

How to Form and Lead an Olympic Team

by Heinz Fallak



In this article, Mr. Heinz Fallak, 47 years old, chef de mission of the NOC for Germany's Olympic delegation, reveals various aspects of his role and his understanding of the task.

We are grateful to the NOC for Germany for authorising us to reproduce this useful article.

Let me start out by explaining the commitments involved in leading a team:

The persons in charge have, above all, a high-grade duty to look after all members of the team. In addition, there is the limited commitment of producing optimal conditions for the athletes during the stay of teams of the National Olympic Committee at the site of the Olympic Games, and that from the beginning of the trip to the final departure. On the basis of former experiences and our own conceptions, the following points are involved:

The creation of conditions for establishing and cultivating contacts of all team members with one another. The knowledge of one another, the personal acquaintance, the conversation and the unbiased meeting are the basis for the functioning social structure of a team creating an atmosphere of confidence and openness, if not even of security.

These personal contacts, this rubbing shoulders with one another are often able—beyond any formal competences and long-winded procedures—to render possible a quick assistance for everyone and a solution at short notice of any problems arising.

During the games, every discipline has its own team captain with competences in his special field. Apart from this, we proceed on the assumption that the active members of the Olympic special associations elect their team spokesmen. According to our conception, the team captains and the team spokesmen—together with the “Chef de Mission” and his closest collaborators—should be responsible for leading the team in a wider sense of the word, not only dealing with technical and organizational problems but also discussing all questions and problems arising in the course of daily briefings.

The experiences of former Olympic Games have shown that problems will certainly arise of a political, sport-political or special nature affecting the whole team or main parts of it as well as its public appearance and reputation. These important questions must be jointly discussed and decided. This creates more security for everyone. The briefings, however, also serve for the handing out of information as to topical decisions, of instructions and pointers from the International Olympic Committee, the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games, the administration of the Olympic village and of possible decisions arrived at by the National Olympic Committee and the persons responsible at individual team levels. These briefings should also deal with special problems possibly arising in the individual sections of the team.

The members of our Olympic team have a claim to permanent assistance, as far as organization, administration and technical points are concerned. This applies to arranging the accommodation in the Olympic village and any relevant special measures, provisions, the allocation of training times including the times of departure and return to and from the competition sites, general traffic problems, mail delivery and reception, the marching-in ceremony, the representation of the team within the sphere of

Olympic sports, the settling of special problems, the assignment of doctors and masseurs and a safe information system, to mention only the most important points.

An essential point is the co-operation between the Olympic team and the representatives of press, radio and TV. The latter have claim to be informed as thoroughly as possible. This has to be safe-guarded first of all by the persons in charge of the team. The Olympic athletes and their coaches, on the other hand, have a claim to prepare for the competition with as little disturbance as possible. We therefore also have to look for possibilities of establishing contacts between the representatives of the media and the team as well as with the individual athletes, coaches and functionaries. Details as to this problem will still have to be discussed with the German sports press.

All these measures are supposed to relieve the Olympic athletes of every-day problems so that the last phase of preparation and the Olympic competition itself are not interfered with.

Here are still a few short references to the measures also applying to the team leadership in preparing for the Olympic Games.

The decisive prerequisite for an Olympic success is the conscientious and intensive preparation by the athlete himself.

The National Olympic Committee, the Federal Committee for Competitive Sport and the "Endowment German Sport Aid" will be generous in their assistance as to all social problems.

In nominating the Olympic team, the National Olympic Committee only has to concentrate and limit itself to the group of prospective finalists.

Now here is a highly interesting problem: how can the concentration of 200-300 lead-

ing sportsmen from 16-18 disciplines be understood as an integrated team?

Within the team, we find different approaches as to sport. This heterogeneous group includes three sections: individual sport, competitive sport and several types of team sport. The team also comprises the team leaders of the associations as well as coaches, doctors, masseurs and auxiliary technical staff. The responsible organizers think that it is highly desirable and possible to understand our Olympic team not only as the sum total of many sportsmen but also as a homogeneous group in which all have the same interest: an Olympic success. Such an approach by the team should also have a decisive influence on the stimulation and motivation of the athletes.

Let us submit a few reflections as to all that: The members of an Olympic team are linked to one another by language, history, culture, people, state and nation as well as by the national sport organizations responsible for them. These linking elements affect each individual consciously or unconsciously and also influence the way they behave in a team. This is why he cannot withdraw from the team: on the contrary, he should identify himself with it consciously and out of his own free will. This is no recourse to a national approach trying to keep away from the Olympic teams of other countries. Even accepting the Olympic idea of trying to be friends with others, one cannot simply give up one's own identity.

The public expects of "its" leading sportsmen and especially of an Olympic team to produce one victory after another, more in any case than all the other teams. We need only remember the comparisons made again and again between the balance-sheets of successes scored by the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany in addition to all the commentaries on the subject. Such an expectation, however, also leads the public in-

terested in sport—at least two-thirds of our population—to identify itself with such a team. We all know how welcome such an identification of the public with the leading sportsmen is but that it can also be very depressing for sportsmen in the case of defeat. In the past, the leaders of the German sports movement have again and again clearly pointed out that every leading sportsman must enjoy a maximum of individuality and free decision. He must know, however, that the nomination to a team also entails a certain social duty: he must be a “useful” team member. This approach has nothing to do with the fact that we do not share the frequently expressed opinion of the public that sportsmen and associations should prove how every penny received from public funds was turned into so and so many successes. There is a duty on the part of the sports organizations, of course, to handle public funds carefully and with a sense of responsibility. We must reject demands, however, that financial aids—without considering many other components—must be balanced by medals.

Watching post-war Olympic Games has led us to the assumption that the awareness of being a member of a “discipline-transcending” team can represent an immediate support and assistance for every single athlete, a non-prescribed motivation for success. This doubtlessly also contains an important social component not to be overlooked in our country too, as far as the entire development of the Olympic idea is concerned. The Olympic athletes are the thin top of the iceberg of all competitive sportsmen in the Federal Republic of Germany. By way of their performances but also by their social and ethical behaviour, they set the standards—apart from the rules and regulations of sport—for the rating of sport by the people, by the young generation and the public, and that also compared to other spheres of human inter-relations and human culture. Olympic athletes—in the classical sense of the Olympic idea—are

decisive upholders of culture whose existence could not be imagined, however, if they did not have a recognized community on which to rely. Does this not mean that they, in turn, bear a responsibility together with such a community?

We therefore address the cordial request to athletes, functionaries and all other members of the teams of Innsbruck and Montreal to examine this approach critically, to stand by it and to introduce it as an idea into the Olympic team.

How should the final conclusion from these deliberations sound?

Nobody must or should be forced to state his loyalty to the team compulsorily, formally or by outside pressure. Everybody should express his loyalty to the team out of his own well-founded conviction. In a team, every single one of us lives in inescapable social and community relations and obligations which he helps to create and support but which, in turn, also support him, which he feels bound to. In the last analysis, this loyalty to his team is a social and self-determined responsibility.

H.F.

