
LEADERSHIP IN COACHING EDUCATION

Once You Know Better, You Do Better

Brad Strand

Brad Strand is a professor in the Department of Health, Nutrition, and Exercise Sciences at North Dakota State University.

In 1977 I accepted my first teaching and coaching position as a head football coach at a small school with a losing history in football and few students willing to play. Didn't matter, I was excited to be coaching despite those limitations. On the second day of practice, a player named Mike swore at the fact that we were running for conditioning at the end of practice. "I don't know why we do this \$%^, it doesn't do any good anyway." Boom goes the dynamite; I over react and immediately kick him out of practice and off the team. How dare he talk to his coach that way. Understand that Mike was my best player standing about 6'3" and weighing about 195 pounds. But there is more to the story.

A couple of weeks later one of Mike's friends came to me and said Mike would like to be back on the team. Like most of you would do, I gave him a second chance. Mike was our punter and during a later game he was in position to punt close to our endzone. The ball was snapped to him and he fumbled it. Instead of falling on the ball, Mike backed away and our opponents fell on it and scored a touchdown. During halftime I told Mike that he had to make sure to recover the ball in that situation. He responded, "if you think you can do better why don't you play." Ridiculous statement but obvious there was something troubling Mike.

To be honest, I didn't like Mike. Bad behavior, bad influence, and bad attitude. So, to get back at him, in the following practice I set him up. I had him and another player, Todd, lie on the ground head-to-head for a tackling drill. I tossed the ball up into the air to Mike and Todd was to tackle him. However, I tossed the ball higher than normal so that Todd would have enough time to level Mike. Of course, he did and a fight broke out. After separating them I told them both to leave practice and come to my office after practice. Todd showed up but no Mike. The next day before practice I asked Mike to come to my office. He comes in and I ask what's up. He swears at me and gets up to leave the room. I reach out and put my hand on his knee and tell him to sit down. He ignores that, gets up

and leaves. I follow him and outside the coaches' office he grabs me and puts me up against the wall. Another coach saw it, and together we got Mike to release his grip and escorted him to the principal's office. While there he called me a liar, pushed the AD and principal out of the way, and stormed out of the office. He was suspended from school for three days. Good riddance!

It was not until later that I learned that Mike's father had committed suicide when Mike was a freshman in high school. And to make it worse, Mike found his father. How does a 15-year-old witness that and not be affected? I am sure Mike was living with lots of guilt, hurt, and anger, and to protect himself he became defensive, confrontative, and probably as a protective measure, did not let himself get too close to an adult, especially a male.

Wow, did that change things for me. I was inexperienced and naïve, with a sense of false bravado. And just like that my reason for coaching changed. Had I known about Mike's background, I like to believe I would have treated him differently, with more compassion, added grace, and greater kindness. With awareness comes responsibility to yourself and others. Once you know better, you do better.

And so began my transformation as a coach after only one season of coaching. I sought to understand how to become a better coach, an athlete-centered coach in which athletes come first and winning second. I began to learn what athletes want from a coach and how they describe a good coach.

Coach-Athlete Relationship

The coach-athlete relationship is a major determinant of an athlete's level of enjoyment, motivation, and wanting to participate in sports. In addition to the impact a coaches' behavior has on an athletes' performance, his or her behavior also impacts and athletes' psychological and emotional welfare. Athletes will experience optimal performance, satisfaction, and fulfillment when their coaches' leadership behaviors are in harmony with the

leadership behaviors that an athlete prefer. A foundational dimension of coaching is a coaches' and an athletes' ability to explicitly recognize each other's thoughts, feelings, needs, and wants from their relationship.

Generally speaking, athletes want coaches who practice democratic instead of autocratic leadership, who provide positive feedback, who give proper training and instruction, who acknowledge situational conditions, and who provide social support. These preferences of leadership change slightly based on the gender of athletes, gender of coach, age of athletes, and team or individual sport athletes. In addition, higher ratings of coach likeability were related to lower levels of perceived stress and better coping.

It is generally accepted that one of the responsibilities of a coach, at any level of competition, is to teach athletes sport skills. Research consistently confirms that the most commonly observed behaviors of coaches, who athletes have identified as effective or good, include the fact that they are instructive before, during and after a skill; they plan diligently and meticulously; they develop positive psychological characteristics, they create fun, positive, and serious learning environment; they provide praise and encouragement; and they are knowledgeable of techniques and tactics.

The Abusive Coach

In 2015, Wolff published an article in *Sport Illustrated* titled, "Abuse of Power". Within the article the author presented a list of major college coaches who had been accused of abusing athletes. Bobby Knight at Indiana, Tim Beckman at the University of Illinois, Greg Winslow at the University of Utah, Jim Leavitt from the University of South Florida, Mike Leach currently at Mississippi State, and Billy Gillispie from Texas Tech.

Many of you might remember seeing the video of Mike Rice, former Rutgers basketball coach. The story about Rice came to light in the aftermath of the secretly recorded video showing him physically and mentally abusing his basketball players. Calling them names, throwing balls at their heads, and grabbing and pushing them around. As you know, Rice did get fired. One has to wonder, why did the athletes accept this treatment from their coach. Why did no one dare to speak up?

One might also wonder if much has changed since then? It is certainly hoped so. But then, in just the past year, basketball coaches at Detroit Mercy, Texas Tech, and Purdue-Fort Wayne have been accused of abusive behavior towards their athletes.

At Texas Tech, players accused their coaches of punishing players whose heart rates dropped below

90% of capacity during playing time for more than two minutes, of calling them "fat pigs" and "disgusting", of being mocked for weight and exhibiting signs of depression, and sexual harassment. The coach responded with, "Our administration and my staff believe in the way we are building and turning this program around here. Our student athletes are developing a disciplined approach both on and off the court. I want our students, fans and alumni to know we are committed to winning championships at Texas Tech and doing it the right way through hard work, accountability and fierce determination."

The allegations filed against the basketball coach at Purdue-Fort Wayne included: the coach mocked players for depression, forced them to play through injuries, pressured them to go on medications, such as antidepressants, called them out of shape and fat, withheld medical care, denied them food as punishment, did not allow players to see a psychologist without a coaching staff present and once told a player to "get over it" after a sexual assault. The coach responded to the allegations with, "While I respect these women and their right to speak out, I deny that I have ever physically, mentally or emotionally abused any player in our program."

The players at Detroit Mercy accused their coach of creating an environment "so toxic and draining that player's made comments in the locker room about having suicidal thoughts as well as purposely injuring themselves to avoid potentially having to deal the coaches' belittling and emotional abuse." The coach responded with, "it completely blindsided me, in our opinion, we have a normal, healthy Division I atmosphere and environment". She further stated, "I came here to be a part of change, positive change, to help change the culture. To help chart a path to national prominence, to impact these women positively. I'm here to coach, to teach, to develop them and to grow them into strong, empowered women". Not surprisingly, all 14 players from the 2020-21 roster either left the program or have been told they can no longer play basketball.

All three of these coaches were fired. Obviously, these three coaches failed to take responsibility for their actions and are, in fact, justifying their means to an end. And in all reality, it does not really matter if a coach thinks his or her actions are appropriate or not, and if those actions are considered bullying or emotionally abusive; if athletes perceive them to be such, they are.

How did we get to this point?

Coaches interact with their athletes on a daily basis in practice, and in many instances, throughout the school day. These in-school interactions involve

talking about the team, other athletes, opponents, practices, past games, and upcoming games in a somewhat equal social setting. When the school bell rings ending the school day, the teacher becomes a coach and the student an athlete. Both individuals assume different roles in different settings. Interactions and communication take on different meanings in the context of practice and games. What a teacher/coach says jokingly in the hallway to a student/athlete is easily interpreted differently on the practice field or court. Many athletes validate themselves through their sport performance and this becomes their identity. Insensitive comments in practice settings carry a lot more weight than those said outside the confines of practice, and athletes respond differently to those comments.

Thinking back to the Mike Rice video, why did these athletes accept his treatment towards them? Why did it take so long for him to be revealed? There are certainly a number of solid reasons and we need to look at the process of initiating and sustaining emotional abuse in the athlete/coach relationship.

Initiating and Sustaining Emotional Abuse

One's involvement in sport begins with an induction phase, typically during youth sport participation. This initial engagement then transitions into an investment phase and a commitment to a coach. The inappropriate or abusive behaviors from a coach usually begin innocently enough, as a coach encourages, pushes, and challenges his or her young athletes. But then, as winning becomes more important and stakes increase, these once thought to be innocuous comments, transition into degrading comments, personal criticisms, threats, acts of humiliation, belittlement, and the silent treatment appear. For some, a coaches' nonverbal actions of kicking equipment, throwing things, glaring, and posturing, leads athletes to believe this is how successful coaches respond to the challenges of coaching. Athletes feel it themselves and they see it happening to fellow teammates. But if they want to continue participating, they have to accept the coaches' behavior, no matter how disgraceful it might be. In fact, if one plays sport for any period of time, these actions, in many cases, become normalized and athletes often fail to recognize them as being inappropriate.

Coaches defend their actions in many ways. For example, a coach might say it was a simply a spur of the moment thing. He or she might say, "I hate to lose and athletes need to be accountable and if not, there needs to be consequences." Far too many coaches experienced bad treatment as athletes and learned bad coaching practices from their exposure to their

coaches' harmful or inappropriate coaching practices. And for many, there is a lack of knowledge for alternative strategies. As such, a coach quickly turns to what he or she knows best and has seen other coaches demonstrate. Unfortunately, athletes, more often than not, accept these questionable and inappropriate behaviors from their coaches. From an athlete's point of view, a coach's fame, or reputation of success, significantly impacts an athletes' acceptance of the coaching practices as an essential ingredient in their athletic development. Over time, the questionable and inappropriate coaching practices become normalized for both coaches, athletes, and parents, and no one questions them.

Most coaches, in spite of their questionable behaviors, would say they care about their athletes and the closeness and uniqueness of the relationship. Coaches care for their athletes as athletes and people and want them to achieve their athletic potential. Many coaches say they enjoy watching talent development, love the kids, and want them to become good citizens. Similarly, athletes say, "my coach would scream at me, but I knew she cared about me." Due to the closeness of the athlete-coach relationship, athletes come to trust their coaches and coaches take on the role of a parent figure and mentor as athletes become like their own children.

Emotional Abuse

We now know what types of coaches' athletes prefer and better understand how athletes come to accept questionable coaching practices. So how often does questionable, or in the research literature, emotional abuse occur in sport coaching settings? Emotional abuse has been reported to be an extremely common but underrecognized form of maltreatment and has been correlated with a number of long-term negative effects such as poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and difficulties with interpersonal relationships. Research has reported that abusive coaching practices are experienced by about 25% of athletes. As was shared earlier, this abuse is normalized in the sport environment and athletes are reluctant to report abusive experiences. And in fact, often parents, athletes, and other coaches are present while these harmful practices occur and nothing is said.

Figure 1 categorizes what might be considered abusive coaching behaviors into physical, relational, and verbal actions. In addition, these actions can be categorized as mild, moderate, or severe in nature. In my research we have asked both athletes and coaches if they have had this done to them or if they had done the described action, if they think it is inappropriate, and if they think it is bullying.

Figure 1 Inappropriate Actions

Verbal Actions
Poked fun at an athlete
Name calling without hurtful intent
Taunting at athlete
Use of nickname when asked not to
Name calling with hurtful intent
Verbal threats of aggression towards an athlete
Inappropriate language towards an athlete; comments on sexual preferences
Relational Actions
Embarrassed an athlete in front of others
Dirty look meant to hurt an athlete
Critical comments meant to hurt an athlete
Set an athlete up to look foolish
Shunning an athlete from the team
Mild ethnic slurs towards an athlete
Obscene gestures toward an athlete
Hurtful ethnic slurs towards an athlete
Physical Actions
Threw something at an athlete
Hit, slapped or heckled an athlete with intent to hurt
Struck an athlete with equipment
Inappropriate unwanted touching towards an athlete
Locked an athlete in a room
Physical violence to deliberately inflict pain on an athlete
Threw something at an athlete with intent to hurt

In an attempt to better understand inappropriate or abusive behavior among high school coaches, I have

collected data from three separate studies. In the first study I asked 900 athletes if their coach had done the listed action towards them. In the second study, I asked approximately 500 coaches if they had ever done the described action to an athlete, if they consider it inappropriate, and if they consider it bullying. And in the third study, I asked another group of 250 former athletes if a coach had ever done the described action to them, if they consider it inappropriate, and if they consider it bullying.

What Was Learned

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of the findings, I will share a few.

- First, coaches are least likely to do physical actions as reported by both coaches and athletes. This makes sense as one can often see the results of physical actions.
- Second, athletes are more likely to report that the various physical, relational, and verbal actions occurred than are coaches. For example, 55% of athletes compared to 45% of coaches reported they have poked fun at an athlete, 81% of athletes compared to 61% of coaches considered embarrassing an athlete in front of others as inappropriate, and 60% of athletes compared to 43% of coaches considered a dirty look meant to hurt an athlete as bullying.
- Third, athletes are more likely to think the actions are inappropriate and considered bullying than are coaches.
- Fourth, both athletes and coaches report the physical actions as being more inappropriate and labeled as bullying. Perhaps this is one reason why they are less likely to do them.
- Fifth, verbal actions are least likely to be considered inappropriate and bullying but those are the things that athletes and coaches both report to happen most frequently.
- Sixth, collectively, for all of the actions, approximately three-fourths of coaches indicated the actions were inappropriate, and approximately half indicated they considered the action as bullying. As mentioned earlier, responses for athletes were even higher.
- Seventh, the items reported being done most frequently by both coaches and athletes are: poked fun at an athlete (athletes 55%, coaches 45%), name calling without hurtful intent (athletes 56%, coaches 31%), embarrassed an athlete in front of others (athletes 50%, coaches 34%), critical comments meant to hurt an athlete (athletes 36%, coaches 7%), dirty look meant to

hurt an athlete (38%, coaches 14%), and set an athlete up to look foolish (athletes 27%, coaches 8%).

Two Big Questions

This raises two questions; first, are these actions inappropriate, and second, are they bullying. Based on these findings, on one hand it is easy to understand how some coaches might be accused of inappropriate or abusive practices. If one does not think an action is inappropriate or bullying, there is no reason for a coach not to use that action when interacting with athletes. For many coaches, their coaching practices mirror that of coaches for whom they had previously played. Unfortunately for those coaches, what was once accepted as allowable is no longer accepted.

On the other hand, it is hard to understand how anyone coaching in today's society is not culturally or socially aware enough to recognize what is acceptable and unacceptable. Is it perhaps that some coaches believe they have immunity for their actions because they are simply coaching and what happens during practice stays within the bounds of the practice field? Coaches use any number of excuses to rationalize their actions including moral justification ("All coaches lose it now and then"), backhanded apology ("I'm sorry, I got carried away a little bit; but we really need the athletes to try harder if we're going to win"), it could have been worse comparison ("I didn't touch anybody, it's not like I push them around"), escalation of stakes ("If you can't take how I am doing things, get off the team"), mental toughness argument ("We are tough on our athletes so they can handle the competition – we build mental toughness"), secrecy and building team culture ("we'll handle this stuff in our family").

But still...

A major challenge in coaching is to think critically about the distinctions between 1) behaviors designed to instruct and motivate, 2) behaviors that are teasing or engaging, and 3) behaviors that cross a line into being hurtful or harassing toward a young person. One coach said, "There is a fine line sometimes in disciplining your team and challenging your team to get to another level. Even in conditioning. Kids get tired and they want to stop and you have to push them to another level. When kids are going through it, it's tough. But when it's all said and done, most kids appreciate being pushed because you find out more about your inner self having been through that than if somebody does not push you to demand your best."

It is clear that not all coaches perceive and define inappropriate and bullying actions in the same way. It is therefore incumbent upon coaching education programs in colleges and universities, coaching associations, and sport related organizations to more thoroughly help coaches understand which coaching practices are unacceptable and should not be used. Granted, some of these actions are difficult to interpret. For example, what is a dirty look meant to hurt? A coaches' glance at an athlete may be interpreted in different ways by different athletes, and certainly different from what a coach intended. Do we simply prevent this by telling coaches not to look at athletes? Of course, that is not the answer.

Awareness and Do Better

What it comes down to is awareness. Coaches must become aware that certain words and actions carry various meanings and are understood differently by different people. Further, coaches must make every effort to listen to their athletes and eliminate or redefine those actions that are blatantly inappropriate. For example, throwing something at an athlete. Just do not do that. Problem solved.

Emotionally abusive coaching practices might be best prevented through an enhanced focus on the education of coaches on things such as ethical coaching, conduct, and alternative non-abusive strategies for athlete development. Attendance at conferences, discussions with assistant coaches, and further coach education will all help coaches become more aware. Sometimes an incident of harm is brought to a coaches' attention. For example, an athlete quits the sport because of something a coach said or did or an athlete makes a comment to a coach.

For sure, coaches learn from mistakes and get better with maturity and experience. It was once said, "Wisdom comes from experience and experience comes from mistakes." And finally, the practice of self-reflection can change a coach. Reflections on the effectiveness of the behaviors, a new found concern for athlete well-being, a greater awareness of personal reputation, and discovering that coaching in an emotional abusive way is not enjoyable.

In closing, As Maya Angelou said, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

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