



**THE
CAMOGIE
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An Cumann Camógaíochta

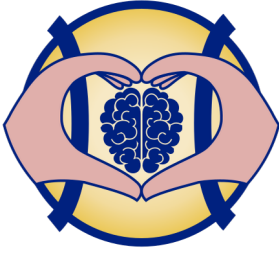


THE CAMOGIE ASSOCIATION

PLAYER WELFARE

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Player Welfare



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BRINGING ON A SUB-CONSCIOUS

My mam, Mary Ryan, was the best and greatest Camogie player to ever grace a Dublin jersey. She won every medal going including 6 All Ireland's in a row where she played at full-back, midfield and in the forward line. I do not know of any other players in Camogie or any other elite level sport that have played the role of a Swiss army knife in all these positions, delivered all of these medals and did it over such a period of time. The GOAT. Here endite my sermon on why my mother is the greatest of all time and there is no way at all that I could possibly be **biased**.

There's no way that I could be! I mean just because she's my mam doesn't mean anything. She's got the medals. Sure I know that I wasn't there to see any of it and no, I haven't diligently checked up on other players, nor have I asked anyone else for their thoughts, and I of course won't be looking for anything that can sway my decision. I'm happy with what I think. End of....!



In fairness though, that's the thing about opinions – we've all got one, we like ours and we think other people's stinks. There's probably a metaphor in there somewhere if we look hard enough. Truthfully though, I am of course biased. We all are in some way. It is part of our nature, and it has helped us to evolve but what really is bias, and why am I writing about it here in particular?

Well, if bias is something that is inherent in all of us then it is therefore inherent in Gaelic Games. It's there in our coaching, our team selections and how we approach our relationships within the game. So let's start at the basics. What is bias?

Simply put, bias is the opinion we make up about someone or something before we've met them. A quick search online and you'll find about 18 different types of bias, each making up part of our psyche. They inform the way we think, the way we do things and act as special factors that guide our behaviour. Our minds are fantastic instruments and they have developed tools and shortcuts that allow us to process information more quickly. We have a conscious mind and a subconscious mind and it is the latter one that does most of the work. The trouble however, is that it uses shortcuts and this can lead to flawed opinions and therefore flawed decision making.

If we are applying this logic to coaching then we need to be aware that all coaches are biased in some way. Every coach has a favourite player although, good luck getting anyone to admit to it. The best coaches pride themselves on giving everyone in the squad a fighting chance of making the team but that process is never completely a level playing field. There's always something swaying them one way or the other. We're all accustomed to putting people into boxes and let's be honest, it's just easier that way. However, we should go easy on each other. Coaches and players, who are both caught up in this subconscious labelling game, shouldn't beat themselves up about it. It's not about feeling guilty or ashamed; it's more about understanding that this categorisation is hardwired into our human minds, helping us to survive in the past.



We've known about cognitive biases for a few decades now, but the full (and often negative) impact is only becoming apparent recently. There's an influx of players with diverse backgrounds entering both amateur and elite sports. Navigating through these complex, diverse teams and unlocking their incredible potential calls for a new breed of sports coach—one who sees diversity as an opportunity, not a roadblock. Enter unconscious bias, a significant roadblock in this journey.

Tackling this issue requires a collective effort to establish a fair coaching process. Realistically, our biases won't vanish overnight. However, coaches can undergo training to heighten their awareness and counteract unconscious biases when making decisions about hiring, determining starters, and assigning leadership responsibilities. It's a step-by-step process, one that is doable but also one that potentially can give you an edge.

If managers and coaches make decisions with limited exposure to players, they will rely on stereotypical info. What they think as opposed to what they know. Imagine a player joins a team from a big town or city, while the club prides itself on their local rural roots. Now, if the new player complains about something, it might unintentionally confirm the coaches' bias that they're just another arrogant soul from the city not following orders and think that they're entitled. Without even realising it, the coaches might start unconsciously pushing this player down the likability ladder each time a situation aligns with their initial biased opinion. The result? Less feedback, fewer one-on-one chats, and fewer chances for development. It's like a not-so-friendly cycle, and the coaches are often clueless about it. The culprit? Bias, lurking in the shadows of our consciousness.

Similarly in the other direction, research in the past decade has shown that we humans have this thing called "similarity bias," where we tend to favour those who are a lot like us. Coaches might filter new info and player profile to fit their preconceived notions, confirming what they thought initially (enter confirmation bias). Plus, there's this sneaky tendency to overestimate the abilities of players who are part of our group, side-lining the outsiders (hello, ingroup bias). That's a lot of new bias labels in the space of one paragraph. A bit complicated but you get the idea. Our brains fill in the gaps so that we can make decisions. They're using an ancient survival mechanism, helping us quickly sort friend from foe which is a bit mad to think about. Ancient survival techniques being used on your local Camogie pitch.... although when you say that out loud it doesn't sound too far-fetched.

Categorising people is a very useful skill, especially in today's chaotic sporting world but we need to be aware of it so we don't close off opportunities for ourselves and our teams. Which is all well and good but how do we actually hook this, stop it and be better?

Well first step is just being aware of it. Knowing that you may be under the influence of bias means that you're less likely to just go with your gut. Knowing is half the problem. Next is involving more people in the decision making process. Coaches should look for input from their team. Removing and minimising decisions that are based on single, biased opinions, ensures that players receive a more objective evaluation of their performance and potential. Pairing that with records or data advances this even further. Now I am not saying that we all need to turn to big data and start using AI bots to pick our teams but there is method to that kind of approach. Keeping a record of points scored, passes made, number of dispossessions, training sessions attended or whatever metrics matter to your team, will help you keep you on a definite path. This is a huge area of elite sports with thousands of sports and data analysts employed across the world – tracking not even the number of passes but the direction that they went, how long they were, how accurate they were, how productive they were and more. This isn't possible for local clubs to do but for coaches, even writing down a few notes during a match or a training session can build up into a powerful tool to gauge performance and help you identify who in the team may not be a star but is the one that keeps things moving and allows for the 'stars' to do the scoring.

For individuals, keeping notes or watching a video back with metrics in mind can help you see where you might improve but also give you more confidence in realising what you are already contributing to the team. Videos are actual recordings of the game as opposed to what you think happened during it.

For teams, knowing that data is being collected, even really informally can help them collectively understand the style and outputs that the coach is looking for. For example, knowing that the number of forward passes is being recorded means that you are more likely to attempt forward passes individually and collectively. So players will not only look to attempt the pass but get into the position to receive the pass from a teammate. Collectively we are looking to pass forward, make progress quicker up the pitch to get into positions to score. Deciding your metric can set the tone – especially if it is repeated and consistent.

All of this leads into how teams communicate and another great way to combat bias. There is no better way to tackle a stereotype than more exposure to the person or the group of people that they belong. The best coaches get to know the players and vice versa. You figure out what makes them tick. The more you know about each other the more that you come together as part of a team. Training sessions that include a bit of fun or a game often provide moments where you can learn something new about your teammate. Meeting for a coffee, a team night out or even having a collective chat after a great win or disappointing defeat lends itself to a stronger team ethic that a management can lead. If then, that coaching team is made up of a diverse group of cultures in terms of both sporting and background then you are giving your group the greatest chance of getting the best out of each other. Which is ultimately what we are looking for.



Like results, bias isn't solely the responsibility of just the players or just the coaches. There needs to be a collective effort. In fact, I would see it as vital for success that you do not see bias as a coaching error alone. Players' expectations need to be tempered as well. Players are just as prone to confirm their prejudiced thoughts about the coaching team and other players. Whether that be selective recall bias, where you remember particular events that confirm your preconceived thoughts or the self-serving bias (locus of control) where athletes attribute their successes to internal factors and their failures to external factors. It is never just the players or just the coaches it is always a mixture of both. The basis of a team culture of trust lies in authentic and open communication of different viewpoints and consistent feedback cycles i.e. having the chats! Talking with the group and being together. Often talked about but less seen. There will always be favourites and that's ok because it is natural but we do need to have systems in place that provide players with opportunities to succeed.

Success means different things to different groups but universally hard work and talent should provide anyone with an opportunity to achieve it rather than belonging to a particular group. If you can create those sorts of opportunities you will have clear pathways for people to achieve. That's good. People need clarity and if we understand why things are happening then we can get on board and move forward. It's not easy but it is worth it. Try out a new approach and see how you get on. Who knows maybe even someday you could be as good as the great, Mary Ryan or the team that she played with. I am definitely biased in that opinion but what did I say, knowing it is half the battle.



PHIL SMYTH is a physicist, engineer and science communicator with over 20 years' experience working across the world in STEM. You may know him from shows like Home School Hub, Ireland AM or his podcasts. Follow him on socials @philofscience or reach out on www.simplyscience.ie



Player Welfare and Inclusion Resources

Below are some of the resources which can be found on the Camogie Association website.

You can check them out at camogie.ie



Player Welfare Booklet Vol 1 & 2



Player Welfare Booklet Vol 3 & 4



Player Health Check Programme



Injury Prevention Programme



Self Care Series



Player Welfare Podcast



Player Safety and Helmets



Concussion Guidelines



Health and Wellbeing Information



Camogie Association Disability Inclusion Policy



Supporting Organisations contact information