

SELF-EDUCATION OF PLAYERS - the key to the success of the SWE handball team



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BACKGROUND

Sweden is a small country with only 9 million inhabitants, but Swedish communities are strong in promoting athletics. Sport is important to the average Swedish person. Sports have also been an important instrument in designing the famous Swedish welfare system. Therefore, Swedish society at large has been strongly influenced by athletic ideals. The state and local governments spend large sums of money on sport halls and stadiums to give people a chance to try different kinds of sports.

For example, Sweden has the most ice stadiums per capita in the world.

Handball is the third biggest sport in Sweden and there are more girls playing handball than boys.

In terms of acres, Sweden is just as big as Spain, which has 40 million inhabitants. From north to south, Sweden extends over a distance of 2200 km, which of course sometimes creates communication problems. Handball is played from Kiruna in the north to Ystad in the south but is concentrated in the southern and central parts of Sweden.

In handball, specialization takes place at a less early age than in ice hockey and football, where the kids are sometimes forced to specialize when they are only ten years old.

This means that handball can develop at its own pace and therefore does not lose talents on their way through puberty.

HISTORY

Sweden scored great successes in the fifties, winning the 1954 and 1958 World Championships and silver in 1962. Then Sweden lost its winning formula and

was left in the shadow of other nations. The Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Romania had taken over. That Sweden lost its foothold was attributable, according to the author, to the fact that the other countries had developed better training methods. In other words: Sweden trained too little and not effectively enough!!

THE BEGINNING

The Swedish comeback started at about the same time when West Germany overcame the East European dominance and won a longed-for gold medal in the World Championship of 1978. Sweden was left far behind, placing 11th. From that point on, things could only get better.

Sweden failed to qualify for the 1980 OG in Moscow, where the GDR beat the Soviet Union in a highly dramatic final. And while the German goalkeeper hero Wolfgang Schmidt was being celebrated, Sweden was preparing for the 1982 WC in West Germany.

Sweden believed that the time was right for the West to reclaim the leadership. With countries like West Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and the newly-born handball country Spain, the prospects were certainly bright.

But the 1982 WC proved another failure for most of the western countries with the sole exception of Denmark, which won a sensational fourth place. Given the overall eastern dominance with the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Poland in the top three, there was no need for further comments.

Would Sweden and the rest of the West ever manage a comeback?

THE COMEBACK OF THE NEW SWEDEN

After the debacle in West Germany, the Swedish Handball Federation embarked upon change.

First of all, a change of coach for the national team. The new man in this job was Roger Carlsson from Gothenburg. He soon realized the players' desperate need to embrace new training methods and adapt to the requisite volume of training. Several of the older players were unable to cope with the new training standards and left the national team, providing room for a new young and highly focused generation.

With the help of the Swedish athletic and weight lifting coaches and using their training methods, Roger Carlsson created a new climate supporting the return to the world elite. But where to find the players?

**To have a vision and a goal is easy
but to make things happen is difficult**

Roger Carlsson started looking for new players. And he found the young and promising Björn Jilsen, a goal scorer who had made a name for himself at the age of 22 in the 1982 WC; a player that Sweden had been looking for for a long time.

The undersigned was 20 years old then and spent the whole season with the national team but did not make it to the WC himself.

Mats Olsson, a fine young goalkeeper, had his championship debut in 1982.

Roger Carlsson understood that he had found some starting material on which he could build something great.

**Players who can subject themselves
to hard training and adhere to
military discipline**

The climate at the Swedish training camps changed. The young players' dedication to their sport put pressure on their older team mates.

After two years, the whole national team had changed. And the new generation quickly accepted the new rules. **The team was more important than**

individual stars. No divas. And the hard training methods were there to stay.

THE PLAY

Swedish handball tactics were modelled on the characteristics of the great East European handball nations: the Yugoslavs' and Romanians' cross moves, the tall Soviet players, and the physical stamina of the players from the GDR. A mix that was certain to lead to success.

Our defence was going to be a 6-0 system relying on the fine Swedish goalkeeper tradition and a well-balanced cooperation between the goalkeeper and the defence. This is still perceived as a Swedish characteristic.

The team spirit was strong and the will to sacrifice everything for the team's rather than for individual success firmly established. This created a formula without stars and a team willing to do hard work in defence and in the training sessions.

Roger Carlsson realized the benefits of utilizing the players' intelligence both on and off the court. He encouraged the players to take part in the development of new offence and defence tactics and to also share in decision-making on social activities.

**Because of the boycott of the 1984
OG in Los Angeles, Sweden was
given a wildcard and the chance to
qualify for the 1986 WC in
Switzerland.**

Sweden qualified for the 1986 WC after a dramatic last-second free throw by Björn Jilsen in the decisive game against Spain.

In the run-up to the 1986 WC and the 1988 OG, Sweden had a troupe of players who were in better shape than ever before. Their physical test results were 30-40% better than in previous tests and tournaments.

The team consisted of great new talents such as the speedy winger Erik Hajas and ball virtuoso Pierre Thorsson. The tactical development continued. The national youth team delivered more world class acts. Magnus Wislander, Ola Lindgren, and Staffan Olsson all joined Roger Carlsson's forces.

periodical

The classic final in the 1985 YWC against the Soviet Union furnished the definitive proof: **Sweden was ready.**

The players assumed responsibility for their own physical training and team spirit pressure was huge.

" I must train hard and become a better player because the others do"

A true Swedish winning formula.

Roger Carlsson resigned as a national team coach after an honourable fourth place in the 1986 WC, defeated by GDR 23-24 in the bronze game, and a fifth place in the 1988 OG.

Over six years he had laid the groundwork and gained acceptance of the idea of individual responsibility and the need for and understanding of a functional collective system. He left a team that was back among the 4 or 5 best nations in the world.

THE GOLDEN YEARS

The Swedish Handball Federation decided to replace Mr. Carlsson with Bengt Johansson. Bengt was 46 years old, had coached HK Drott, Halmstad for more than 10 years and had played for Sweden himself 72 times. The undersigned, who had been trained by Mr. Johansson in the 1979-80 season in Drott, had the first personal talk on this matter with him on the flight back to Sweden from the 1988 OG.

" My first thought was that he was the complete opposite of Roger Carlsson and a bit confused."

For a great personality like Bengt Johansson there was no middle ground between Success or Chaos. These were my words in 1988 and if you have followed the game you know the result!

Bengt's leadership style put individual intelligence in focus and his social skills created harmony within the group. He did everything to develop the Swedish tactical game in both defence and offence. The various moves were assigned names drawn from his strange dialect and his vibrant personality made life on and off the court an enjoyable experience for everyone.

The 1990 WC in Czechoslovakia was to be Bengt Johansson's first championship and for the first time Sweden had a realistic chance of winning a medal!

And we did!! Sweden won a truly dramatic final against their old rivals from the Soviet Union. This triumph marked the beginning of an unprecedented winning streak covering the 12 years between 1990 and 2002, with medals in each championship except the 1996 ECh in Sevilla. Unbeatable!

During this period, Sweden won the following medals: WC gold in 1990 and 1999. ECh gold in 1994,1998 and 2000. WC silver in 1997 and 2001. OG silver in 1992,1996 and 2000. WC bronze in 1993 and 1995.

The starting line-up in the 1990 final: Erik Hajas, Per Carlen, Pierre Thorsson, Ola Lindgren, Magnus Wislander, Staffan Olsson, and the goalkeepers Mats Olsson and Tomas Svensson.

I think most people will agree with me that this was one of the best teams ever in the history of modern handball. The rise from number 11 in 1982 to World Champion in 1990 was the result of the development of game tactics and physical strength, better leadership, patience, freedom coupled with responsibility and, most importantly of all, the observation of the golden rule that every player in the team has equal value.

THE NEXT ERA

Everything comes to an end. The 2003 WC brought a painful awakening for Swedish handball. A team weakened by many injuries and poor preparation finished a devastating 13th.

During the Swedish team's golden years many of its competitors had studied the Swedish model, including details such as its defence and offence moves.

For some time, Sweden had been able to keep up the pace, develop the game further and stay on the winning track.

But over the years the other nations also adopted the Swedish game style, which they had picked up in the many matches they played against us. Thus Sweden lost its unique position.

Even on the club and national team levels, coaches across Europe copied the Swedish style of leadership

with its reliance on personal responsibility and possibility for players to use their influence.

In the 2004 ECh Sweden lost vital games and missed both the medals and the qualification to the 2004 OG in Athens. This is a great tragedy for Swedish handball but also for world handball, as spectators will not be able watch the Swedish stars in the OG. The era of Bengt Johansson is over. Magnus Wislander and Staffan Olsson have most likely had their last appearances in the Swedish national team. The German triumph was both logical and well deserved after the two previous defeats in the finals of the 2002 ECh and the 2003 WC. Slovenia's struggle leading to an impressive second place and its first-ever medal likewise demonstrated the potential of a handball family in the process of growth.

I can detect a Swedish influence in the play that carried Germany to victory. For example, Germany played a Swedish-style 6-0 defence and exhibited the same kind of team spirit and warrior mentality as Sweden had done in the 1990s. I am convinced that we witnessed the birth of a new handball super power in the 2004 ECh: **Germany!**

THE FUTURE

The Swedish future will be built on players born 1982-83, who won the 2003 YWC in Brazil. They have been well educated under the Swedish system and the unique model which has been handed down from generation to generation since the 1980s. Sweden will hire a new coach for the national team in 2004. What Sweden now needs is a coach who is able to initiate a re-launch of the Swedish programme, to stop and to analyze. To pick up the training methods of the 1980s and rebuild the team spirit and the devotion to the sport. Sweden needs a coach with the strong sides of both Roger Carlsson and Bengt Johansson. Sweden needs once again to study those nations who are winning medals now. How do they train and how do they play? In other words: why is Germany the European Champion?

THE SWEDISH MODEL:

To create a successful team requires a strong leader and a clear strategy.

To find leaders/players ready to adopt the will to win, who are able to cooperate in a group and who are prepared to take on a great deal of responsibility.

To study ideas pursued by other teams and to develop them so that they fit one's own organization.

To be patient.

To make changes to everything in an ongoing process.

To be able to say - "I'm sorry".

Handball