COACH TIPS FOR MANAGING THE PRESSURES OF PLAYOFFS



POSITIVE COACHING ALLIANCE

One of the most exciting and challenging parts of any season arrives when the stakes rise, and each performance determines who moves on. Tournaments and postseason play create an atmosphere of competition, excitement, and joy - while also introducing added pressure.

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT PLAYOFF PRESSURE OFTEN STEMS FROM THREE KEY FACTORS:

1. Increased feeling of being judged

As the stakes rise, athletes often feel every mistake is amplified and evaluated by parents, coaches, and peers. [1]

2. Fear of disappointing others

Research shows that the top driver of sports anxiety isn't just losing - it's the fear of letting down important adults. [2]

3. Unintentional coaching shifts

When the postseason arrives, adults sometimes change their tone, routine, and reactions, signaling to athletes that the environment has become tense or urgent. [3]

Use the practical strategies below to create an environment where your athletes can manage added pressure, feel supported, and compete at their best.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES:

MODEL EMOTIONAL CONTROL

Athletes look to you first. How you react to stress, handle adversity, and maintain composure gives your team a direct blueprint for their own behavior.

Try this: *Notice your stress triggers early. Model calm body language, a steady tone of voice, and constructive sideline responses - especially when mistakes happen during high-stakes moments.*

MAINTAIN PRACTICE ROUTINES AND PREDICTABILITY

Predictability lowers anxiety and restores an athlete's sense of control. Resist the urge to hold extra-long practices to address perceived flaws, introduce complex new strategies, or alter warm-up schedules right before a playoff game.

Try this: *Maintain your normal practice schedule and lean into the reliable routines that helped your team reach the postseason in the first place.*

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REFRAME STRESS SIGNALS AS EXCITEMENT

During a sports challenge, heart rate and breathing increase as the body gets ready to perform. Help athletes see these responses as signs that they're ready and excited to compete.

Try this: *Teach athletes that physical stress responses right before or during competition can be signs their body is preparing to perform. Help them shift their internal dialogue from "I'm nervous" to "My body is getting ready to compete."*

TEACH REGULATION TECHNIQUES

Equip athletes with concrete tools to regulate their emotions when stress levels peak. Learning to recognize feeling overwhelmed and reset in the moment benefits athletes both on the field and in life.

Try this: *Teach athletes quick regulation strategies, like breathing exercises, grounding techniques (focusing on something they can see, touch, or hear), or physical relaxation tactics (unclenching the jaw, relaxing the shoulders, or even splashing cold water on their face).*

REDIRECT FOCUS TO PROCESS OVER OUTCOMES

Fixating on win/loss outcomes increases performance anxiety and fear of failure. Focusing on execution and process goals maintains athlete confidence, builds resilience after errors, and keeps teams pushing forward when trailing.

Try this: *Frame team objectives around controllable metrics like their effort, incremental development, learning, and processing of mistakes rather than winning the game or surviving elimination.*

REMEMBER FUN AND CONNECTION

Athletes perform their best when connected to their joy of the game. If postseason play becomes overly rigid or intense, athletes can lose the intrinsic motivation that drove their success.

Try this: *Use fun team-building activities to help athletes connect, both on and off the field. Let athletes choose a favorite practice drill or game to ensure they stay anchored to the fun of the sport.*

CONDUCT INDIVIDUAL AND TEAM CHECK-INS

Regularly gauge where your athletes stand emotionally. Proactive check-ins provide a safe outlet for athletes carrying heavy expectations, pressure, and off-field experiences that affect how they show up.

Try this: *Take 60 seconds with individual athletes - especially those showing signs of stress - to ask how they are feeling and reinforce their value beyond stats, performance, or mistakes.*

1. Conroy, D. E., Willow, J. P., & Metzler, J. N. (2002). Multidimensional fear of failure measurement: The Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory. Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 14(2), 76–90.
2. O'Rourke, D. J., Smith, R. E., Smoll, F. L., & Cumming, S. P. (2014). Relations of parent- and coach-initiated motivational climates to young athletes' self-esteem, performance anxiety, and autonomous motivation: Who is more influential? Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 26(4), 395–408.
3. Smith, R. E., Smoll, F. L., & Cumming, S. P. (2007). Effects of a motivational climate intervention on athletes' anxiety and performance in youth sports. Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 29(1), 39–59.