

Vol 2, Issue 20: Individual Differences Among Athletes

Individual Differences Among Athletes

The sporting arena has long been a microcosm of the social environment. Sport is an arena in which individual differences have often made intriguing storylines including Jackie Robinson becoming the first African American to play in the MLB and the introduction of Title IX to increase gender equality. Currently another individual difference has entered sport's spotlight with John Amaechi announcing that he is a gay ex-player in the NBA. Amaechi's announcement was met with various positive and negative reactions, further illustrating the impact of individual differences in sport. Whether these differences are obvious, such as gender or race/ethnicity, or more subtle, such as sexual orientation or religion, it is important to address these differences positively and proactively among athletes.

Coaches have the unique opportunity to take kids from various backgrounds with various differences and mold them into a team that works together for success. This task can be challenging due to the various and often contrasting reactions that result from differences between athletes. So how can coaches and the athletes under their direction work effectively in situations where differences exist? Here are some suggestions for creating a positive team environment:

- Be aware of your own personal biases and how they influence your behaviors
- Respect individual differences through consistent and equal treatment of athletes/teammates
- Be open to talking about these differences and how they may affect the team and the individual
- If individual differences are disrespected, it is important for the coach to address the issue and create consequences for the offender
- Strategize with athletes about how to work successfully with individual challenges in order to achieve team goals
- Create and maintain a safe environment for all athletes in the program where prejudice and discrimination is not tolerated.

At the Center for Sport Psychology and Performance Excellence at the University of North Texas, we have a staff of sport consultants who embrace diversity and are committed to creating and supporting the best athletic experience for athletes, teams, and coaches. For more information about how we can enhance your sport program or if you have any questions about how to work with specific individual differences in your program, please call us at 940-369-7767, visit our website at www.sportpsych.unt.edu, or email us at sportpsych@unt.edu. And as always we leave you with our sport quote of the week:

“Sport is where an entire life can be compressed into a few hours, where the emotions of a lifetime can be felt on an acre or two of ground, where a person can suffer and die and rise again on six miles of trails through a New York City park. Sport is a theater where sinner can turn saint and a common man become an uncommon hero, where the past and the future can fuse with the present. Sport is singularly able to give us peak experiences where we feel completely one with the world and transcend all conflicts as we finally become our own potential.”

~George A. Sheehan