

Nonverbal Communication in Performance Sports

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Abstract

Communicational process in professional sports includes several types of communication: verbal, nonverbal, intrapersonal, interpersonal and the group. Nonverbal communication is a type of communication that is frequently used in a professional sport team: technical sessions, trainings or official matches. The role of nonverbal communication is to help the understanding of verbalized notions expressed with the help of verbal communication and sometimes, to replace totally verbal communication. Can be noted in the advantages chapter the following ideas: short time of communication, the possibility of providing a greater amount of information's in a shorter time and a much better understanding of the message from the receiver in the case of existence of disturbing factors (the music from the stadium or the crowd). According to prof. Cristian Radu, we can receive messages through nonverbal communication by studying elements such as: paraverbal communication (the timbre and intensity of a coach/player's voice or the pauses or speech defects of an athlete), clothes (can underline aspects like the importance of the event or it can show us how much a coach/player cares about his image, mimicry and facial expressions can show us the intensity of the moment (technical instructions of coaches during the match).

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1. Introduction

The communicational process in sports is an important component of sports activities and is indispensable in this type of physical activity. One of

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the axioms of the Palo Alto School tells us that “it is impossible to not communicate”. (Radu, 2019) With communication a player, a trainer, or a manager could offer important information to the receptor, helping for reaching the goals proposed. The importance of nonverbal communication is underlined by the ideas of Albert Mehrabian, who created the rule “7-38-55”, which means that in personal communication, 55% are represented by body language, 38% by voice and tone, and 7% are represented by spoken words. (Amsel, 2019) Concerning this classification, we can see how important is for a sportsman to build his communication process. Septimiu Chelcea, Ivan Loredana, and Adina Chelcea formulated some axioms of nonverbal communication. In their acceptance: “In direct interpersonal relations it is impossible to not communicate nonverbal” and “Nonverbal communication represents an element in the human communication system and it should be analyzed as it is, not independent from the verbal communication” (Chelcea&Ivan, 2008). That underlines the fact that verbal and nonverbal communication are complementary and each one has its role in the process of communication.

Before proceeding to an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of nonverbal communication, we propose an enumeration of the elements of communication. According to Denis Mcquail, the elements of communication are: “a communicator or transmitter of a message, a message, a language or a code, a channel of transmission and a receiver capable of decoding the messages” (Mcquail, 1999). Concerning these elements, we must note that the appearance of problems within them can alter the communication process. For example, if the language is not similar to one sender and receiver, we can expect a faulty understanding of the message. At the same time, disturbing factors must also be taken into account.

2. Advantages of nonverbal communication in sports

People in sports could use nonverbal communication in various situations when verbal communication is not very efficient. To give strength

to these affirmations, we will see several situations when nonverbal communication is more efficient than other ways of communication.

The first situation is when the stadium crowd is too loud and the trainer of a team wants to give explanations about some situations in the game. Eventually, he will use verbal communication, especially by whistling to the players, but the important ideas will be transmitted by nonverbal communication (placements in some moments of the game, sign of eventual substitutions). The same situation is when the player wants to transmit something important to the bench (claims an injury or wants to be substituted). In the following example, we will see how the former Denmark football manager between 2000-2015 Morten Olsen, tries to calm the tempo of his team during the World Cup 2006 Qualifiers game against Greece.



Figure 1. (Image 1 – Morten Olsen, ex-Denmark head coach, offering indications during the game Denmark - Greece) (Gettyimages, 2017)

We can observe the position of the body, which is slightly bent forward, and the hand is held down, firmly, with the fingers outstretched. The face also suggests firmness in the decision. The gaze is fixed on the players. Another element inspired is calmness. This movement does not suggest aggression but inspires safety. A trainer needs to inspire safety and trust in his decisions.

The second situation is at half-time. According to professor Gomboş Leon, at half-time, the players are very exhausted at this period at the game, so it will be much easier to understand simple messages and ideas. (Gomboş, 2012) This thing might be done with nonverbal communication, instead of using too many words and with the risk of losing the concentration of the players.

Looking at these examples, we could see some advantages of using nonverbal communication. First is the capacity of transmitting information in various conditions which could lead to good advantage for the team or the player, especially when the crowd is too loud. Second is the possibility of the expression of more ideas in a short time, which helps the coach to deliver instructions in a much better way and not lose his players. Compared to decoding words, nonverbal language is decoded 4.5 times faster. (Zamfir, 2017)

3. Disadvantages of nonverbal communication in sports

There are some situations when nonverbal communication creates problems or represents a trap in understanding the transmitted message. The most common situations of this kind are when the receiver and the sender do not know each other well enough. Although some signs are already a convention in society, some signs can represent game instructions that are known only by the players of that team, representing a code language.

For example, a new player will not understand from the beginning the signs sent by the coach or his colleagues. These misunderstandings can lead to improper execution of game tasks or misunderstanding between players. Therefore, nonverbal communication is good to be used when both parties use a common language.

Another situation is when nonverbal communication is used wrongly and it can produce image damage for the user. It's usually the adapters that can make people uncomfortable. Here we refer to gestures such as scratching or smelling. A very good example, also reported by the media is Joachim Low, former head coach of the German national football team. He was

caught many times by the cameras in certain embarrassing positions. We will detail more in the article, in the paragraph dedicated to adapters.

4. Ways of manifestation of nonverbal communication

Professor Cristian Radu made a classification of the ways of manifestation of nonverbal communication. In the next lines, we will observe several with their application in sports.

4.1. Silence

The first one is silence. There are several types of silence, each one with his interpretation. Among the human characteristics betrayed by silence, we can list arrogance, the feeling of guilt, boredom, or concentration (Radu, 2019). In sports, we can identify a phenomenon called “Silenzio Stampa”. The term is from the Italian language and it means “press silence”. It is an initiative of sports teams to not provide press statements or pieces of information in general. This is a type of protest used by the sports team when, for example, the press is too aggressive in the reports about the team or when serious untruths are published.

4.2. Objects

For the image of the person, small elements such as jewelry (watches, rings, and others) and bigger elements like cars or houses could construct the image of the person. (Radu, 2019).

In 2017, the French sports daily L'Equipe published a top with the coaches from Ligue 1 and their watches. From this top, we can distinguish several types of coaches. The first category is the coaches who don't spend a lot on a watch, such as Frederic Hantz or Stephane Moulin, who chose simple watches, at 13 euros. The second category is formed by the coaches who spend moderately for a watch like Phillipe Hischberger (a 150 euro watch). The third category is formed by the coaches who like to spend a lot of money on their watches such as Bruno Genesio or Christophe Galthier (several thousands of euros). (L'Equipe, 2017)

Comeback to our purpose, a study from 2015 suggests that people who can wear watches can be more conscientious. In the same study, we can find that people who wear watches “arrived significantly earlier to appointments in comparison to controls”. (...) In sports, these two qualities, conscientiousness and punctuality are strong values, at same time for players and coaches

The objective of L'Equipe article analysis is to underline the fact that these nonverbal aspects are more and more important and they are observed by the public. In addition to the characteristics presented in the previous paragraph, we can add the fact that the style of the watch can help us discover the style of that sportsman.

4.3. Gestures

Gestures are a component of nonverbal communication. According to professor Cristian Radu, who uses the Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen classification, we could see a lot of gestures that are present in a sportsman activity. (Radu, 2019)

First, they are the emblems. “Emblems are a gesture that substitute (conventionally or not) words and, in certain situations, can constitute one language itself (for example, the language of deaf-mutes”. The same authors suggest some examples of gesture: “the index finger placed on the lips to impose silence, shaking the head vertically as a sign of confirmation, the sign of victory”.

The idea of the index finger placed on the lips to impose silence is frequently used in sports. Some examples are representative. Football manager Jose Mourinho is a good example of this aspect. His image constructed by the media is an image of a confident person, a professional in football but at the same time, he is considered an arrogant person, and some of his public appearances show sincerity, and direct and tell things as they are. This sign was used sometimes by Mourinho when his team was victorious and he tried with this to teach a lesson to the contestants. It is a gesture that imposes something and for this reason, could be interpreted very easily in many directions.



Figure 2. (Image 2 – Jose Mourinho with a message for the fans and media after a game) (Dailymail, 2016)

Shaking the head vertically as a sign of confirmation is very often used in sports. It is a short way to confirm and it is used especially during training or matches. Using words or too many words in this situation may lead to the disclosure of some secrets during the game. For example, when a player shows with his finger the direction of his shoot before taking a penalty shot. It is much easier for the trainer to do this short gesture of confirmation.

The next categories are the illustrators. These are “gestures that accompany the verbal language and complete, reinforce or nuance the information conveyed by it”. Some of them are frequently used by sportsmen.

Kinetographs “reproduces a corporal motion through which we intend to reinforce what we want to say.”. (Radu, 2019) These gestures are often used especially when the players try to explain some things to the trainer or their colleagues. They are present both in the training sessions and in the matches. A good example is the coaches' press conferences. Put in front of the pressure of the results, of the fans, and the questions of the press, the coaches are put in difficult situations, and many times they want to underline what they want to say, so using nonverbal communication could be a good instrument for him. The use of nonverbal communication can convey confidence to the world because sometimes times, the coaches are considered weak and lacking in authority. For sure, the nonverbal communication role

is not to supply the results of the team or to distract the attention from the activity of the manager, but it can be a good way to face the pressure.

Deictic movements are another type of illustrator that we can see frequently in sports. Their role is to “indicate directly certain people, places or objects” (Radu, 2019). These movements are used in the training ground, in technical meetings, or even in the games. Their role is to simplify communication and increase the speed of actions.

In the following example, Thorir Hergeirsson, coach of the Norwegian handball women’s team, tries to explain a position in the game to Nora Mork, one of the Norwegian players. We can tell by the look of the player that the coach is trying to show her a certain place on the field. It is a simpler method than going to that point on the field.



Figure 3. (Image 3 – Thorir Hergeirsson offering indications to Nora Mork)
(Gettyimages, 2017)

Spatial movements have the role of “indicating the relationships of closeness or distance existing between individuals or objects that represent the subject of communication” (Radu, 2019). In sports, they are often used especially when the coaches try to offer explanations about an opponent. For example, a coach explains to the player how close he must mark his opponent. Simultaneously, these movements could be used also by referees when they explain to the players how close the ball was to entering the goal or to describe some actions that lead to sanctions for a player.

Rhythmic movements are used to “highlight the pace of an action” (Radu, 2019). The most common situation when this type of movement is used is when a player or a coach tries to describe or suggest the tempo of an action. To realize this aspect, a person who executes this movement must offer attention to some aspects such as the position of arms and hands, posture, and facial expression. These elements could describe the dimension of demand: a suggestion or an order.

After illustrators, the third category is represented by adjustment gestures. Their role is to “guide and maintain the communication” (Radu, 2019). Also, they “suggest the attitude of the communicators, and that leads to adjustments in their discourse” (Radu, 2019). These gestures are present in sports and we could see it when a player talks with his coach or when the referee spoke.

Affective gestures are, more often, “involuntary gestures that often betray emotions” (Radu, 2019). Thinking of sports, which involves pressure, tension, and emotions it is easy to understand how they are used. The applause of encouragement from the tunnel to the field, and the coach congratulating the player who just scored, are some examples of how these gestures are used in sports. In the final of the 2016 European Championship, Cristiano Ronaldo punched a colleague in the leg as a sign of the tension accumulated throughout the match. The moment was considered rather funny, Ronaldo apologizing to Adrien Silva. This gesture is translated as a manifestation of the emotions that a sportsman can have during a match, a mix of emotions that at a given moment can be externalized.

The fifth category is represented by the adaptors. They “didn’t have a lower communicative function” (Radu, 2019) but, as the author says, “it is important to control them for reasons of politeness” (Radu, 2019). These adaptors could be: “scratching, wiping sweat” (Radu, 2019). In sports are some examples of trainers who did not pay attention to such aspects and as a result, they were apostrophized in the press and by the public. Despite their smaller role, these gestures could also betray some emotions. For example, biting your nails during a game could betray increased tension, fear, or nervousness. In 2016, at European Football Championship, former German national team head coach, Joachim Low was caught on camera making

certain gestures that are more about intimacy. (scratching and smelling himself). Both the press and the public took notice and they took advantage of the situation, commenting on the actions of the German coach. What we can take from this situation is image damage to Joachim Low.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, nonverbal communication represents a very active component in the communication process bearing in mind that this can help communication by shortening the transmission time and by delivering the messages despite the disturbing factors but also it can mean a trap if the communication elements are not in an optimal relationship, leading to the erroneous understanding of the content of the message. At the same time, if used carelessly, nonverbal communication can damage the image of the person who uses it.

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