

# DOMINATOR OR Accommodator?

## Self-assessment reveals players' conflict behavior patterns

By Roy Baroff and Bill Sanford

So, your team has won 17 national championships in 22 years. *Sports Illustrated* named your program the most dominant in all of college sports. What do you do to get better? Beyond training on the field and in the weight room, you look for ways to improve team chemistry and community.

To help the University of North Carolina women's soccer team with training to help build team unity and improve performance, we developed and piloted a seminar in leadership for a small group of Tar Heel players in the spring of 2003. Based on positive feedback from players and coaches, we revised and conducted the program with the full team as part of its pre-season training in August of that year.

The genesis for this training program was the authors' belief and experience that how sports teams resolve conflict has a direct impact on their on-field performance. We both are UNC graduates and played soccer in high school and/or college. One of the authors has worked with sports teams on a range of issues to promote teamwork and leadership. Our program focused on how each player handled conflict and its impact on the team and on individual performance. Our goals were to increase the players' awareness of "process" issues when in conflict and to help them understand that they could make informed choices about their behavior. We also wanted them to consider that these choices affect the team and the players' on-field performance.

We began the program's

Issue	Process	Outcome
Lack of playing time	Walked off the field, complained	Played less
Formation of cliques	Other cliques formed	Separation of players
Bad player, bad attitude	Consoled plus humor	Stopped playing
Poor coaching ability	Brushed it off	Lost confidence, team play declined
Parents complaining	No response	Tore the team apart, people left the team
Coach's lack of soccer knowledge	Player talked to coach	Playing time decreased, player quit team
Referee made a bad call, threw a player out	Complained to referee	Played with only 10 players

initial session by asking the team to brainstorm in three areas a feeling word associated with conflict, a word defining conflict and finally a word defining conflict in a constructive manner. Our goal was to get the players to share their perspectives on conflict and then to ask them to consider conflict as a constructive force.

Next, the team identified a range of soccer team conflicts that had occurred on other teams on which the players had participated. By focusing attention on other teams, we were able to create a "safe space" in which to talk about conflicts that occur on a soccer team. At the same time, it was likely that some of the same issues were present on the current team. Our goal with this exercise was to help players define the issues and look at the outcomes generated by different behaviors. The issues, processes and outcomes that were identified are shown in the table above.

The second training session began with the players

M.A.C. Hermann Trophy winner Catherine Reddick and the North Carolina Tar Heels strengthened their leadership abilities by developing their conflict management skills.





taking a short written self-assessment to help each player look at her behavioral tendencies in conflict situations in terms of five conflict styles: avoiding, accommodating, dominating, compromising and collaborating. We discussed the behaviors that were characteristic of each style (for example, "avoiding" can look like fleeing, denying, ignoring, etc.) and when each style would and would not be an appropriate choice.

We also gave each style a physical gesture and symbolic phrase. We represented avoiding, for example, by shrugging one's shoulders, looking to the sky and saying, "Conflict? What conflict?" This allowed the players to "try on" each style and experience, if only briefly, the feel of any unfamiliar styles. The exercise was designed to increase the players' awareness of their own behavioral patterns, tendencies and preferences; demonstrate that different team members may have different conflict styles; provide a model they could use to understand their own behavior and the actions of others and remind the players that when faced with a conflict, they have choices about how they act.

We asked the players to sit in the conflict style group with which they most identified. This led to some interesting and humorous discussion among the team members about leadership styles and on-field behavior. We also heard comments that indicated the players were grasping the concept of choice in how they dealt with conflict. For instance, one player in the accommodating group tried on a dominator's approach and said, "This feels pretty good. I think I'll try being a dominator sometime."

Despite our reminders that the self-assessment was intended to give the players food for thought rather than to definitively label them, the players almost immediately began to refer to each other as "dominators," "accommodators" and the like.

We later learned that on an early-season road trip, a disagreement arose while at dinner and the discussion that followed included references to the players' conflict styles. Apparently, these references helped the players work through their disagreement and, in the ensuing lively discussion, the players shared their preferred conflict styles with each other and the coaching staff.

In the second session we also conducted an activity to introduce the concepts of interests and positions. We formed three groups and auctioned off 10 soccer balls. Each group

needed five balls to have a successful "season" and was given private information that allowed for an all-win resolution. The result was a lively discussion that highlighted the significance of interests and positions.

Finally, in the third and final session we introduced a practical model for resolving conflicts and completed several role plays to give them an opportunity to practice using the model in soccer-specific scenarios. Our goal was to provide a tool that the players could use to resolve their own conflicts and as a "mediator" both on the team and in their personal lives.

We spoke recently with coach Anson Dorrance and some of the players to get some feedback on the training. Maggie Tomecka, a senior midfielder, reported that "I learned that I was an 'accommodator' and that this was affecting my leadership. I decided I had to be more of a 'dominator,' especially on the field. I now talk more on the field, directing play, and have taken more responsibility for being a leader."

"This team had some exceptional chemistry and leadership this year," Dorrance remarked. "One of the elements that got us here was the conflict resolution training."

This program emphasized internal collaboration, resolving conflicts through an all-win approach, to contribute to the team's ability to compete at an elite level. We began this article by asking how the best college sports program gets better. In addition to spending countless hours of training on the field and in the weight room, this experience suggests value in building team chemistry and community through conflict resolution training.

The story has a happy ending. In December 2003, the UNC women's soccer team capped their undefeated season (27-0) with an unprecedented run through the NCAA tournament. The Tar Heels outscored their opponents 32-0 to claim their 18th national championship, their first since 2000. ☺

*Editor's note: Roy Baroff is an attorney and ACR member from Pittsboro, N.C., who works primarily as a mediator in litigated cases. He also conducts mediation and other conflict resolution training programs. He is still playing soccer. Bill Sanford is president of Team Achievement, a consulting and training firm based in Raleigh, N.C. He works with athletes and coaches to improve performance through leadership development, team building and conflict resolution.*

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