

# STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING CRITICISM OF YOUR COACHING

Passionate athletes and parents/caregivers may sometimes cross the line with unsolicited suggestions or criticisms of a coach's strategy or methods. At their worst, these instances can leave coaches feeling frustrated, disrespected, or even uncertain about their decisions - especially when they occur in public. The following strategies can help coaches proactively manage and respond to such situations.



## CRITICISM FROM ATHLETES

### SET CLEAR PARAMETERS TO RECEIVE FEEDBACK

Establish expectations at the beginning of the season for how you would like to receive feedback. For example:

- *If you have feedback on my coaching, the drills we're using, or anything else, please connect with me before or after practice one-on-one.*
- *We will refrain from having any conversations that criticize teammates.*
- *I will be open with you about why I can or cannot implement any suggestions.*

### OFFER OPPORTUNITIES FOR ATHLETES TO USE THEIR VOICE

Engaging athletes in decisions can help them feel a sense of control and ownership over the team. This can keep them more connected to - and understanding of - your other decisions. For example:

- Give athletes the opportunity to pick the skill they will work on next practice.
- Let athletes pick a game to end practice with.

### USE A SELF-CONTROL ROUTINE

When responding to criticism, a self-control routine can help coaches manage their own emotions and respond more effectively. When coaches model this behavior, athletes learn practical strategies for managing their own emotions in challenging moments. For example:

- Take a deep breath in through the nose for six seconds, then out through the mouth for eight seconds before responding.
- Coaches can close their eyes, turn their head to the right until they feel a stretch in their neck, then turn their head to left until they feel a stretch in their neck before responding.

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## RECOGNIZE THEIR PASSION

An athlete who is providing criticism is showing an interest in the game and likely aiming to improve their own, and/or the team's experience. They likely just haven't learned how to express a difference of opinion in an appropriate way. Acknowledge the athlete's passion for improvement, while guiding them towards better responses. For example:

- *I love that you have taken an interest in improving our practices. Let's make sure that we talk about this one-on-one so I can better understand your thoughts and you can better understand mine.*

## PROVIDE INSIGHT INTO "WHY"

As much as possible, coaches should provide athletes with a quick rationale for training methods and practice plans. Doing so gives athletes the information they may need as to why you've made the decisions you have. For example:

- *Today we're going to work on dribbling with our weak foot so we can improve our control in every direction when confronting a defender.*

## CRITICISM FROM PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

### DEVELOP A COACHING PHILOSOPHY

Coaches should take the time to define their purpose for coaching and a plan to integrate it into their team. Doing so, and sharing it with athletes and their parents/caregivers, provides a reference point for why a coach makes the decisions that they make. For example:

- *I hope that, through sports, I can have a positive impact on my athletes - helping them develop both sports and life skills. I do this by meeting them where they are at, providing them opportunities to learn from failure, and making sure that they are having fun.*
- Check out PCA's [Developing Your Coaching Philosophy](#)

### HOST A PRE-SEASON MEETING

Welcome parents/caregivers and athletes to the team, introduce yourself, your coaching philosophy, and set expectations for the coming season. Opening the season with this clarity ensures everyone is on the same page and provides a foundation to return to if challenges arise. For example:

- Check out PCA's [Pre-Season Meeting Agenda](#)

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## OFFER TO MEET ONE-ON-ONE

If a parent/caregiver is persistent in sharing criticism, engage them in a calm, empathetic conversation. Encourage parents/caregivers to let their athletes self-advocate, but offer to connect with them if necessary. Offer to meet one-on-one and establish your requirements for feedback, for example:

- *We can't talk until 24 hours after a competition so any emotional build up dissipates.*
- *We can talk about your athlete's attitude or psyche, but the coach is in charge of decisions of playing time, lineups, and strategy.*

## ENGAGE PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

If expectations are continually ignored or public criticism continues, coaches should turn to a program administrator for support. Escalating the concern demonstrates its importance while ensuring coaches aren't left to manage it alone.

*This resource is based on PCA Trainer Will Jackson's thoughts on handling criticism from athletes and parents/caregivers.*