

“A player to start out with, then a manager? That just doesn’t work these days”

A professional handballer and simultaneously lawyer in a law firm: Andreas Thiel was and is a master of self-management. During his active sporting career with VfL Gummersbach and TSV Bayer Dormagen, the German national team goalkeeper studied and worked for a large law firm in Cologne. Nowadays he is a self-employed lawyer and the lawyer for the Handball-Bundesliga (HBL). In October he was a guest lecturer on the ‘European Handball Manager (EHM) course at the German Sport University.

Cathrin Priehs (student of the M.Sc. in Sport, Media and Communication Research at the German Sport University) spoke to him about setting priorities, the professionalisation of handball and a failed essay at university.

Priehs: Mr. Thiel, you managed to combine working as a lawyer and a career as a professional sportsman. I am sure you are a role model for many people with regard to self-management and time management. What is the secret of your success?

I suppose you just have to get your priorities right. If you want to do put 100% into things rather than 50%, you have to neglect other things - that is a fact. I am a man: multi-tasking isn’t my strong point! It drives me crazy. Instead of that I knew or know how to set priorities: sometimes my university exams were more important and sometimes sport.

With hindsight, would you say you got your priorities right all the time?

On the whole, yes. But sometimes I had no choice. For example, once I had to write an essay for university during the European Cup period of TSV Bayer Dormagen. I had to earn money playing handball in Dormagen. I am sure that that was the reason for failing my essay (laughs). Of course it was tough – especially the exam period. And in the last few years of my sporting career I was already working as a lawyer in a large Cologne law firm.

If I may ask: is your nickname perhaps called the ‘wizard’ because you are immune to stress?

That’s not the reason (laughs). But I do think that I have an above-average stress resistance level. I work under pressure really well. People say that I rarely had problems with difficult games. Of course I was extremely nervous before the matches – like before my oral exams. And I didn’t sleep well last night either! I am not used to giving speeches. Talking for about 90 minutes – I don’t know if I’ll manage that.

Don’t worry: the participants are looking forward to your lecture!

See! Now you’re making me even more nervous! (laughs). No, but I know that I always seem to keep a clear head when the time comes.

Do you think it is possible to be a fully qualified lawyer and professional sportsman these days?

No, certainly not in top-level sport. We can't expect clubs or employers to make compromises. People just make too much money for that to happen. These guys are completely professional. In my day it was pretty exotic to study and play professional handball; apart from me, only Rüdiger Neitzel and Karsten Kohlhaas, who both studied medicine, did both. In Heiner Brand's generation it was normal. But as I said, even we were discontinued models. The only way to do it nowadays is via distance learning.

Let's take a look at your handball career until today: How have things changed in handball?

The whole thing is now covered by one term: Professionalism. You can actually just sum it up in one word: 'money'. Players make far much more money than 30 years ago. Clubs are obliged to make more money due to higher staff costs, otherwise they can't manage financially. The licensing procedure is far more transparent etc.

Everything is much more professional, including the management of the clubs. For example, it's becoming more and more difficult for a player to just stop and say: "I'm going to become a manager now". That doesn't work nowadays. Just because I saved a goal or could throw well doesn't mean to say I'll be a good club manager now.

Lots of football managers and sports directors are ex-players. Do you think handball management can model itself on football?

Our rules, including the licensing guidelines and also the original statutes of the Handball Bundesliga were copied from the German Bundesliga. We just don't have the money. Take a look at football: the German Football Association and the German Bundesliga have a legal department run by five top lawyers.

In contrast the German Handball Federation there is a voluntary Vice Law (*editor's note: responsible for legal affairs*). I repeat voluntary. And in the Handball Bundesliga there is a part-time legal advisor – and that is me! Our whole organisation has one press officer, one game manager, one manager, an office manager, a part-time legal advisor – me – and two event / marketing managers. The rest consists of interns – usually students studying sport management. That's the difference to football.

You work with lots of different people in handball management. Which skills should a handball manager have in your opinion?

They have to have sufficient know-how. And they should be from that field. That is usually the case, if I have a look at the participants of the *European Handball Manager* course: for example, Axel Geerken was an excellent Bundesliga goalkeeper and has played a couple of games for Germany. Potential handball managers should have some knowledge of the field and a good sense of players' duties. That doesn't mean that people from outside don't have a chance. I'd say that that is possible in other sport associations. For example, Frank Bohmann is a former hockey player. And hockey players know about how things work in team sports. I think that applicants should have had a certain 'socialisation in team sport'.

**And what does the *EHM* have to offer in your opinion?
What parts of the course do you view as particularly relevant?**

Well, it's an advantage to have heard of certain things already. With regard to my own field - law - it would be good for the participants to be able to say to themselves: "Oh, yeah, I already heard about that in such and such a course!"

You don't have to know how the whole legal procedures at the German Handball Federation works. Or to know the exact ins and outs of an international transfer. Or how the arbitration procedure works. You should just have heard about it and know where to get your information from when you have to check it out as a manager on your own. But as I said, that just applies to my legal area. I reckon that the emphasis should be acquiring economic knowledge.

And what about the psychological or medial aspects?

Communication and management, yes. I think that's really important. So-called 'soft skills' are necessary. A 'lord of the manor style' just doesn't work anymore. The players are too confident nowadays. The managers have to get on with the consultants and so on. I dislike all those kind of things – but that's part of the whole package.

The *EHM* covers economic, legal, psychological media topics and communication science in handball management. As a final question: would you have done the course if it had been on offer then?

I think so. I would be interested in doing it now if it weren't for the fact that I am 55-years-old and fully qualified. But I am certainly not going to change my job now. I'm perfectly content as a self-employed lawyer and legal adviser. That's enough for now.