



2009 Outlook...It's a Morale Matter!

Even the most casual fan of professional sports knows that high morale is one of the most important ingredients when it comes to long-term success. A team can recruit the greatest players, engage all top coaches and build the best stadium in the world and that still won't be enough if players aren't united mentally. Both positive and negative events can affect morale and this season the Phillies are staring both down: The death of legendary announcer Harry Kalas in April and the championship win last season have the potential to tug at the team's mental game.

Dr. Steven Rosenberg, former team psychotherapist for the Flyers and author of "I Hope the Hell I Win! Turning Hope Into Reality...How Winners Win!" says that both Kalas's death and the championship last season need to be dealt with as mental issues.

Rosenberg was with the Flyers in 1985 when star goalie Pelle Lindbergh died in a car crash mid-season and he says it took a lot for the team to surmount that tragedy. Rosenberg says that while a team can pull it together to win in the deceased person's name for a game or two, that doesn't last for the long term.

"You run into normal playing situations and you actually grow to miss that person, which results in a big let down. That's what everyone is dealing with right now on the Phillies," he says. Rosenberg says that when he worked with the Flyers, he had team members keep a diary of their thoughts and memories of Lindbergh. "When you write things down, you release the feelings," he says.

None of the tough guy hockey players had any problems doing these exercises, he says.

Dr. Cory Bank, founder of the Abington Center for Therapy and Sports Psychology, agrees that the death needs to be directly addressed. "Teams resemble families in many ways and may show similar ways of grieving. However, if they are in the midst of their season they have to play on. They might honor the player by playing at their top level, however this seems to be only temporary and the team usually winds up playing at their similar level," he says. "The long-term fixes should include group counseling, individual counseling and a way of honoring the player, such as with a retired number." Ironically, winning also has a way of pulling a team down, says Rosenberg.

"When you get off a World Series win, for a championship team there's a sophomore jinx—can you do it again next year?" he says. Another thing champs have to deal with is their increased popularity. "There are many players who

enjoy the limelight, but it's very distracting," Rosenberg says. "There's a lot of offers for national magazines that want to put you on the cover."

Bank adds: "The success of a team could influence players to try to increase their individual leverage with regards to their contracts, endorsements, etc. This could negatively influence team morale as it could cause tension between team members."

Rosenberg recommends what he calls "staying in the moment" as a strategy to gain focus. Rosenberg often guides athletes in breathing exercises, approaches to clearing the mind and positive visualization as ways to play in the present tense. His book "I Hope the Hell I Win!" offers numerous exercises geared at athletes seeking an edge.

One thing the Phillies will hopefully have on their side this season is the support of fans, which can be a big boon to morale.

Says Bank: "Even though Philly fans have been negatively viewed—hey, we did throw snowballs at Santa!—one could see how appreciative the Phillies were of the fans in 2008."