



Coaching Today's Athlete

Working with Gens Z and Alpha: Between COVID isolation and living in the digital age, social-emotional and verbal communication interactions have been limited and at times are socially discouraged due to the ease of text messaging platforms.

What we know about these generations:

- They want and need to know you care about them.
- Crave more praise than prior generations of athletes.
- Want to feel as though their views are heard, respected and not judged, even if you disagree with them.
- They need to know you'll follow through on what you say in order to build trust.
- Strong desire to understand the rationale behind activities and decisions.

Strategies to help your interactions and relationships:

- Help them feel heard. Inserting "I hear you" before responding with your instruction will go a long way.
 - Example: "Thank you for sharing your feedback. I will take that into consideration. For now, we are going to do it this way."
- Manage your own emotion before responding.
- Respond with curiosity. This includes both language and tone you are asking.
 - Example: "It looks like you are frustrated or don't agree. Help me understand what you're thinking."
- Check in on your athlete about how life is outside the gym. This lets them know your relationship is not just performance contingent.

Article for additional reading:

<https://appliedsportpsych.org/blog/2019/03/coaching-generation-z-athletes/>



Communication Strategies & Scenarios

Scenario: Holding to team/gym standards and behaviors

Does your gym have rules each athlete has to sign? If so, make sure you review the behavioral standards with the athlete to ensure understanding. Without that step, it is easy to get the answer “I didn’t understand/know.” When an athlete is not acting in alignment with the gym/team standard(s), help them build the communication skills and accountability by asking them questions first before telling them they’ve done wrong.

Example: “How does (insert athlete behavior) align with our team standards?”

Follow-up: “What is one thing you can work on today to be more in alignment of this standard?”

If the athlete is unable to identify something specific, this is where you can help them through positive reinforcement by saying something like, “(insert behavior) is something I’ve seen you do before and it seemed to work well. Do you think this is something you can be intentional about today?”

Scenario: Blaming one another/finger pointing

- Base blaming top (or vice versa): Pull the base(s) aside, let them know you notice their reaction, and gain clarity.

Example: “I can see you’re frustrated. Help me understand what you believe the responsibilities of the base are.”

This helps you and them gain insight about their true understanding of their role, helps them naturally take ownership, and allows you to fill in the gaps of knowledge. If they are unable to answer or their response is missing key aspects, this is your opportunity to educate in a non-shaming way.

Example: “Yes, those parts are important. A few things I would add that I’d really like you to focus on are...”

Scenario: Athlete is practicing to the point of detriment (e.g., wants to keep taking reps to make it perfect)

We want to be careful with this one to validate their hard work and desire to be the best they can be, while educating them on the potential downfalls of overtraining (e.g., physical and emotional burnout, increased rate of injury, decline in performance due to overthinking or expecting perfection). If you have a story to share with them about

yourself or another athlete (share anonymously for the other athlete's privacy) that went through something like this, do so. Hearing your stories tends to lead toward greater buy-in than pure education.

- If you have an athlete in the gym that you trust and has struggled with this in the past, this is also the perfect opportunity to utilize the peer support system. As a coach, sometimes your advice is seen as a parent telling them what to do. Many athletes respond better when they get advice from a trusted peer.

An example of how to express concern and validate their hard work: "I see how hard you're working. I very much appreciate your dedication to doing the work to achieve your goals, and I want to make sure you're able to do that. I also want you to have fun and enjoy the sport for a long time, so I worry about you pushing yourself too hard leading to burnout or injury. Part of my role is to keep you from experiencing either of those things, so know when I say "no" to another rep, it's because I care about you.

Scenario: Parent is questioning your decision

Your response will be dependent on the relationship you have with this parent and their level of involvement. Asking you a clarifying question is appropriate and can be helpful for the parent and athlete. You do not need to over-explain your decision, though parents do deserve some information to understand their child's role.

The parent is technically your client, so we want to keep good working relationships while also know too much information is inappropriate and can lead to sideline coaching. Express your gratitude for them wanting to understand. Reflect their child's goals for performance and development and identify how your decision aligns with the process it takes to achieve those goals. Encourage the parent to help their child understand the decision from this lens.

Example: "I appreciate you wanting to understand and support your athlete. I know Josie's goals are to make the Senior NT. There are different routes to getting there, and I take her and her teammate's strengths into consideration when making decisions. She has amazing flexibility and highlighting that in the mixed pair would allow her greater visibility and opportunity to score for Senior NT exposure.

I truly want to help your athlete achieve their goals. What would be most helpful is garnering your support in helping them understand the process we discussed today if they come home complaining. Hear them out, while encouraging your athlete to stay process focused. Help them create a dialogue to come to me to ask clarifying questions. I'd be happy to have a discussion with them directly."