

GROWING CHAMPIONS FOR LIFE

Positive Strategies for Helping Kids Win at Life and Sports

How the Best Coaches Get More of the Behaviors They Want

By David Benzel



If you have coached for any length of time you probably have had these conversations in your head more than once:

“How can I get my athlete to start doing... this or that?”

And...

“What will get this athlete to stop... such and such?”

Or...

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“Why does my team keep struggling with... fill in the blank?”

Effective coaching is an art.

A balanced mix of instruction and inspiration can bring about a positive learning environment. But with countless personality traits and varying skill levels on one team, finding that balance can be tricky.

What things can you do as a coach to bring about more of the behaviors that will make your athletes and team successful?

Here are 6 RESPONSES that will always produce better results than these 6 REACTIONS to avoid.

1) Encourage Rather Than Criticize

For the most part, young athletes desire to please. They want their parents to be proud of them and they want their coach to be impressed with their performance.

As a result, responding with encouragement goes a long way when you are trying to cultivate optimism and positivity in your athletes. And on the flipside, criticism can quickly squash even the most eager efforts.

Have you ever witnessed the visual effects of either one of these? A child that is encouraged seems to stand taller and looks more confident. And if you have been around when an athlete is criticized you might have noticed slumped shoulders and a defeated expression.

Pro Tip: When encouraging an athlete, aim to be SPECIFIC. For example, instead of saying, “great job Jonny.” You might say, “your dribbling was fast and more controlled today.”

2) Educate Instead of Complain

Every mistake that is made becomes a teaching moment.

Even the most skilled athletes can learn something – about the sport, themselves, and their opponents – at every practice and every competition.

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Coaches that aim to educate their athletes rather than get sucked into a habit of complaining, develop a team that is supportive and accepting of others.

Pro Tip: At the practice following a game begin by having a 5-10-minute conversation answering the question, “What can we learn from the last game?” Do this regardless of the outcome and engage everyone. Keep it positive and not targeted on any one player or mistake.

3) Uplift and Never Humiliate



Some athletes love to be the center of attention and they revel in the moments when the focus is on them. For others, the mere thought of being “called out” or used as an example is mortifying. And then, of course, you have many athletes in between the two extremes.

As a coach, it is important to know your athletes’ personal preferences.

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What might seem like a way to uplift a child before her teammates could actually be quite humiliating. Developing a place that feels safe to each athlete is essential for growth.

Pro Tip: Always respect and work within the tendencies you discover in your athletes. Treating them all the same is not effective or even realistic. (None of us interact with everyone in our lives in the same way.) Embarrassing, ridiculing, or humiliating anyone on the team should never be modeled or tolerated.

4) Praise Efforts – Avoid Blame

Whether an athlete works hard through a practice set, achieves a sought-after goal, or just plain struggles during a game, praise his efforts.

This is not to say that you should be throwing out praise all day long.

It needs to be earned.

But successful results are not the only things to be celebrated. Persistent effort is worthy of praise. And it sets the stage for developing fortitude in young athletes.

Pointing a finger in blame might be tempting after a missed opportunity or a failure to perform a simple skill but it will never inspire your athletes toward greatness.

Pro Tip: Enlist the help of your team captains and older athletes to praise the efforts of their teammates. Anytime purposeful effort is noticed it should be applauded. Remember to keep in mind the personality of the recipient. Praise can be given in a quiet word of encouragement or in acknowledgment before the whole team.

5) Attentive Not Neglectful

Certain personalities draw attention.

In the team setting it might be the “star” athlete or it could be those few “troublemakers” that always seem to be testing your limits.

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However, as the leader it is important to be attentive toward all your athletes – the quiet ones and those lacking drive or skill, need your coaching just as much as those on center stage.

Athletes want to know that you care AND that you are watching – regardless of where they are on the roster.

When you are attentive to each of them you build confidence. Neglecting those who don't seem important or who just rub you the wrong way does not go unnoticed by the individual or the other team members.

Pro Tip: Take a calendar and put the name of one or two athletes on each practice day. Regardless of what is going on that day be sure those particular athletes are on your radar for that practice. It might be that you work individually with them on a technique or it could be that you try to catch them doing something well and acknowledge it.

6) Reward Not Punish

Coaching is going to test your patience. That is inevitable.

It is important to have a mindset that you are hoping to catch your athletes doing something right rather than find them doing something wrong.

That is not to say you turn a blind eye to inappropriate behavior.

But it is important to recognize good behavior, and proper execution is quickly reinforced with reward – whereas punishing a mistake or bad decision can establish a sense of mistrust or angst.

Pro Tip: Create an emotionally safe place for your athletes by always looking for creative ways to reward good behavior. For the sake of clarity, there is a difference between taking disciplinary action for inappropriate conduct and punishing a team or individual for a performance mistake or lost game.

Final Thoughts

Whether you are in the role of coach, parent, co-worker, or friend quick reactions rarely produce good results. Well-thought-out responses and purposeful mindsets play a large role in helping to develop the kinds of behaviors that will serve the team well and build character in your athletes for the long haul.

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