

The **'Perfect'** TEAM

**Looking
for the
perfect
team?**



Jojo Pridemore



You might as well be searching for the Holy Grail...

How often have you heard of a team who's had a big argument and broken up before, during or immediately after Nationals, having already spent an exorbitant amount of money? Most of the time this could have been avoided by simple communication, honesty and a little bit of compromise from the outset. Instead, the 'volcano effect' takes hold and petty grievances, built up over the course of the year, come to an ugly head, usually at an important and stressful event like Nationals.

Quite often, a couple of months down the line, the issue that causes the break-up seems pretty minor. But it's an all-too-common practice in skydiving,

and one that detracts from teams and individuals being able to perform at their best. Most teams require a minimum of two years to even scratch the surface of their full potential. It takes time for teams to gel to the extent that they have true communication, anticipation and knowledge of working together. But this all-pervasive attitude, which makes it acceptable to break up a team over somewhat insignificant differences, prevents the sport and individual skydivers from growing and progressing. It's the syndrome of seeking the 'perfect' team, which has become so commonplace in skydiving that we could almost be forgiven for thinking it's acceptable.

By **Gary Beyer**
World & National Champion
AIRSPPEED (96-01)



Simon Ward



Airspeed at the US Nationals, photo by Wendy Smith

What is the 'perfect' team?

Most competitive skydivers have an idea of what the 'perfect' team is. They look at teams like the *Golden Knights*, *Airspeed*, *XL* and *VMax*, see these teams communicating and performing well, and make the assumption that, to some degree, team members are virtual clones of each other. They never see individuals disagreeing or arguing, and believe these must be 'perfect' teams comprised of 'perfect' skydiving individuals with 'perfect' personalities. They imagine how great it would be to be part of a team like this and that their own problems stem from being unable to replicate this perceived perfection in their own teams.

Because of this unrealistic expectation, too many talented skydivers waste their time not training with a team at all. There's nothing worse than not training – in fact, some of my steepest learning curves have come from being part of what could be described as 'dysfunctional' teams.

In a similar way, teams waste time by constantly replacing 'flawed' team members in search of the 'perfect' team dynamic; instead they should be working together, getting over personality differences to achieve a common goal, which is performing at the team best.

It may come as a shock but...

...there is no perfect team!

The truth is that on any team, individuals have their own ideas, flaws and times of stress – and often disagree with their teammates. Our unique qualities and imperfections make us part of this diverse human race; differences are inevitable. I can't think of a more diverse group of people than *Airspeed 8* – our disagreements ranged from how many jumps to do, to physical training and jumpsuit colours.

Despite this, I often hear how up-and-coming jumpers idealise the top teams and think they always get along perfectly with each other. The result is that when a disagreement naturally occurs on their own team, they assume it's an inherent, insurmountable fault and subsequently break up or switch members. Differences like this are to be expected; they are part and parcel of team training, no matter what level you're at.

A reply I often hear to this is, “*Yeah, but we're not Airspeed!*”, implying it's easier to deal with team disagreements and personality conflicts when you're a professional team; if you have to put up with it for 'work', then somehow you can. But when non-pro teams nowadays are spending between £1,000 and £10,000 per person per year, it seems like a few minor differences could be worth dealing with for longer than just one season! More to the point, there's really no alternative: if you want to perform you have to deal!

It's easy for teams to think their issues are unique and that problems can't be resolved. However, it is most likely that the individuals are not willing to work out their issues. Usually the problem is nothing more than the result of someone's need to express themselves and this, in turn, being taken the wrong way. Problems like this could have been resolved months earlier with the input of a good coach or by using truthful 'pass the rock' sessions where team members get the opportunity to vent and communicate openly.

Teams need to realise that what they're going through is normal; conflict is part of a natural evolution for every team. Every single team goes through conflicts. The difference between a successful team and a failing team is that the former works out their differences whereas the failing team does not. It's not a matter of individuals being unable to resolve their conflicts – it's simply that they are unwilling. *Airspeed* has gone through few big decisions without some pretty heated opinions being cast around the room.

Because every team goes through the same cycles of development, it's worth outlining what those cycles are, so they know what to expect. One way of looking at how teams grow and mature is to use Bruce Tuckman's 'forming, storming, norming, performing' model*.

Stage 1: Forming The honeymoon phase

When most teams join up, everyone gets along. Team members are excited about the new team and keen to get started. This is known as the honeymoon phase. Most skydivers are jubilant that they actually have a team to skydive with, morale is high and negative personality traits are kept in check. It's very important in the 'forming' stage to get an experienced coach for guidance and direction. Many teams also benefit from having a team leader and this is the time to appoint them. You should also spend quite a bit of time discussing your goals and aspirations as honestly as possible, as this will avoid problems down the line. It is very frustrating being in a team where people have completely different agendas; one wants to go to the World Meet and another just wants to swoop at the end of the dive!

Levels of commitment in terms of number of jumps, tunnel, money and time should be discussed as a priority. While not every member of the team will have exactly the same objectives, as long as they are in the same ballpark the team can succeed. It's important to come to a workable compromise and move on. Rejecting a team whose goals don't precisely match yours and ending up not jumping is much worse than doing only 200 team jumps instead of the 300 you wanted! Individual long term goals can be different. It's fine if one person eventually wants to become a World Champion and another just wants to compete for a couple of years before moving on to other things, as long as the collective team goal is agreed upon and compatible for the duration of the agreed term of the team. I refer to this as 'buying into the contract'.

The key agreements of this 'contract' are that individuals:-

- Agree to work together to achieve the common goal.
- Agree to communicate honestly with each other, often by having regular 'pass the rock' sessions.
- Value their differences; they recognise that every person has a different background and personality, so will have different ways of relating and behaving.
- Seek to gain insider learning about their impact on the team, ie, thinking before speaking, and recognising that what they say has the potential to impact the team in a negative (or positive) way. Individuals should be responsible and accountable for their actions and words.

Stage 2: Storming Guess what? The honeymoon is over!

This is the frustrating stage of learning with the team; individual quirks start to come out and team members vie for position as they attempt to establish themselves. Cliques can also start to form within the team – questions and uncertainties come up and the 'contract' itself may be questioned. This is where most teams sow the seeds of inevitable self-destruction. Simply put, this is the stage where arguments might occur over block techniques, individual performance and styles of relating. Even table manners, personal hygiene and fashion sense can all come under attack! It's important to realise that this is natural human behaviour in a goal-orientated team environment. It's also important for individuals and the team to reiterate the goals they set and believe that the team outcome is more important than individual needs. At this stage, outside help in the form of a coach experienced in dealing with team dynamics is invaluable.

I've heard more times than I'd like to recollect, “*I guess I'm just not a team-player!*”. I don't believe this. That individual is just not willing to compromise or never bought into the 'contract' in the first place. People who are described as 'team players' are just more willing than others to suppress their need to be heard all the time. I believe there's no such thing as a natural team player. Anyone has the ability to become a team player as long as they are prepared, at times, to put aside their own ego for the good of the team. Knowing that the 'storming' stage is normal and can be overcome by focusing and refocusing on the agreed team 'contract' is critical. There's no knowing when the 'storming' will occur or how long it will last. However the sooner a team recognises it and accepts it as normal, the sooner the team will leave this phase behind.

Stage 3: Norming Congratulations, you've got further than most teams

This is the phase where the team has recognised individuality as a strength and has matured as a group. Commitment and unity are strong. It could feel similar to the honeymoon phase but, instead of being based on enthusiasm alone, it marks a time of personal growth and acceptance. Roles and responsibilities are clear and welcomed: the team's everyday interactions have become like clockwork, and the daily training routine, including team meetings and 'pass the rock' sessions, is more instinctive and needs no prompting.

It's important to realise the individuals themselves have not fundamentally changed and disagreements will still occur. However teammates have come to understand that having their personal needs met is secondary to team growth. The same disagreements teams had in the 'storming' stage suddenly seem less important and are dealt with more quickly and in a more mature manner.

Stage 4: Performing The fun part!

In this stage the team has a high degree of autonomy and will be running like a well-oiled machine. The team is able to focus on performance; personal issues that would have held them back previously as a distraction have melted into the background and become irrelevant. This is also the phase where individual relationships and trust are consolidated within the group. On a personal level, team members trust that each one will always act for the good of the team – communication between piece partners is open and honest. In the sky, everything falls into an instinctual rhythm, more so than a forced or conscious act. Trust in individuals' ability runs high, allowing team members to be sure that others will also fly their slots with confidence. This in turn allows for faster keys, more confident moves and, ultimately, more points.

Teams should expect that disagreements will still occur – even arguments – but now issues are resolved within the team positively. It's also important to recognise that, even though a team has reached the 'performing' stage, teammates may not be the best of friends. However they trust and respect each other because of the understanding that they are all focused on the common goal, ie, the 'contract'. This phase is more easily attainable than most people think. It's the most fun part of training and the pay-offs are numerous. Individual growth, realisation of your potential, a load more points and the best skydiving you'll ever do are just some of them. It's a choice that anyone can make.

Gary Beyer
garybeyer1@aol.com



Willy Beckers

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Mike McGowan

Joe Predernann



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