

EXTRACT FROM TUG OF WAR ASSOCIATION HANDBOOK 2001

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ADVICE ON TRAINING A NEW TUG OF WAR TEAM

As the coach of a new team, you are advised to contact one of the Area Representatives for the area in which your team is based. The Area Representative can put you in touch with local people who will be only too pleased to give you sound advice. Names and addresses of the Area Representatives can be found in this handbook.

One of the great merits of Tug of War is that it is essentially a team event with each individual giving nothing but their best in unison and harmony with their colleagues. Tug of War has many brilliant teams but no individual stars. To those who desire to develop mind and muscle together with the true spirit of comradeship within the principles of sportsmanship, Tug of War affords such an opportunity.

In addition to the hard, physical effort and grit demanded by the individual there must be the highest order of self-discipline and cooperation in the interest of the team. This fact must be accepted if a Tug of War team worthy of the name is to be built and maintained.

ESSENTIAL EQUIPMENT

Every Tug of War team must possess a regulation size rope and have a suitable training ground. The training ground needs to be equipped with a gantry where the whole team can pull a weight up and down. The weight must have a clear movement of at least 8 metres. You should be able to vary the weight. It is important that gantries are properly constructed and subject to regular safety checks. You also need a suitable fixed point to which you can attach the rope. A static rope is very useful for getting novices to pull in the correct position. If you use a tree be sure to protect the bark.

ASSEMBLING A TEAM

In assembling people to form a team, it should be borne in mind that Tug of War is an exceedingly strenuous sport and training for it can be very physically demanding. The people recruited must therefore be definitely keen, hardworking and cheerful characters - and above all, willing volunteers. Persuasive methods will inevitably be used to recruit potential pullers, but it must not look as if they are being pressed into service. Anyone of surly disposition given to frequent grousing is much better left out as they will have a very bad effect on the others.

Tug of War is a sport that can accommodate pullers of all shapes and sizes, as long as they have plenty of grit and are prepared to put up with any amount of hard work.

TRAINING

Training should take place twice a week. Training a new Tug of War team is a gradual process and must not be rushed. If you introduce new pullers to a full training regime straight away, you run the risk of causing physical damage - if they stay that long!

During the first period of training (4 to 6 weeks) you should aim to get your new pullers "fit to train", novices should be taught how to hold the rope properly, and introduced to the gantry. A note of caution here - when your team is on the gantry, in the interests of safety, spare pullers should stand by the front of the rope ready to grab it and slow it down in the event of the weight going into "freefall". In the first period, you should also concentrate on general fitness and agility using circuit training, short sprints and medium distance running. You should start with easy exercises, and gradually increase the intensity. It is a good idea at this stage to encourage your pullers to squeeze small rubber balls in both hands (in their own time) to develop the grip.

Throughout the whole of the training it is important to weigh your pullers once a week (in the same kit) and keep a record of their weights. Weight is likely to drop in the first few weeks, and may rise slightly afterwards as fat is replaced by muscle. Tug of War training can become very monotonous, this can be avoided by making it as varied and enjoyable as possible. Active games of a light hearted nature should be freely interspersed with the more serious work, and training should never be carried out as fatigue.

After the first 4 to 6 weeks it should be possible to arrange the likely teams in order in which they are going to pull on the rope, and the rope work should be carried out as a team. You should still make use of the gantry, but from now on more and more work should be done against live opposition. If necessary divide your available pullers into small teams and run a competition with three or four in each team.

The arrangement of the team on the rope is important, and as the team develops each puller will fit in to a preferred position. You can develop the best type of balanced team if all pullers operate from the same side of the rope; the rope on the right of the team is usually considered the best.

From now on your coach should aim at building the strength and stamina, and perfecting the technique of the team. A team's strength can be improved by working with heavier weights on the gantry. Circuit training and running should still play an important part at this stage of training. The following section on technique aims at giving coaches an idea of the recommended positions to be adopted by the team at various phases of a pull.

TECHNIQUE

PICK UP THE ROPE (rope on the right side)

Pick up the rope (Hint: slip your right toe under the rope, and at the judge's command, lift the rope with your foot and take it with your hands) and stand upright, well balanced on both feet, rope positioned between your body and the upper part of your arm. The rope should be in a straight line and fairly taut from front to rear, but a team should not stiffen themselves in any way. A rigid stance uses up energy that will be required later.

TAKING THE STRAIN

This is the normal pulling position on the rope. Gripping the rope firmly as described above, drive the heel of your leading leg (usually the left) into the ground and allow your body to fall back to an angle of about 45 degrees. You are only allowed one "dig" at this stage, you drive the other heel in when the judge gives the command "Pull!". The correct position here is of the utmost importance, so it will be dealt with in detail.

(a) The Feet.

The heels or sides of both feet must be cut well into the ground. It is impossible to push with the feet flat on the ground - a fault common to novices. Your feet should not be directly one behind the other, but should be one each side of the rope, one foot being about 30 - 45cm to the side of the other. This gives lateral control and prevents swaying about. Your feet should also be separated about 15 - 25cm from front to rear.

(b) The Legs

Your leading leg should be straight. This leg acts as a prop, and the more the opposing team pulls, the more they should pull it into the ground, thus increasing its resistance. The rear leg is slightly bent and it is from this leg that the driving power is mainly produced. Viewed side on, your feet should always be forward of your knees.

(c) The Body

The rope should pass between your body and the upper part of your arm as close as possible to your centre of gravity, because you can exert your full force only through your centre of gravity. The lower part of your body must be kept well up to the rope, and not allowed to sag, and your back should be kept as straight as possible. If your body is allowed to sag in the middle, not only is tremendous strain being placed on your back muscles, but any drive from the legs will not be carried through the body and will merely accentuate the sag. The upper part of your body should be above the rope, but not lying on it.

(d) The Hands and Arms

The rope should be held with the hands together, left hand in front with both palms facing upwards. Your left arm should be straight, your right arm should be as straight as possible consistent with the position of your hands. If your arms are bent, the arm and shoulder muscles are cramped and much energy is unnecessarily expended. Viewed side on, your hands should always be behind your knees.

(e) The Head

Your head should be kept back in prolongation of the line of your body, and not allowed to slump forward. This gives extra weight on the rope and helps breathing.

THE HEAVE (OR LIFT)

The ability to execute an effective heave, or "lift" as it is called by Tug of War athletes, is a useful weapon in a team's armoury. Keeping the strain on the rope, slightly lower your body and heave by a powerful stretch of your legs and body upwards (hence the term "lift") and towards the anchor. Immediately take advantage of any ground gained by moving your feet back, taking short steps. There must be no easing up either before or after the lift, as any relaxation will allow your opponents to take the offensive.

Your team must be taught to heave in unison. Some pullers heave with a quick snatch, others with a slow, ponderous movement. A happy medium must be found so that your team heaves with a uniform movement.

The lift can be worked up very well on the gantry. It is very important that a team should not relax and give ground after a lift. If, after heaving, the weight on the gantry is seen to drop, it is an indication that the team is not holding what has been gained.

DRIVING OUT

When you have got your opponents on the move, you need to keep them moving until you have beaten them. This is called "driving out". Every puller should be in the normal pulling position as described above. The team moves backwards, taking small steps, no more than 30cm, chipping the heels into the ground at each step. Movement should be from the hips downward, the power coming through the legs. Your team should train to chip back in unison, ie each puller making the same leg movements at the same time, thereby maximizing the power on the rope.

DEFENDING - THE CHECK

To counter a lift from the opposing team, slightly lower the rope and turn so that the line of your shoulders is at right angles to the rope, and brace the rope as hard as you can by adding extra pressure with your legs and body. This is the classic Tug of War defensive position. Unless a team is well coached in its lift, they can be very vulnerable at the end of the movement before they have consolidated their position. If the opposing team applies a counter heave at this stage, they can often gain an advantage. Your team must be carefully coached in checking a heave so that they carry it out quickly and effectively, and not lose ground.

When your team is under attack (ie your opponents are trying to drive you out), you will have to go into the defensive position to prevent the rope from going forward. Some pullers go into a sitting position (not on the ground where they would be disqualified) when defending, if you do this be sure to keep your back straight.

TACTICS

As a new team, you can learn a lot by watching experienced teams in action. When you watch a Tug of War competition, you will often see the teams go directly into a holding position and remain there until the coach of one side feels the time is right to attack. The attacking team will then increase their pressure (usually without a lift) and try to drive their opponents out. You quite often see novice teams going into a holding position when up against more experienced opposition. When this happens it suits the better team because they only have to wait for their opponents to tire, then they can drive them out without expending much energy. As a new team, you should attack from the start, initially you might not win many pulls, but you will increase your strength and stamina, and as you improve and start to win more pulls you can amend your tactics.

Regarding tactics generally, on hard ground where there is little opportunity for digging in, it is best to attack quickly, and having got your opponents on the move try to drive them out. A team is inclined to slip on hard ground, the best way to prevent this is to pull in a slightly higher position, remembering to keep your feet about 30 - 45cm apart and always work off of your heels. When pulling on a soft surface, a team must be prepared for pulls of long duration. A team, which is well dug in is very difficult to move, and constant heaving against such a team will merely tire out the attackers. The best policy is to dig in also and wait until the other team attacks.

THE COACH

You often see a novice team hampered rather than helped by its coach, so a few notes on the position of the coach will scarcely be out of place here.

The ideal team to aim at is one that can pull with few words of command from the coach. Having said that; the coaches of the very best teams do become quite animated when up against top opposition. A good coach can "read the rope" and can produce concerted effort by giving the right commands at the right time. A well trained team should be able to tell from the feel of the rope the exact moment at which to make a movement. In some teams, the job of giving commands to the rest of the team is given to one of the pullers, usually someone positioned near the middle of the rope.

The coach should stand on the rope side of the team. He or she should be close enough to the team to be able to encourage them, and at the same time must be able to watch the opposition so as to anticipate their moves, and enable his or her own team to counteract them.

A coach's job is to motivate and encourage the whole team, but sometimes (especially during long pulls when the going gets tough) individual pullers need special attention. When under extreme stress, different people react in different ways. A good coach knows how to get a positive reaction from the different individuals in his or her team. Some pullers will respond to a kindly word, some to pleading, and others even to being shouted at (be careful not to use bad language as the judge will disqualify the whole team!) - whatever it takes to extract that little bit of extra effort to win the pull.

INDOOR TUG OF WAR

Novices teams are unlikely to experience indoor Tug of War before outdoor, but a brief description of the indoor version is appropriate here.

Indoor Tug of War is pulled on a mat. Teams wear training shoes instead of boots and pull flat footed. The athletes pull in a straight, almost arched, position with their waists well up to the rope. The rope is kept very tight and teams get into a rhythm as they increase the pressure and try to press the opposition out. Heaves are very rare in indoor Tug of War.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The above section covers the basics of Tug of War, it is not meant to be a coaching manual. Further information can be found in the TWIF Coaching Manual (available from the ToWA), or you could attend one of the coaching courses run by the Tug of War Association.