

# Women's field hockey team plays mind games

BY SONO MOTOYAMA

Women's field hockey coach Valerie Cloud decided that her team could use a little boost, so she brought in an expert: psychotherapist/sports counselor/performance-enhancement consultant Keith Waldman, a partner in the Marlton, N.J., firm Optimal Performance Associates.

After speaking with softball coach Carol Kushow and strength coach Rob Wagner, who had worked with Waldman, Cloud decided to have Waldman work with her team for six sessions during preseason. "If you don't have a happy player you're not going to get the best out of her," Cloud said. Although she said that the field hockey team was not experiencing any particular problems per se, Cloud added, "When you get a group of 25 women together, they don't always know how to work toward a common goal."

To reach that common goal, Cloud called on Waldman, who used games with names like Stepping Stones to Success and the Hula Hoop Game. In fewer than 10 days Waldman spent between 15 and 18 hours with the team, putting them through a "a team-building initiative."

Waldman's exercises broke the group of about 30 athletes and coaches into smaller clusters. The clusters had to work together to complete a task, sometimes with Waldman intentionally throwing a monkey wrench into their plans.

Adapted in part from experiential learning theories pioneered by Outward Bound and used by British soldiers during World War II, the program Waldman developed for the Penn athletes was geared toward having them tackle challenges together creatively.

"Bringing me in was a way of enhancing team and individual performance," said Waldman. He wanted the team to focus on what he calls "the controllables" -- their own performance and how they react - not on "uncontrollables," such as whether they win or lose or what call the referee might make. The team also spent time discussing the exercises.

Waldman, who has a personal interest in sports and is an active amateur athlete. He said he worked with the team to help members learn to "overcome adversity, overcome conflicts, communicate with each other, trust each other and develop common goals."

It's too early in the season to tell if the training will translate into a winning season, although coach Cloud says both the team and the coaches benefited.

On the last day of Waldman's program, during an exercise in which teammates had to tell each other what they meant to the team, one athlete unexpectedly addressed Waldman.

"She said I'm part of the team," Waldman recalled. "And that really touched me. Probably more than they would realize."