

As a coach, team collapse is crucial in sports to know how to stop it, and prevent it in the future.

Introduction

Team collapse mid-game is a difficult task to manage when it impacts your team. As a coach, there are some methods to flip the script but you can only do so much as the game may take itself away. In this essay, I will dive into what team collapse is and how to prevent it from re-occurring. I will also introduce the best methods to stop what may be an ongoing team collapse and prevent it from getting any worse.

Background/ Relevance To Sport Coaching

Team collapse is a “sudden, collective, and extreme underperformance of a team within a competition, which is triggered by a critical situation that interferes with the team’s interplay, a loss of control of the game, and ultimately the inability of the team to regain their previous performance level within the game” (Wergin et al., 2018, p. 15). Commonly associated with momentum, many studies have investigated the cause of team collapse and how to prevent it from happening again. A famously known example of team collapse is in the 2017 Super Bowl. The Falcons were up 28-3 with 18 minutes left to play until they ultimately blew a 31-point lead to lose the Championship in overtime. This event is a great example of how important it is to know how to handle team collapse. The cause of this collapse is debatable, some say luck, some say performance, and some believe it was an outside power. Whatever it truly was, it was too much to handle for Dan Quinn, head coach of the Falcons. An example like this shows how crucial it is for a coach to maintain constant control no matter what collapse or momentum swing may come.

The Coaches Perspective

Team collapse results in losing control of your team as a coach, nothing seems to be working within the team and the collapse ensues. Momentum is a key term as it can

shift to one team or the other. Research in the area of momentum in sports showed negative psychological changes such as collective efficacy and team cohesion. (Den Hartigh et al., 2014). Apitzsh (2009) stated that there are two different points in a game that outline collapse. Firstly, negative thoughts prior to the game led to emotions resulting in a passive play style. Secondly, at the end of the game, typically through a critical event, negative emotions can arise leading to passive behaviour and upcoming negative performance. For the coach, this is all stuff that can change. It is all about your coaching environment and the culture of the team. A positive culture, group accountability, communication, and collective efficacy are all necessities to solve this issue.

Importance of Team Collapse

This topic is crucial to the various roles of sports coaching because of how common team collapse occurs and how necessary it is to overcome it. It all starts with your interactions with the athletes and having a culture that can compete with their backs against the wall. Great teams overcome collective collapse, for teams who can't, don't succeed. What makes collective collapse so interesting is if a coach does all that one can do, there is still a chance that it was not enough to overcome. You can question, did Dan Quinn do enough to bring the Falcons back into the game? Is there a point where the collapse was out of his hands? Because of this, the topic is important for the role of any coach as team collapse is a common occurrence in our sports. In Basketball, you have the ability reset with a timeout which sometimes stops a run. But for other sports, it isn't the same that way. Meaning, all sports coaches need to know how to win when they have their backs against the wall.

Literature Review

Diving into team collapse, choking is the main term used to describe it. It can be defined as "performance decrements under circumstances that increase the importance of good or improved performance (Baumeister, 1984). The reason why choking takes

place in sports, is mostly due to concentration difficulties influencing distraction and shifts of attentional focus. Hill and Shaw (2013) conducted a qualitative study by examining individual choking in various types of team sports. They found that important games, expectations, individual responsibility, presence of an audience and physical as well as mental errors are to be important antecedents for the occurrence of choking. More antecedents included: distraction, anxiety, perceived control, team cohesion, age, physical exhaustion and overconfidence. These factors will affect individuals, but a team collapse would mean more than one of these athletes is choking. It is a collective downfall, and not just one player. Sometimes it just happens in sports and the coaches need to stop any flow changes, but what is so interesting about team collapse is that it comes from a collective unit, not just one individual. An entire team crumbles together in front of the coach. Typically team collapse arises from a key moment, a critical event. Athletes also try to get out of the collapse, but it seems to make the collapse even worse. This is summarized as the inability to regain their previous performance level. A participant in Hill and Shaw's study claimed: "The collapse happens when you feel overly secure and you try difficult passes, play extremely careless and thoughtless, and make mistakes" (Hill, Shaw, 2013). They also found that a very common factor describing the critical team collapse event was an unforced error accumulation, meaning several individuals produced errors that added to the collapse of their performance. Mistakes have been shown to play a crucial role in relation to the team's underperformance but it's typically classified as a symptom or outcome of team collapse (Apitzsch, 2009). The key player's underperformance also plays a big role in the collapse of a team as the lack of good play in their best players can reflect onto his or her teammates. In Hill and Shaw's study, athlete 7 (volleyball) stated: "We got a key player, who is very stable in reception, and she suddenly couldn't manage anything anymore and that continued with the team... That was what caught my eye, that nothing worked anymore for her and shortly after that the same thing happened to the other player's." Now, this is interesting as the key player's performance can have a lot of control over a team. Underperformance by a key player can result in an underperformance from the rest of the team too: "The underperformance of a key player may cause a decrease in perceived self-efficacy of the teammates resulting in collective

underperformance of the team” (Bandura, 1977). It is fascinating how much power the key players of a team truly have and from a coaches perspective, that is difficult to manage. Another critical event is a perceived wrong referee decision. This is also interesting as what’s known to be the worst no-call in the NFL led the Los Angeles Rams to the Super Bowl. A blatant pass-interference call was missed late in the fourth quarter which had huge effects both immediate and long-term. The Saints ended up going to overtime and lost the game. A common theme with collapse is when the chance to win is still there, the Saints still had the opportunity despite the play, but at that point, the game changed and it was in the opposing team’s favour. Jones and Harwood (2008) have found that poor refereeing decisions have a possible impact on psychological momentum. The interruption, refusal of a team to agree with the call and the negative emotion perceived about a said call, has negative impacts on team performance and a positive effect on the opponent’s mindset and performance.

Outcomes

Mainly there are 3 forms of outcomes in team collapse. Beginning with affective outcomes, players typically would receive negative emotional contagion within their team due to the collapse situation. Looking at Hill and Shaw’s study again, Player 6 (volleyball) explained how negative emotions increased within the team and led to despair: “Some players became aggressive, others went quiet. I believe that emotions play a crucial role in volleyball and we didn’t lift ourselves up on our own points anymore and desperation became bigger and bigger, like a vortex” (Hill, Shaw, 2013). Furthermore, researchers have determined a link between the mood or morale of the whole team and individual players resulting in the assumption of an emotional contagion effect within a team (George 1990; Totterdell, 2000). Athletes also claimed anxiety to be what maintained the collapse within their team which was crucial. Fear of loss, fear of negative evaluation and panic about the collapse itself seems to cause a hectic form of playing and thus resulting in the underperformance of the team. Participants in the study also described anger as another effective outcome of collapse. They explained how they themselves or other players within the team expressed their anger on the court

sometimes to the coaches, due to their dissatisfaction with their team's performance. Athlete 10 (basketball) said: "Suddenly nothing works anymore and people get angry and yell at each other because of a mistake." This anger in the team prevents them from finding their way back to regular performance so as a coach, it's important to maintain accountability, and instill a positive culture. Secondly, athletes receive cognitive outcomes which are mainly perceptions and thoughts. Participants found that pressure resulting from the team collapse stopped them from returning to effective play entirely. Underperformance from key players as I mentioned earlier, further increases pressure which maintains the team collapse as what could be called a "vicious cycle". With the pressure resulting from team collapse, perceived insecurity comes as another outcome. Athlete 7 (volleyball) in Hill and Shaw's study claimed: "If you're insecure on the court already, you look at the key player and if she plays good you think: it'll work out somehow. And if she collapses you think: Okay, if she can't do it, how am I supposed to?" The choking of a key player can further increase insecurity in other players making them underperform as well. Mainly, this perception of insecurity has taken place due to a lack of accountability of the individual players. Collective accountability is an important asset for a team's resilience, especially when there are these setbacks or collapses. Lastly, behavioural outcomes were behaviours that athletes showed as a reaction to the team collapse. A decline in performance occurred and cautious play arose as players were scared to make a mistake. That level of cautiousness depends on the degree to which athletes try to avoid failure rather than aim for success. You lose your team at this point in a sense as athletes stop playing as a team. Another example from Hill and Shaw's study pointed out that the pressure of team collapse created a hectic rush. It made players rush their actions in order to overcome the collapse and score. Athlete 6 (volleyball) said: "It's the task of the setter to make the game calm but due to the hectic rush, setting became imprecise and due to that it was more difficult to make a point. It's a vicious circle." Limited communication also prevents a team's recovery to a collapse. McEwan and Beauchamp (2014) argue that communication within the team is one of the most important teamwork behaviours that regulate team performance. Limited communication causes a performance decrease and when suffering a team collapse, communication is needed to stop the turning point. Lastly, blaming others after failure

plays a part in team collapse and this negative handling of each other's mistakes fosters the maintenance of these events. You can not have your players blaming each other on your team as a coach. That culture is destined for team collapse and it cannot stand.

Coaches' Perception of Team Collapse:

Dan Quinn, head coach of the Falcons weeks after losing Super Bowl 51 said: "I'm past it, but I'm not over it. I don't think I'll ever be, and that's a good thing" (Orr, 2017). The Atlanta Falcons quite arguably blew the worst lead on the biggest stage in all sports. At the end of the game, Dan Quinn said: "I think for sure we ran out of some gas, they executed terrifically. When they got hot, it was hard for us to deal with." It would make sense that the Falcons were tired, and the offense could not stay on the field in the second half meaning the defense had a lot to do. Some also say that the Falcons played too aggressively in the second half, Quinn acknowledged that he could have managed the game and the clock a bit better than he did. From Dan Quinn's perspective, it was all a learning experience. Successful coaches find ways around team collapse and the Falcons could not do that.

Practical Applications & Conclusion

Adjusting to team collapse is not mastered by every coach. Along the lines of preventing collapse, it is very important to get your values/ goals straight and instill a culture that won't give up when times go wrong. After completing my research, I would say that the number one thing to stop team collapse (whether it's ongoing or about to come), starts with communication with your athletes. Meaning, the way you deliver your feedback, the level of attention and trust you give to your players, the role you play as a part of this collective unit and ultimately having everyone onboard with the culture. As important as it is to prevent team collapse, it'll still happen sometimes and that's sports. Because of this, it is so important for the role of a coach to find a way to guide his or her team and adapt to the obstacle and overcome it. The philosophy must be on the same page as every athlete and that is just the beginning. When it comes to ongoing collapses, coaches like Dan Quinn find out that experience may lead to more success especially when it may come to more technical methods like improved clock

management. And for the opposing side of that super bowl, Bill Belichick stated he never flinched as the Patriots managed to fight their way back from what was their own team's collapse in the first half of the game. They were down 21-3 at halftime but were comfortable with his team making it back into the game. Don't'a Hightower said since he was comfortable, so were the players. Typical Bill never showed emotion. That plays a role in the culture of the team, sticking to the plan and trusting that it will follow through. There was nothing out of the ordinary as usual, strictly business. Coach K also said: "Effective teamwork begins and ends with communication". It is so incredibly crucial to have hammered down as a coach and even when the team starts to fall apart mid-game, it is the coaches job to know how to rally the troops back in it beginning with that strong verbal feedback.

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