

Look at It as a Game

Wayne Turk



Everyone uses sports analogies at times. FedEx even ran a series of commercials poking fun at football analogies in business. This article takes the analogy process a step or two farther (admittedly farther into the absurd at times), and takes a somewhat lighthearted look at how project management is like a number of sports. Some are pretty obvious (like relating the PM to a quarterback) and some are a stretch. While this isn't a serious comparison, there are grains of truth scattered throughout.

Team Sports

Let's kick it off (to start the clichés early) with football, now arguably our national sport. As with all of the team sports, the most obvious analogy is that project personnel have to function as a team. Everyone must play their position to the best of their ability to get the job done. If anyone drops the ball, it is a setback; although it can be recoverable (all puns are intended, by the way). While every team member plays a role, the PM is the quarterback of the project team, calling the plays and directing the players.

The goal of the game is to score and win. A good game plan makes scoring easy. There are a number of parts to the game plan for your project—the project management plan, the quality assurance plan, the configuration management plan, the schedule, and many more. But the ball takes a lot of strange bounces, so you need a risk management plan for contingencies.

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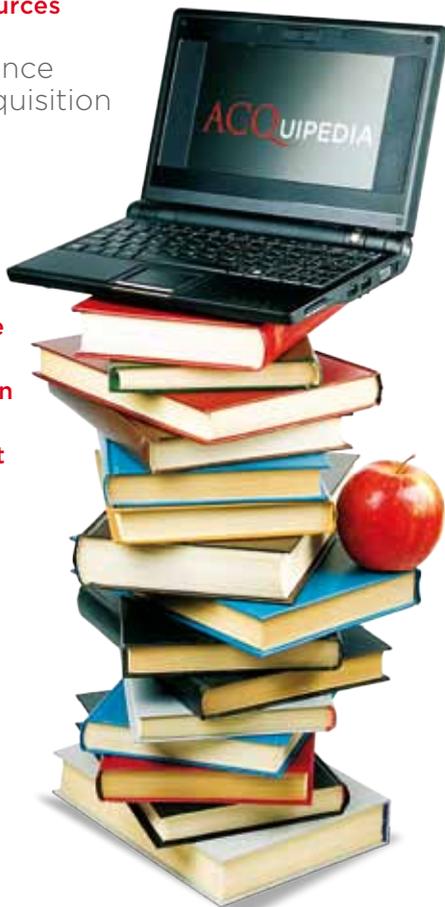
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During the game, there will be mistakes. We'll call these penalties. Some are major and some are minor. A few will be overlooked or declined. The goal of the team is to minimize the penalties, especially the major ones. Good coaching and careful execution by all team members keeps the penalties down and can lead to a score (a deliverable or milestone). Scoring enough wins the game. Good scouting of the opponents (we'll cover the opponents later) and knowing the rules of the game are critical. But even without penalties, sometimes you have to drop back and punt when things don't go right—starting over with a revised game plan.

Another team sport where the analogies fit is baseball. If you don't know what you are doing or you aren't careful, you can easily strike out, especially when someone throws you a curve ball. Some of the common curve balls are changes in requirement, decreased resources, or revised schedules. Once in a while you can knock one over the wall. Good processes can help you get those homers. But you can drop an easy fly ball or commit an error if you aren't careful. Monitoring the schedule and doing earned value management can help you get the easy outs and ensure that all of the bases are covered. Multiple base hits (meeting suspenses) or even bunts (good decisions) can put you in the winner's circle.

Let's look at basketball now. There are people who will be blocking your shots (intentionally or unintentionally). Some of them may even be people on your own team. Good communication with contracting and legal, among others, can help prevent those blocked shots. As a PM, you aren't going to get many free throws, even when you are fouled, so take advantage when you can. You have to pick up the pace and drive for the basket as time is running out. Try to do your work and maintain the schedule so that you don't have to make that three-pointer at the buzzer.

I could go on and on, but that's enough on team sports. You can make any team sport fit as an analogy to project management. I deliberately left out hockey and lacrosse because any time that you give people sticks and require pads to protect them, you are in trouble. And in project management, you normally don't have pads and others have all of the sticks.

Individual Sports

Let's turn now to some of the individual sports and see how the analogies fit. We can start with boxing. Someone is always pounding on you and if you are not careful you can end up knocked out or down for the count. Keeping your gloves up by being aware of everything going on in the project will protect you. Having good people in your corner also helps. By the end of the fight, you are going to be battered and bruised, but winning, especially if it's a knock out, makes you forget all of the pain. It is the same with a project.

Going to a more gentle sport, how about golf? We can start with the clubs. They are your tools. You have different clubs for different shots—and as a PM you have many different tools

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available. These include EVMS, a requirements management system, risk management, project schedules, etc. Golf is a game of consistency, the same swing over and over. With your project, consistency comes through good processes. But like in golf, sometimes there is that unusual circumstance where you have to change your swing, pick a different club or adjust your stance. Making your processes flexible and tailorable is analogous.

Even the best golfers in the world hit bad shots and get in trouble at times. When that happens, they try to hit the right recovery shot. Sometimes that is just a chip back into the fairway and it might even be back towards the tee. Sometimes it is the spectacular shot through a small opening that ends up on the green. PMs have to do that, too. If you end up in the woods (some type of problem), usually the best play is to get back to the middle (a revised schedule) and move on from there. On rare occasions there may be a way to hit that spectacular recovery shot, but look at the risk/reward ratio. If it fails, you may really be in the hazard then. That knowledge of when to try each comes with experience. It is also helpful to take the advice of your caddie (your team members). Just because you hit a good shot once, it doesn't mean that you will do it every time. Just try to keep advancing the ball closer to the hole.

How about running? A previous boss said it best when he said to "first worry about finishing, then worry about finishing first." This is especially true when your project is a marathon. Set the right pace and check your progress. Again, EVMS can help. Even when you "hit the wall" you have to keep going. With a project, like with running, a minor problem can turn into a big one if it is not taken care of early. At the other end of the spectrum are the sprints. In these you have to get off to a good start right out of the blocks. Good plans and processes can help. You have to go all out on the short projects to make sure that you hit the tape first. But don't worry about setting records, just finish.

And then there is swimming. The rules and problems are similar to running. For instance, it is easy to make a false start when the starting gun sounds. Comparing swimming and project management directly—you always feel like you are under water and trying to get your breath is tough. A consistent stroke is required (those pesky processes again).

General Sports Analogies

There are many things about project management and sports in general that are very similar. For instance, tension and adrenalin are common to both. You can burn out if you aren't careful. Good coaching is critical. The PM frequently serves as the coach (as well as the quarterback) to his team. It is up to him to make sure that everyone does their jobs and all follow the right game plan. The game plan (all of the plans that you need for a project) has to be right and appropriate.

In both, you have opponents; schedule/cost/quality are your biggest opponents in project management. And they are tough ones. You are always going against the clock, working under a salary cap (funding constraints), and striving for the winning outcome. Experience helps. That includes your own experience and that of your team. You are looking for both the veteran players and the rookies with the skills and the right attitude. You need both to build a winning team.

A loss can devastate you. Whether it is the loss of a team member or the loss of the game, either can damage your record, but neither is the end of the world. You can rebound from either through hard work. Both sports and project management have rules. Breaking the rules can hurt you or keep the team from winning. Losing your temper can get you thrown out of the game.

Conclusion

Sports analogies are a common everyday part of our language. They are apropos for project management. While this article took a fairly lighthearted look at the sports comparison and clichés as they apply to project management, hopefully there were some nuggets of truth and good advice hidden within. Think about it: The good coaching, the right game plan, keeping the goal line in sight, the right mix of veterans and rookies, the potential penalties, playing the right shot at the right time, overcoming the inevitable fumble or dropped ball, winning over your opponents—all of those have a place in your job as a PM, just with different words.

Now it is up to you and the team. Go out there and put it between the uprights!

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