

3 Coaching Strategies to Manage Ongoing Rivalries

In some team [dynamics](#), there are going to be unavoidable rivalries: teammates will struggle for starting spots, personalities will clash over leadership responsibilities, and issues will arise with other teams. [Conflict](#) is normal and not always a problem on its own, but ongoing rivalries can slowly poison a [team](#). Nadia Kyba, MSW, TrueSport Expert and President of Now What Facilitation, has seen teams go through rough patches navigating these types of situations.

Here's how Kyba recommends coaches put a stop to rivalries early.

Set standards early in the season

Jealousy within the team can start from simple, easy-to-avoid misunderstandings. Inter-team rivalries tend to stem from competitive urges and athletes feeling as though they're being unfairly treated. As a coach, you can set the team guidelines and rules of play early in the season to minimize some of these issues.

"Team guidelines help if there is some sort of conflict or rivalry between teammates," says Kyba. "Having a system in place where they're clear on what the [expectations](#) around behavior are, and that everyone's bought into, gives players a sense of ownership and understanding."

Check in with your team by scheduling short meetings throughout the season to ensure that there aren't lingering undercurrents of problematic [jealousy](#) or rivalry.

Be transparent

[Discuss](#) how players can get into the starting lineup, expectations for how practices are run, and explain the metrics that are important to you as a [coach](#).

"If a coach is really clear about how they're making decisions, that takes away the opportunity to make assumptions, which can lead to rivalries," Kyba adds. "One thing I've noticed that leads to the rivalries is that coaches don't meet with athletes ahead of time to talk about how they're making decisions. In team sports, like soccer, basketball, or volleyball, oftentimes a coach will announce the starting lineup right before a game. And then players are left to have to process everything on the spot rather than having that team meeting a few days ahead of time to discuss the lineup and how the selection was made."

Assess the situation

What a coach perceives as a rivalry might be as simple as two people on the same team [not being friends](#) — and that’s okay, as long as they aren’t actively engaging in fights, [bullying](#), or disrupting the team. There’s an undertone in team sports that everyone on the team should be friends, but with young athletes, that’s not realistic or necessarily healthy to promote. And some jealousy can lead to healthy, not harmful, competition.

“It’s okay if athletes don’t love each other, they don’t have to be best friends,” says Kyba. “That diversity is actually what will make a team really strong, as long as they understand that they’re there for a common goal and a common purpose.”

At the end of the day, it’s easy to tell athletes to be good sports, but you need to also [model](#) that behavior on and off the field. If you’re yelling at the referee, cursing another coach, or complaining about players on the opposing team, you’re creating a culture where that kind of commentary is accepted and encouraged.

“I think the coach might not realize just how much kids necessarily soak up from them,” Kyba says. “If coaches are yelling at the referee, they’re modeling that it’s okay to question and yell at officials.”

Kyba adds that it’s also important to share guidelines and expectations with [athletes’ parents](#). Make sure they understand that [complaining or yelling](#) at the opposing team, referees, umpires, and especially at the other athletes on the field isn’t acceptable behavior in the stands, ever.



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