

A COACH'S GUIDE TO EFFECTIVELY COACHING TOUGHNESS



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WHAT IS TOUGHNESS?

When the clock is winding down in a challenging game, mentally tough athletes and teams continue to compete with confidence, focus, and effort until the final whistle.

Whether it's staying composed under pressure, believing in their ability to respond to setbacks, pushing through fatigue, or learning from mistakes in the moment, this inner strength helps athletes navigate challenges and perform at their best. Mental toughness is the ability to manage the demands of training, competition, and everyday life while remaining focused, resilient, and in control under pressure—allowing athletes to unlock their potential when it matters most. ¹

BENEFITS OF BEING MENTALLY TOUGH

This mindset extends far beyond the scoreboard. When coaches help athletes develop genuine mental toughness, they aren't just helping them handle high-stakes competitive moments - they are building the internal strength young people need to navigate real-world challenges by developing lifelong skills, including:

- ✓ Improved stress management
- ✓ Better decision-making
- ✓ Boosted perseverance
- ✓ Improved self-esteem
- ✓ Lower anxiety ¹
- ✓ Improved emotional regulation ²
- ✓ Increased resilience
- ✓ Better performance



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A SHIFT IN COACHING TOUGHNESS

For many years, mental toughness has been associated with a “tough love” coaching style. The thinking is straightforward: if athletes were exposed to harsh criticism, intense pressure, and demanding environments, they would become more resilient and better prepared to handle adversity in sport and life.

Many coaches who adopt this approach do so with good intentions. They genuinely want their athletes to perform at their highest level, persist through challenges, and develop the strength needed to succeed both in sports and in life.

However, research suggests that toughness is not built through fear, shame, or constant criticism. In fact, coaching environments that rely heavily on negative emotions can undermine confidence, increase fear of mistakes, and reduce athletes' willingness to take risks and learn.

Over time, these environments can hinder skill development, performance, motivation, and enjoyment.

When athletes normalize this harsh treatment, they learn to tolerate or replicate it in other areas of their lives. ³

Today, we know that athletes develop genuine mental toughness not when they are broken down, but when they are consistently challenged, supported, and equipped with the skills to respond effectively to adversity.

The High-Performance Shift: True toughness isn't built through fear or intimidation; it is built through internal skills and capability. Coaches who create environments that foster the four core pillars of mental toughness - **confidence**, **challenge**, **commitment**, and **control** - help athletes develop the resilience and mental strength needed to perform at their best and thrive both on and off the field. ¹



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STRATEGIES TO COACH TOUGHNESS

Research suggests that mental toughness is built through four interconnected pillars: **confidence, challenge, commitment, and control.** ¹ Rather than relying on fear or criticism, coaches can intentionally create environments that help athletes develop the skills needed to perform under pressure, respond to adversity, and grow through challenges.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

An athlete's foundational belief in their own ability to contribute to outcomes, engage others for support, and overcome adversity.

- ✓ **Build Trusting Relationships** - Athletes who feel supported by their coach and teammates are more willing to take risks and respond productively in tough moments. Consistent encouragement and emotional support create the foundation athletes need to recover from adversity and perform at their best.
 - ✓ *Instead of: "Play better. You are letting the team down."*
 - ✓ *Try: "I know this has been a tough game. Keep competing; we've all got your back."*

- ✓ **Create a Sense of Belonging** - Ensure every athlete knows they are a valued member of the team. When athletes feel accepted for who they are and understand how they contribute to the group, they are more confident in their role and their abilities.
 - ✓ *Instead of: "If you want to contribute to this team, work harder and become a starter."*
 - ✓ *Try: "Everyone on this team has a vital role to play. We win or learn as a team."*



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RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES

The ability to view obstacles, setbacks, and change as opportunities for growth rather than threats.

- ✓ **Reframe Mistakes as Information** - Mistakes are a crucial part of learning. When athletes feel safe taking risks without fear of negative consequences, their growth accelerates. Coaches can help athletes develop resilience by focusing on what can be learned from mistakes instead of dwelling on the error and its consequences.
 - ✓ *Instead of: "That was a terrible backhand. Give me 3 laps."*
 - ✓ *Try: "I love what you were trying to do with that return, but the angle wasn't there. Next time, when you're forced backwards, look for an open area on the court. We'll keep working on it."*
- ✓ **Keep Athletes in the Learning Zone** ⁴ - Growth happens when athletes are challenged appropriately—pushed beyond their comfort zone but not overwhelmed. In a Learning Zone, athletes feel safe to take risks, make mistakes, and improve. Fear, excessive pressure, and unrealistic expectations can push athletes into a Panic Zone, where learning and performance decline.
 - ✓ *Instead of: "If we can't figure this basic drill out, we'll just run lines instead."*
 - ✓ *Try: "Hold up, let's bring it in. We're losing our shape and getting frustrated because we're rushing. Let's walk through spacing one more time, and then I want to see us execute at game speed."*



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DRIVING COMMITMENT

The internal drive to stay engaged, put forth effort, and persist through challenges over time.

- ✓ **Process-Oriented Goal Setting** - Athletes are more motivated when they understand how daily actions connect to improvement. Collaboratively setting process goals helps athletes take ownership of their development and stay committed through difficult moments.
 - ✓ *Instead of: "You need to shave 5 seconds off your time, or you're never going to compete."*
 - ✓ *Try: "Let's work on your starting position. Can you commit to practicing 15 extra starts a week to improve your form?"*
- ✓ **Athlete Voice & Choice** - When athletes have opportunities to contribute ideas, solve problems, and shape team culture, they develop a greater sense of ownership. Ownership fuels commitment because athletes are working towards something they helped create
 - ✓ *Instead of: "This is how we do things on this team."*
 - ✓ *Try: "We aren't quite playing to our standard. What are you seeing out there and how can we improve it?"*



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INSTILLING CONTROL

A belief that an athlete's personal actions, choices, and efforts directly impact the outcome of a situation, regardless of external circumstances.

- ✓ **Teach Emotional Regulation** - Athletes perform at their best when they can manage their emotions under pressure. Helping athletes recognize signs of frustration, anxiety, or overwhelm—and equipping them with simple regulation strategies such as [deep breathing techniques](#)—allows them to think clearly, retain strategic information, and execute skills in the face of pressure. ²
 - ✓ *Instead of: “Get your head in the game! Stop losing your focus!”*
 - ✓ *Try: “I can see your frustration building. Try taking a deep breath in to regulate and re-focus.”*
- ✓ **Create Opportunities for Appreciation/Reflection** - Regularly dedicate time for athletes to reflect on their performances and appreciate the support they received from teammates. Guide athletes to focus on what is in their control (effort, mechanics) and what isn't (official calls, opponent behavior). Praise athletes for their specific, effort-based contributions rather than results or scores.
 - ✓ *Instead of: “Now that's how you hit a ball!”*
 - ✓ *Try: “Way to keep your eye on the ball! Your practice is paying off!”*

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