



Divide and rule: A qualitative analysis of the debriefing process in elite team sports



A.-C. Macquet ^{a,*}, C. Ferrand ^b, N.A. Stanton ^c

^a National Institute of Sports, Expertise and Performance (INSEP), Paris, France

^b Université François Rabelais, Tours, France

^c University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article aimed to gain an understanding of the process of debriefing during major competitions in elite team sports. Debrief interviews were conducted with 9 head coaches. The interview data were used to identify how head coaches divided up the tasks given to staff and team members prior to, and during the post-match debriefing. Results showed that debriefing consisted of two steps: preparation and presentation. Preparation referred to four successive tasks. Presentation to the team of players consisted of eight tasks relating to transformational and transactional styles of leadership. Coaches were shown to divide the labor within the staff and team. The data tend to support the view that in elite team sports, coaches are both transformational and transactional leaders, adapting their style of leadership to the situation, athletes and time available. This study provides insights into the task-work and team-work underlying team functioning and division of labor.

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1. Introduction

In sports, debriefing is defined as a discussion between the coach and athlete that is conducted after a competition, with the aim of achieving positive changes and improvements in the following competition (Hogg, 1998). It concerns both performance assessment and athletes' development. Successful debriefing was shown to aid learning, motivation, confidence, psychological and emotional recovery, and self-awareness (Gould et al., 1999; Hogg, 1998, 2002; Milne et al., 1999). It also enables teams to improve performance, decrease negative emotional effects, and foster coach–athlete relationships (Hogg, 2002; McArdle et al., 2010). During successful debriefing, participants reflect on positive and negative components of performance, taking into account technical, tactical, physical and mental aspects (Hogg, 1998). For these reasons, it is essential to debrief athletes after an important competition (Hogg, 1998, 2002; McArdle et al., 2010).

Debriefing appears to be a complex process consisting of many components: (a) self-reflection by the coach and athlete in order to

explain what went well and badly; (b) information and vision sharing between the coach and athlete; (c) identification of the need for change regarding technique, strategy, physical and mental preparedness; and (d) goal setting and goal adaptation (Hogg, 2002). Debriefing appears to be a constrained exercise that is conducted by the coach under specific conditions: (a) environment (e.g., quiet place); (b) time (e.g., available time); (c) resources used (e.g., video); and (d) individual or group (McArdle et al., 2010). The coach plays a key role consisting of encouraging the athlete to self-assess as well as giving the athlete feedback to help him/her to progress (e.g., Rees et al., 2012). The coach has to guide the athlete to perceive his/her own potential and limits in order to improve or maintain his/her self-confidence and achieve his/her goals (Hogg, 1998). He/she guides the athlete to provide him/her feedbacks as well as he/she provides athlete feedbacks in order to understand what happened and why. He/she also gives athlete instructions about how to achieve positive issues if they encounter such situations again (Hogg, 2002). Even though debriefing is a popular psychological and tactical tool in sports, few attempts have been made to explore the ways coaches prepare for debriefing athletes.

Some have examined the debriefing process from the perspective of coaching (e.g., Macquet, 2009; Omodei et al., 1998). Athletes were shown a video of their performance during a competition. They were encouraged to comment on their focus, perceptions,

* Corresponding author. Research Department, Laboratory SEP (EA 7370), INSEP, 11 avenue du Tremblay, 75012 Paris, France. Tel.: +33 141 744 873; fax: +33 141 744 535.

E-mail address: anne-claire.macquet@insep.fr (A.-C. Macquet).

thoughts, and judgments as they made decisions and how they assessed their decision effectiveness. Their comments were then used to highlight self-reflection, including foci and perception (e.g., Omodei et al., 1998), decisions (e.g., Macquet, 2009; Macquet and Fleurance, 2007; Macquet and Kragba, 2015), and performance (Macquet et al., 2012). Such studies showed that video assists the recall of athletes' experiences during competitions, and allowed researchers, coaches and athletes to access some of the thoughts athletes had during their performance, to understand what went well or badly as well as the likely causes. These studies all focused on the debriefing of individuals. They did not report on how to debrief a group in relation to the roles of individuals, their competencies in-game, or their concentration and attention skills during debriefing and so on.

Beyond sport settings, other researchers have debriefed small groups engaged in natural and dynamic environments. Such environments are similar to elite team sports environments as they presents high stakes outcomes, important time pressures and uncertain environments. For example, Mitchells (1983) developed a technique called Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, for use in debriefing small groups of firefighters, paramedics and law enforcement officers. Mitchells calls debriefing following life-threatening or traumatic situations "psychological first aid". The debriefing interview consists of explaining what happened and what people felt, thought and did during the situation. Such discussions have preventative effects, as debriefed individuals tend to be less depressed, angry and stressed than their non-debriefed colleagues (Bohl, 1991).

These studies of Mitchells (1983) and Bohl (1991) highlighted the psychological benefits of debriefing on individuals. Nevertheless, they did not discuss what individuals should do in the future if they encounter such critical situations again. Moreover, to our knowledge, no studies have focused on debriefing in team sports during major competitions, namely, continental and world championships, and the Olympic Games. Major competitions present intense time pressure, high stakes, and uncertainty. In these competitions, coaches and athletes have only a short time to debrief. Our experience on high level sport and discussions with French team sport coaches tells us that coaches favor a collective debriefing taking place several hours after or the day following the match. They also conduct individual debriefings with some players and semi-collective debriefings involving players with the same role within the team. Furthermore, national coaches work within a group of staff who each have different roles and tasks, including tactical work (i.e., head coaches (HC), assistant coaches (AC), and video coaches (VC), and medics (i.e., doctor and physiotherapist)). As a collective, they undertake a collaborative work: they pursue the same main goals (e.g., Annett and Stanton, 2000), namely debriefing athletes and prepare them for winning major competitions. They can succeed or fail as a whole. To our knowledge, no study has shown how the staff are organized to debrief players, or how a team of players is debriefed. This research focuses on the way the HCs of elite team sports use their experience to debrief a team of players in major competitions.

Research into expert coaches has shown that experts have the ability to identify what novice coaches do not. They provide athletes better feedbacks about possible causes of what happened and better solutions to the problems athletes are facing (e.g., Horton and Deakin, 2008). They also spend much more time providing information about tactics, than technique, and use their time more productively than non experts. Coaches need to be aware of the work-to-rest ratios that enable athletes to recover between practice sessions. They also need to create a climate of trust, consideration, and high expectations when they organize the team-work (e.g., Horton et al., 2005).

Some studies have shown that coaches behave like leaders in organizing their team (e.g., Fletcher and Arnold, 2011). Leadership has been conceptualized as a set of behaviors and leadership styles belonging to an individual (e.g., Bass, 1999; House, 1996; Lewin et al., 1939). Styles may be dictatorial, autocratic, participative or laissez faire (Lewin et al., 1939), directive, supportive, participative or achievement-oriented (House, 1996), and transactional or transformational (e.g., Bass, 1999; Bass et al., 2003). Bass (1999) and Bass et al. (2003) showed that transformational leaders motivate followers to go beyond their self-interest for the greater good, to achieve team goals and emphasize followers' sense of value, self-worth, and confidence by being attentive to followers and expressing followers their own beliefs. Transformational leadership consists of four dimensions: (a) idealized influence – the leader fosters trust and respect among others and serves as mentor to followers; (b) inspired vision – the leader fosters motivation and high expectations, and energizes followers to achieve their goals; (c) intellectual stimulation – the leader incites followers to be creative by questioning and challenging them; and (d) individualized consideration – the leader answers the personal and psychological needs of followers. Transactional leadership is concerned with leader behavior that focused around rewarding appropriate follower behaviors (i.e., contingent reinforcement) and punishment or corrective orientated leader behaviors (i.e., passive and active management by exception; e.g., Arthur et al., 2011). Transactional leaders prefer avoiding risk, focus on time constraints and efficiency and try to maintain control on followers. This theory of leadership style is well-suited to study the leadership styles sport coaches adopt while debriefing their athletes.

Research in leadership indicates that the leader organizes the way the work must be done by the team. He/she organizes the team-work. Research in leadership in sport setting has focused on: (a) leadership styles (e.g., Fletcher and Arnold, 2011; Rowold, 2006; Vidic and Burton, 2011); (b) the effects of transformational leadership style on intrinsic motivation (Charbonneau et al., 2001) and well-being (Stenling and Tafvelin, 2014); and (c) the role of athlete narcissism in moderating the relationship between coaches' transformational leadership and athlete motivation (Arthur et al., 2011). It has not studied how the HCs debrief a team of athletes in elite team sports. The current study aimed to gain a better understanding of the process of debriefing in elite team sports, during major competitions including intense time pressure and high stakes. More specifically, it aimed to explain what tasks are carried out to debrief athletes during major competitions as well as the division of labor between staff.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Nine HCs volunteered to participate in this study (seven men and two women). The criteria used to select them included being HC of national senior sport teams' of male or female players and having participated in major competitions. Four of the teams had previously won medals in continental and world championships and/or the Olympic Games. Coaches work with their national team for specific and short periods during the year in order to prepare for the major competitions. HCs were given pseudonyms to provide some degree of confidentiality (HC1 to HC9). Participants included HCs of volleyball, basketball, handball, and field and ice hockey teams. They ranged in age from 34 to 60 years ($M = 46.5$ years, $SD = 8$ years) and each had more than two years of experience with national teams, except HC6 and HC7, who were novice national HCs but had participated in the qualifying major competitions for the

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