

## Team Chemistry in EMASS

We have all seen teams that performed better than expected with the skills they have on their roster. And we have all seen teams that looked great on paper, but underperformed through a long season or the playoffs. When a team wins many more games in a season than expected, you can rest assured that they had fun. Did they **have fun** because they *won*? Sure, but more likely, they **won** because they *had fun* playing together because of a positive team chemistry. In team sports like senior softball, having fun together, i.e., good team chemistry, leads to a much more competitive team and a better win-loss record.

We work hard to balance teams throughout the year. Initial roster decisions are mostly based on past performance. Actual performance of a team can vary quite a bit based on several factors including: injuries, execution, luck, player skill increases/decreases, good/bad management and team chemistry. Most of us can observe and judge all these factors relatively well, but **team chemistry**, is less tangible and hard to quantify.

I recently listened to a podcast by Joan Ryan on the topic of team chemistry. She published a book entitled: *Intangibles: Unlocking the Science and Soul of Team Chemistry*. This short article summarizes what I learned on that podcast.

The skills inventory of a team is a static description of the players, their skills and the coverage across positions. On paper, and before teams start playing, this roster assessment is **potential** energy. Team chemistry is the dynamic interactions among the team. Team chemistry is **kinetic** energy: how they play together, how they get along (or don't) on the field and on the bench, how they respect (or don't) one another, how they communicate (or don't) with one another, and how they win (or lose) in a sportsmanlike manner.

The author identifies seven classes of characters (she calls these archetypes) you can find on most teams that have great team chemistry:

1. The Kid: The rookie or new player who is in awe of playing on this team with these teammates.
2. The Enforcer: The player who holds people accountable for the standards and norms of the team.
3. The Buddy: The friendly player who ensures that everyone feels included and welcome on the team and all of its functions.
4. The Sage: The player with wisdom who is trusted to settle debates of strategy, history, and life.
5. The Warrior: The HHA player who gives 100% in every situation.
6. The Spark Plug: The player that can get things started and change the state of the team mood.
7. The Jester: The lovable weissenheimer who can use humor to keep things fun and positive.

Notice that all of the above are defined in terms of players, not the manager. Managers are important to team chemistry, but the main ingredients come from the team, not it's leader. The managers of teams with great team chemistry had two essential characteristics. The first was acceptance. This means accepting the players for who they were, not who the manager wanted them to be. In other words, the manager worked with the hand they were dealt and didn't try to force players into roles they weren't good at. The second characteristic was personal connections. This means the manager created a connection with each player that was not just about his team role, but had interest and understanding of his outside-the-team life like family, job, illnesses, likes, dislikes, etc.

The author introduced two other important concepts that can improve team chemistry or reduce team chemistry by a quantum leap:

- Super-carriers: These are usually B players (i.e., not the strongest performers or weaker performers) who have good broad skills and talent stack across most of the seven archetypes.
- Super-disruptors: These are players at any level who just don't have the sportsmanship gene, or the team player DNA, and a corrosive personality that alienates some players and exudes negativity.

Our Division Coordinators take team chemistry into consideration, but such an intangible parameter is still difficult to forecast as teams are formed and start playing together. They might know that Fred Mertz loves to play with Ricky Ricardo and Ralph Kramden doesn't play well with Ed Norton, and Oscar Madison will compete with Felix Unger for the starting pitcher position if they are on the same team. However, when we shuffle up teams every year in EMASS, most of these interaction patterns aren't well understood and with 100s of players, we could never accommodate them all. Nevertheless, our Division Coordinators take this into consideration as best they can.

This short paper introduces the concept of team chemistry. It is the tip of a larger iceberg. We hope more of our players can appreciate its importance and the challenges faced by our division coordinators and managers as they work to balance the teams across a division.

**What are you doing to add to the chemistry of your team?**