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Developing a Caring Coaching Climate Fosters Confidence
"Kids don't care what you know, until they know that you care."

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Lead Summary: When athletes buy-in to a positive training climate their training effort, enjoyment, and desire to continue all increase. This article focuses on practical approaches coaches can use today to promote a safe, personalized, and respect-filled atmosphere – integral building blocks for developing a successful caring climate.

Successful coaches often describe the importance of fostering positive, intense, caring team climates. As coaches, we value our athletes' improvement, health, and achieving their full potential in and out of the weight room. If we did not care, we would not put in the long hours, extra days, and emotional energy necessary to be truly influential coaches.

How we present our training and ourselves to athletes^[1] determines our training climate – the relationships built among athletes, as well as between athletes and ourselves. Research suggests that our influence is greatest when caring and cooperation are emphasized over intra-squad competition; importantly, adolescent sport participants have “reported being most motivated by enjoyment.” (2, pg 267;5) Participants in positive, caring climates have consistently reported higher enjoyment, effort, and interest in future activities. (4) Exactly what we want to hear from our athletes! So, what makes a climate caring? A caring climate is determined by “the extent to which individuals perceive a particular setting to be interpersonally inviting, safe, supportive and capable of providing the experience of being valued and respected.” (3, p. 70)

Building Caring Relationships

Though some caring climate development techniques may seem simple or require minimal extra effort, their consistent implementation is essential. Successful implementation helps build an intense, caring climate that athletes enjoy and work hard in. (3,4) The athletes' resulting buy-in may become the lynchpin to maximizing athlete success. This certainly reimburses the extra effort on our part.

Learning and using our athletes' names

Learning and using our athletes' names shows we view them not solely as a group, but as distinct individuals. (3,4) Until we use their names daily, they will not realize we know who they are! Using their names consistently represents the effort we make to know each athlete at a basic, but important, level. (3,4)

How well we use athletes' names is easy to track and may reveal positive or negative patterns we have unconsciously developed overtime. A negative habit might be highlighting the same handful of specific individuals, or always catching certain individuals when they frustrate us. Knowing the pattern, we can then set goals to change. For example, we may focus on using each athlete's name at the session's start and end; using each athlete's name five times during a session; or catching specific athletes when they are doing well. Even when we do use names well, there may be an individual or two we unconsciously and unintentionally notice less. In this situation, we can target the goal to increase our use of those specific athletes' names during training. When we use our athletes' names, they heed the information more, because they *know* to whom it is being targeted.

Recognizing each athlete's health and attitude

Recognizing and responding to changes in our athletes' health or attitude when they arrive, illustrates the individualized attention we give. This may come through in how we adapt a particular athlete's training challenge level to match his/her energy level, sickness, injury, or other negative or positive performance influencing factors. Genuinely getting to know our athletes opens the door to building trusting relationships, which can enhance their view of us as caring about each one as a person.

Respecting all individuals

We have the opportunity to clearly illustrate respect for our athletes, peers, and competition. Two ways to express respecting our athletes are being prepared/organized for training, and truly listening to their input/opinions.

Being prepared for our athletes arrival shows we respect their desire to improve and view their training time as a precious commodity. By having the program available and the training area well organized for the day's training, we and the athletes' can be getting into the "training mindset" as soon as they arrive. Additionally, we can use these first few minutes to give individual attention to our athletes, during which we may note potentially necessary training adjustments. We can also use this time to help our athletes determine the day's training goal(s); reassess short and long term training goals; review what they accomplished the last training session/week; or connect what we are doing in the weight room to their sport performance. Through these personal interactions and focus on our athletes' goals/improvement, they will realize we have made them and their training a top priority.

Another way we can show our athletes are a priority is by sincerely asking for and listening to their input. A few examples include: enabling anonymous comments/feedback; having individual athlete meetings over the course of training; and/or during regular interactions in and out of training sessions. Another successful approach has been using athlete-requested activities/skills in the next day's warm-up, or in a special, upcoming training session. An important aspect for successful implementation for the latter approach, in particular, is that the athletes know the deadline for turning in requests. This helps to ensure we have enough time to properly design this special training session. No matter which approach we use, when we truly listen and explain our reasoning, our athletes get to feel more involved in the whole training process.

Enhancing Relationships – Techniques and Benefits

Developing an intense, caring climate involves other, detail-driven, high-effort interactions, which – when done consistently – can become automatic behaviors, just like the techniques mentioned above. For example, constantly giving specific, individualized feedback on their improved movement, mobility, assessment, or sport performance capability exemplifies the highly detailed attention we give to each and every one of our athletes. Making these connections for our athletes helps them

recognize in-training improvement, and how training affects their sport performance. This gives us the opportunity to educate our athletes by connecting their sport performance to proper technique, muscular recruitment, and determining the appropriate challenge level.

Although the above techniques may not necessarily take our extra time and can become natural habits, they do require high levels of our energy to maintain at consistent and optimal levels. As our athletes relate to these caring techniques, they will start relating more to us as well. This means they will notice if we slip in our habit of using their names consistently or remembering how much they improved since the last training session. Additionally, they will start mimicking the caring techniques we consistently employ, by using each other's names, highlighting each others' successes, or knowing each other in and out of training. All of which is related to athletes reporting greater effort and enjoyment when experiencing more positive and supportive climates. (4,5)

Central to developing a caring climate is our relationship-building process with each athlete. This does not mean becoming best friends. It does mean learning about their lives in and out of training. This will make us and our training sessions a "safe place" to be – a place athletes want to be! They start sharing their high moments with us – doing well on a test, getting into college, making big plays – and seeking our advice during more difficult times. This may enable us to increase our athletes' self-esteem. This may be especially important to our athletes experiencing easier transitions – entering middle or high school – as one's perceived competence in academia and athletics has consistently predicted one's self-esteem (1,2). It is, therefore, important we remember just how much we influence all our athletes' future character, not just the most gifted.

We will never know how, when, or whom we will influence most. A handful may later thank us; however, the majority will continue on in their lives without our ever knowing the extent to which we shaped their character and personality. To have an idea of the impact we can have, simply think back to your own coaches. Most likely we are a coach today, in part, because of coaches from our youth. While we coach

athletes how to remain healthy and fit for life, we are also modeling our interaction and leadership style. Intentionally developing a caring climate can positively influence our athletes for a lifetime.

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[1] Athlete will be used as a term to cover any individual trained, whether a competitive athlete or PE student.