes are relegated to pawns on the playing field. No one likes to be told what to do or what to care about. When people feel that their thoughts and feelings are not valued, they are likely to discredit even the most well-intentioned ideas because they feel they are being imposed upon them. This undermines accountability and reinforces a culture in which student-athletes are prone to rebellion and destructive behavior.

Consensus building is a concerted effort to meet the interests of all the stakeholders. Reaching consensus, while often time-consuming, is a realistic and attainable goal—even in the most complex disputes. Consensus does not necessarily imply unanimity or that everyone is going to hold hands in agreement. Dr. Lawrence Susskind, Harvard professor and founder of The

Consensus Building Institute, writes, “Consensus has been reached when everyone agrees they can live with whatever is proposed after every effort has been made to meet the interests of all stakeholding parties.”

This approach enables all parties affected by the issue to voice concerns and propose solutions. It does not imply that every person will get his or her way. They won't. It means that, if parties do not achieve their ideal outcome, they will have some idea why (e.g., about how it would negatively impact others). They will then be invited to help devise an acceptable alternative that meets the interests of all parties.

Consensus building approaches may include outside practitioners. If the assessment or dispute system design process involves an outside practitioner, that individual does not waltz in and attempt to fix the organization. He or she collects information about the organization's strengths and weaknesses and then uses that information to help the organization amend or develop its own dispute system. An outside practitioner is generally not able to learn enough about an organization during a brief period of time to propose durable solutions to its problems. Instead, the practitioner helps the organization to devise its own solutions that are consistent with its own traditions, values, and environment.

Consensus building is critical to developing successful athletic teams because it enables all parties to contribute to the goals, rules, and culture of the team. In fact, though the terminology may be new, the athletic community is no stranger to the concept. Collective bargaining is a well-established example of a consensus-based approach. Such procedures establish a sense of ownership and accountability, as well as a shared sense of purpose among contributing members. Consensus based approaches also establish clearly defined codes of conduct. When players and coaches work together to establish the rules, there is little room for the misunderstandings and inconsistencies regarding implementation that commonly occur in intercollegiate athletics.

*“Our decision-making must be based on evidence, rather than intuition or anecdote. It must be inclusive and ensure that all key stakeholders have the opportunity to have their perspectives heard and their supporting data presented.”*

*- Myles Brand, State of the Association 2003*

### **Myles Brand: Redefining “Student-Athlete”**

“The Brand Era” at the NCAA instituted a new model of leadership that brought academics to the foreground of intercollegiate athletics. Brand's focus promoted the skills of student-athletes both on and off the field, particularly their consistently higher-than-average national graduation rates. He routinely spoke of internalized “skills for life” that included “the drive to pursue excellence, knowing how to lead and how to follow, respect for others even when they are competitors, the commitment to hard work, learning how to focus, learning how to persist despite obstacles, and knowing the importance of team and group effort.”

### **Establishing Core Competencies**

Like all acquired skills, conflict prevention and resolution skills take practice to develop. We must adopt a multi-dimensional approach to athletic training that recognizes the physical, the

mental, and the interaction between the two in order to employ these skills in the active settings for which we train. Training in the third dimension, the realm in which mental and physical meet in real time, must simulate the situations in which athletes seek to achieve the outcomes.

Experts and researchers have referenced the following as core competencies for all successful athletes:

- Communication
- Negotiation
- Leadership
- Collaboration
- Problem-Solving
- Life Skills
- Heat of the Moment Conflict Skills

If we support athletes in developing these skills, and we provide opportunities in which to integrate and practice them both on and off the field, we will enable athletes to develop core competencies critical to both individual and team success. This will also effectively prevent a great deal of destructive conflict that occurs when these skills are lacking.

Anyone who knows sport understands that athletics require both mental and physical agility. We hone our concentration. Our heads have to be in the game. To play together on the field or to navigate the inside lanes on a packed track requires core conflict resolution skills specific to our sport. Athletes, coaches, and teams who continue to hone these skills benefit both on and off the field.

Sports psychologists have demonstrated the power of the mind as it relates to athletic success. Mental training is necessary, but mental training alone is not sufficient. Physical trainers emphasize the importance of physical strength and endurance. This, too, is entirely necessary, but physical training alone is also not sufficient. A multi-dimensional approach to athletic training that recognizes the physical, the mental, and the interaction between the two enables athletes to employ these skills in the active settings for which we train. This interaction between the mental and physical realms manifests differently across sports and contexts. There is no prescribed method of integration that will prove effective in every context because every team, every situation, every sport involves individuals and teams with their own interests and goals.

If athletes and coaches are unable to grapple with conflict, their performance is stunted, teams become disintegrated, and personal behavior compromises professional achievement. It is a no-win situation for everyone: players, coaches, sponsors, fans... It is time to continue the work of the late NCAA President Myles Brand to reflect the talent, integrity and dedication of our players, teams, and coaches. Not simply because it's the right thing to do—it is a necessary action to continue the growth of the industry, optimize competitive performance, and protect the good will fundamental to sport.

*“Athletics is too visible and influential to be ancillary and too enriching to the university experience to be ignored as a contribution to the mission of higher education. And if it has value in the university’s meeting its mission, it deserves to be supported, if needed.”*

– Myles Brand, *State of the Association 2006*

The *NCAA Principles of Amateurism* states that participation in intercollegiate athletics should be “motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental, and social benefits to be derived.” Where are the teachable moments in sports? How can we utilize the existing climate to impart valuable life skills and obtain competitive edge?

### **“The Brand Plan”**

“The Brand Plan” develops and publicizes a curriculum that enables students to learn about core values, to discuss the role of values in shaping one’s character, and to highlight these students within their communities, providing a shared model for all. It is believed that, by focusing on student-athletes as students first, it is possible to successfully mitigate much of the unhealthy dissent surrounding intercollegiate sports and provide student-athletes with the tools to achieve success both on and off the field.

Although Dr. Brand was primarily focused upon balancing athletics and academics in order to prepare student-athletes for successful personal and professional lives beyond intercollegiate sport, this emphasis can be extended to all levels of conflict management in sports. We seek to honor and extend Dr. Brand’s balanced, integrative plan to understand, prevent and resolve all types of destructive conflict at all levels of participation in sports.

### **Outside the System**

Because sport is an integral element of our culture, it is important to address sports conflict beyond the realm of athletics. If we can facilitate a greater public understanding of these athletes’ struggles and their dedicated commitment to their studies, their communities, and their sport, we will prevent much of the sports-related conflict that takes place in the public sphere.

The academic community can help to prevent conflict by establishing a greater understanding of the complex environment surrounding professional and intercollegiate athletics. While we have placed a strong emphasis upon tactile conflict management skill-building for athletes and coaches, non-athletes can also help prevent conflict through enhanced awareness and education. Academic institutions profit from student-athletes, but they fail to educate the greater academic community (and sometimes even student-athletes themselves) about the role that the student-athlete is intended to serve. Most academics have little idea about the many challenges student-athletes boldly face each and every day. Non-athletes on campus are often unaware of the racial and gender discrimination that overshadows their athletic peers. They see the perks—athletic gear and scholarships, but they fail to acknowledge the hardships that befall so many student-athletes on college campuses across the country.

Through theory-based coursework that addresses issues such as race, class, gender, and commercialism, we can educate the public about the real-life experiences of intercollegiate and

professional athletes. We call them role models. Then we berate them when they make common mistakes that, thanks to modern media, instantly become public knowledge. We should not overlook these indiscretions, but we also need not aggrandize them. It's time we made a valiant effort to know what it's really like to walk in their shoes.

Much conflict stems from ignorance. Decades of research in conflict management have demonstrated that when people sit down in the same room and listen to one other's stories, they are able to see the big picture with much greater clarity. Athletes, no matter how high-profile, are only human. We need to recognize them as distinct individuals who deserve the respect and understanding extended to any other student or professional.

## Strategies for Preventing Conflict in Sports

### *Specific Solutions*

Sports-related conflict is distinctly different from other types of conflict, largely because there are clear winners and losers, and because the conflict frequently occurs in physically-oriented settings. As a result, sports require a specialized approach to conflict prevention and resolution.

Individual sports also require specialized attention when developing strategies to prevent and resolve conflict. Football players, gymnasts, and golfers experience different types of conflict and it manifests in different ways. As a result, athletes and coaches need to develop skills and strategies to address and to prevent the specific types of conflict that arise within their sport.

### *Ombuds: Finding the Middle Ground*

The majority of ombuds work to help resolve existing conflict; however, an important result of ombudswork is also directly tied to prevention. Ombuds have an opportunity to work with a number of stakeholders through a variety of conflict situations. They ask questions and attempt to identify the underlying causes of conflict through confidential interviews and consultations. Because this work enables ombuds to see the larger picture through the eyes of many different stakeholders, they are well positioned to identify conflict trends and recommend areas for organizational or institutional change. The process of resolving conflict teaches us about the causes and the costs of the conflict scenarios we seek to prevent.

Athletes and coaches agree that much of the destructive conflict that exists on and off the field is due to poor communication. Conflict is inevitable; it is how we handle it that can make or break a game, a season, or a career. Some organizations choose to employ an independent ombuds (sometimes referred to as ombudsman or ombudsperson) to help employees, managers, and other parties find ways to resolve conflict. Mary Rowe, MIT Ombudsperson and founder of the International Ombudsman Association, defines an organizational ombuds as:

*A neutral or impartial manager within a corporation, who may provide confidential and informal assistance to managers and employees in resolving work-related concerns, who may serve as a counselor, go-between, mediator, fact-finder or upward-feedback mechanism, and whose office is located outside ordinary line management structures.*

External ombuds serve a similar function to the organizational ombuds described above, but they may work on a part-time basis for more than one organization. The only practical difference between internal and external ombuds relates to cost and available hours. Many organizations choose to implement an independent internal ombuds office so that all members of the institution have access to confidential services at all times. Other organizations may not be large enough to necessitate a full-time position.

### ***Heat of the Moment Conflict Skill Development***

Sport-related conflict rarely occurs around a table. It takes place during the height of a match or after a questionable overtime call. It happens when the pace is intense and emotions run high. This poses a particular challenge to resolving conflict in sports because athletes and coaches often do not have the ability to take a mental time-out or a few deep breaths to center themselves and consider a response. They respond in the moment—almost, some might say, by reflex.

Heat of the Moment Conflict Skill Development demonstrates that conflict resolution skills, when practiced and strengthened like any other learned skill, can become so engrained that athletes are able to utilize them at any time, even under immense pressure. How does the athlete respond when conflict presents itself in the most critical moments? This real-time approach serves as a true test of whether an athlete has internalized positive conflict skills on a level that enables him or her to act consciously and consistently under pressure.

A recent study involving competitive soccer players found that teams that incorporated conflict management through simulation and role-playing during practice achieved significantly better season records than their similarly ranked opponents.

In *Understanding Sports Conflict*, we illustrated the overwhelming prevalence and the associated costs of destructive conflict in sports. It is not a matter of whether conflict will emerge; it is a matter of when. It behooves us to arrive prepared in order to handle it constructively. What are the specific challenges one faces in a particular sport or position? A sprinter benefits from cross-training, but if she wants to perform optimally in her event she must practice time trials on the track. The law of specificity applies equally well to conflict management training. Athletes and coaches benefit from conflict management tools like the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, which enables users to identify their individual conflict styles, the conflict styles of others, and the potential costs associated with each; however, such intellectual analyses are only helpful if they inform integrated practice. Conflict management tools of all kinds will only prove effective in high-pressure situations if they are repeatedly practiced in the setting where they are to be employed.

### ***Sports Conflict Observation Tool***

The Sports Conflict Observation Tool enables coaches, players, and practitioners to identify and analyze very early stages of conflict and to effectively address the issue before it escalates to larger proportions. Practitioners or team leaders observe teams in practice and game situations and utilize the tool to chart various types of observable conflict that may occur (e.g., physical, verbal, etc.) and the participants involved (e.g., teammates, opponents, coaches, officials, etc.).

Having observed the contexts from which visibly identifiable conflict emerges, practitioners and team leadership can attempt to proactively address such instances and prevent future escalation. As with many conflict situations that emerge within the lines, these observable manifestations of conflict may alert coaches and athletic leadership to other less apparent conflicts that are manifesting as conflict on the field.

The Sports Conflict Observation Tool is particularly useful because it frames specific examples of conflict that coaches or practitioners should look for. Coaches who are accustomed to their players' on-field dynamics may easily overlook conflict cues. When, however, they are written out in front of them, coaches may more readily recognize behaviors they have learned not to see.

## CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated that conflict prevention skills prepare athletes to perform at an optimal level as individuals and as teams. We have acknowledged the important and complex role of emotion in sport. Meaningful change is going to take time and effort, but if we give the issue the systemic attention it deserves, we will not be disappointed. Assessment will enable athletic organizations to understand the types of conflict that exist and the many interests they involve. It will enable them to include all relevant stakeholders in devising a dispute system that effectively manages the destructive conflict the organization seeks to prevent.

By establishing a consensus based approach to conflict prevention, athletic organizations will facilitate a greater level of accountability and success among their members. Conflict prevention skills are core competencies that are imperative to athletic success. When athletic organizations implement conflict prevention strategies, they will find that the many members who contribute to the institution's success are far better prepared to focus their time and energy upon the game. And that's when the competition heats up.

Destructive conflict inflicts enormous costs upon players, coaches, administrators, and supporters. While conflict may be inevitable, the costs of destructive conflict certainly are not. Resolving existing conflict is imperative; however, if we truly seek to optimize performance and minimize costs, we must focus our attention on prevention as well. We must assume a systemic approach to solve a systemic problem. We must not neglect the foundation upon which we build as we set our sights toward increasingly greater athletic goals. Success at the highest levels is contingent upon the structural soundness of our foundation. It is critical that we acknowledge conflict prevention skills as fundamental. Not simply because it's the right thing to do—it is a necessary action to continue the growth of the industry, optimize competitive performance, and protect the good will fundamental to sport.

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