



Toolkit

Positive Motivation: Getting the Best From Today's Athletes

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Positive Coaching Alliance seeks to change the culture of youth sports so that every child, regardless of social or economic circumstances, has access to a positive youth sports experience led by a caring, trusted coach. Positive Motivation: Getting the Best From Today's Athletes provides coaches with the tools to effectively motivate today's athletes by both establishing a team environment that promotes positive motivation and responding to challenges that may arise.

This toolkit summarizes and supports the learning from Positive Motivation: Getting the Best From Today's Athletes.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR MOTIVATING TODAY'S ATHLETES

Today's athletes face a number of challenges brought on by current circumstances. As coaches, it's important to recognize their strengths, understand their experiences, and guide them towards positive ways to deal with adversities.

Research tells us that there are four key elements⁽¹⁾ coaches can use to help today's athletes better connect to, enjoy, and succeed within their sport experience. They are:

Explain the “Why”

With technology and information at their fingertips, young athletes expect adults to have done their homework. Providing a quick rationale for training methods and practice plans can improve motivation and effort of young people. It also reduces the inevitable ‘why’ questions from both athletes and parents.

Communicate Effectively

While face-to-face communication may not be a strength of today's athletes, coaches and support staff can challenge young athletes by asking open-ended questions, using text messaging only for logistical communication, practicing face-to-face conversations in team meetings or training, and switching up methods of communication (i.e. videos, articles, demonstrations) to aid messaging. They can also make messages clear, concise, and direct to account for shorter attention spans.

Build Independence

Today's athletes are more dependent on significant adults than any other cohort in history. By giving athletes some autonomy, choice, and responsibility, coaches and support staff can give them more ownership and develop skills related to independence. For example, providing opportunities for decision making, critical thinking, and accountability can help athletes with personal and professional development.

Promote Resiliency

While each generation is considered “softer” than the previous one, current generations are known to have heightened difficulties dealing with adversity. Coaches and support staff can create opportunities for athletes to cope with adversity and further develop perseverance and resilience. Creating pressure and challenging situations in training, along with supporting appropriate coping strategies, may assist today's athletes with how to better handle competitive and personal setbacks.

In the pages that follow, these key elements influence and are reflected within the strategies for motivating today's athletes in a positive way.

1. Gould, D., Nalepa, J., & Mignano, M. (2019). Coaching Generation Z athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* (accepted). and Twenge, J. (2017). *iGen: Why Today's Super Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

POSITIVE MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE

Motivational climate refers to the psychological environment a coach creates through the manner in which they interact with their athletes and guide them towards skill development and task completion.⁽²⁾ Within a negative motivational climate, coaches may overly emphasize and concern themselves with outcomes, fail to regulate their emotional responses, and create a team environment in which athletes feel unsafe and that they don't belong.

A positive motivational climate can be achieved by focusing on effort and progress, instilling a feeling of trust and belonging amongst athletes, and providing opportunity for athletes to be autonomous and connect to meaning in what they are doing. Establishing a positive motivational climate increases learning, creates a more enjoyable sports experience, and improves performance. Three tools coaches can use to create a positive motivational climate are:



Coaches Can...



Start Practices With an Opening Circle to:

- Set expectations for the session
- Check-in on players to see how they are showing up to practice
- Briefly review what will be worked on and why

Ask for Input:

Create opportunities for athletes to develop decision-making skills and gain ownership over their experience.

- Let athletes choose a warm-up activity or skill-based game and set guidelines for it
- Give athletes a space to share their thoughts and opinions about the team
- Be open to athlete feedback and validate their thoughts and opinions

Plan Welcome Activities:

- Host a kick-off meeting where athletes get to interact in fun ways
- Plan 5-10 minutes of informal connection time before formally starting practice
- Express gratitude and appreciation for all athletes on the team throughout the year

2. <https://members.believeperform.com/what-motivational-climate-do-you-create-for-young-athletes/>

HIGH CHALLENGE, HIGH SUPPORT

Research shows that a team environment characterized by high challenge and high support sets up athletes to develop resilience while producing strong motivation, learning, and performance. A high challenge high support team environment is characterized by supportive challenge towards goals, athlete ownership and input on goals, good relationships with coaches and peers, healthy competition, learning from mistakes, and a feeling of safety that encourages risk taking.⁽³⁾

Three tools that will help coaches instill a high challenge, high support environment while also helping them communicate more effectively with and promote resilience among today's athletes are:



Coaches Can...

Practice Empathy with Accountability:

- Listen to understand athletes and validate their feelings
- Clearly state and enforce expectations
- Consider outside circumstances that lead to athlete behavior
- Collaborate with athletes to resolve missed expectations

Use If/Then Statements:

If/then statements ensure that information is clear and useful while also providing athletes with a 'why'. Always check for understanding when using if/then statements.

- "If you point your plant foot towards your teammate, then you'll be more likely to pass it to their feet. Do you have any questions?"

Create Scaffolded Challenges:

- Plan practices so athletes work on a particular skill within increasingly difficult situations; ex:
 - Start off with a basic introduction to dribbling the basketball with their left hand
 - Progress to a drill that has athletes use their left hand while dribbling in and out of cones
 - Progress to a game of tag where one athlete is 'it' and has to knock the ball away from the other athletes who are dribbling in a circle with their left hand only
 - Finally, emphasize left-handed dribbling during the scrimmage
- Celebrate small wins and provide encouraging, specific feedback to athletes to help build their confidence and resilience while trying out new skills

3. https://bases.org.uk/imgs/55_tsos_editor_s_choice_spread_p20_21_815.pdf

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

The third strategy for motivating today's athletes is about how to approach and execute challenging conversations in a positive, productive way. Throughout a season, coaches may need to relay information to an athlete that can have a negative impact on them - i.e. they may not be starting the next game, may need to work on a particular skill, or may be expected to respond differently to certain situations. Approaching these conversations with care and clear communication can help athletes as they build independence and resiliency and develop both sport and life skills.



Hard conversations don't have to be mean conversations. They don't have to take on a detached or authoritarian tone. Holding people to their greatness is perhaps one of the most loving actions we can take. Real accountability isn't a 'gotcha'. It's an 'I see you.'

Amy Fast, Ed. D.,

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Prior to having a challenging conversation, coaches should consider the following questions:

- When/where would you have the conversation?
- What has the athlete been going through that may have led to the need for the conversation?
- How will you start the conversation with empathy?
- How will you respond if the athlete isn't receiving it well?

When having a challenging conversation, coaches should consider these three tools:

1.

Handle with Care

Self Regulation

2.

**Consider Impact
vs. Intent**

"I Didn't Mean It..."

3.

**Set a Positive
Goal**

What to Strive For

Coaches Can...



Handle with Care:

- Model self-regulation by taking a deep breath and ensuring you feel ready to approach the conversation
- Strive to have a calm, caring tone while maintaining positive body language
- Consider how the athlete may be feeling leading up and during the conversation

Consider Impact vs. Intent:

- Words that cause harm aren't excused by good intentions - coaches should be mindful of what they say and what the impact could be - especially considering cultural differences
- Apologize if necessary - coaches are not above making mistakes in these conversations and can model humility

Set a Positive Goal:

- Collaborate with athletes to develop a positive goal to strive for
- Emphasize positive actions that would indicate progress towards that goal
- Be clear and direct about what accomplishing the goal looks like