3 Ways Coaches Can Create a Circle of Care that Supports Athletes
By TrueSport

As a coach, it's easy to feel responsible for solving every problem that your athletes bring to you. You may find yourself trying to assess nagging knee pain, answer nutrition questions, or help an athlete manage pre-competition nerves. But trying to do it all yourself can leave you stretched thin and leave your athletes without the specialized support they need. That's why building a trusted circle of care matters for both you and your athletes, even if you have little or no budget.

Here, Charron Sumler, PhD, TrueSport Expert and Director of Mental Wellness and Performance for the Tennessee Titans, shares how coaches can build a circle of care that supports both athletes and coaches.

Why a circle of care matters for athletes and coaches
A circle of care is a group of people with different roles and expertise who work together toward a shared goal, Sumler explains. "Coaches shouldn't have to wear every hat and be the knowers of all things," she adds. "There was a time when it was expected that it was just the coach and their athletes, and that the coach had to do it all. But that's not the case today."

Knowing when to bring in other experts is part of effective coaching. "Coaches are experts in the sport, the game, and the relationship building and leadership on the team, but part of that leadership is to be able to identify the common needs of the athletes on the team, and identify who can best serve those needs," she says. "We want coaches to understand that no one needs to be an expert in everything."

Sharing that responsibility can also help coaches recognize and respond to athletes' needs sooner. "You need a range of experts that you can trust and rely on so that you don't have to be all things to all people," she says. "It's about sharing the responsibility with a team of other experts so that you can make better decisions. That shared responsibility allows you to catch problems earlier, because you have multiple perspectives paying attention to different metrics and signals."

But a circle of care isn't just beneficial for athletes: It's critical for coaches, says Sumler. "Having other experts you can trust can prevent some of the burnout coaches often feel when they're juggling too many inputs," she says.

1. **Identify your team's needs and trusted resources**

Every team's circle of care will look different. Think about your team's current needs: Are they dealing with nagging pain or more serious injuries? A sports registered dietitian, sports medicine physician, or athletic trainer may be high on your list. If athletes are having trouble dialing in their nutrition, a dietitian is a great resource. Depending on athletes' needs, a sports psychologist or mental performance consultant may also be helpful. Sport-specific coaches and strength and conditioning specialists can round out your network. For athletes navigating college recruiting or

name, image, and likeness (NIL) opportunities, your network might also include professionals with expertise in those areas.

Identify which of these experts you already know and trust in your community and ask for recommendations from other coaches if you don't already have an established connection.

Consider your own circle of care as well, says Sumler. You might ask a fellow coach to serve as a sounding board and offer to do the same for them. Regular check-ins with someone who understands the demands of coaching can give you space to discuss challenges and recognize concerns affecting you or your athletes before they become major issues.

2. **Build relationships that fit your budget**

Next, consider what your budget and resources allow. If you're a high school soccer coach who doesn't have a budget to hire a full-time athletic trainer, you can still build relationships with local professionals you trust. Is there a local physical therapist that you would recommend to families? What about a registered dietitian who has worked with athletes in your community? Could they offer an introductory team session, group rates, or other affordable ways to connect athletes with support? Some experts may be willing to volunteer time or offer free educational sessions as a way introduce their services to potential clients.

If you do have more funding, you may be able to bring in part-time or full-time professionals. An athletic trainer can provide dedicated support for athlete health and safety, while a dietitian might offer team education alongside individual appointments.

"At minimum, having a short list of recommended experts and resources that you can give to your team or send to caregivers can be extremely helpful," Sumler says. "You can be creative about how you bring your circle of care together in a way that benefits everyone."

While this sounds simple, building relationships takes time. Sumler recommends starting to build your circle of care in the offseason before an athlete urgently needs help. Consider meeting with prospective experts for a roundtable discussion during a time when you have the bandwidth to get to know them and discuss how you might work together.

"The goal is to have people you know and trust as part of your circle, not just names you found by searching online," Sumler says. "This is a big decision because you're recommending these people, so you do need to vet them and truly trust their expertise."

The goal isn't to keep athletes from seeking outside support. It's to make trusted resources easier to find and establish relationships that allow for greater access. Starting those conversations early gives you a chance to clarify roles, discuss communication expectations, and build a network that supports athletes, caregivers, and coaches alike.

3. **Create a communication plan**

If your circle of care involves ongoing collaboration rather than a list of recommended resources, start with a preseason meeting, says Sumler. Use that time to discuss the team's goals, clarify each person's role, and identify any potential challenges.

Athletes and caregivers should know who the experts are in the circle of care, which of them to reach out to in different situations, and how to best contact them. Make accessing support as straightforward as possible. For instance, if every athlete can book a 30-minute session with the dietitian during the season, provide clear scheduling instructions. As the coach, establish ways for athletes to connect with you, too, whether that's via email or during office hours at certain times of the week.

Members of your circle of care also need a plan for communicating with one another and responding to concerns. If a dietitian becomes aware that an athlete is struggling with under-fueling and overtraining, for example, what are their next steps? Laying out a clear chain of communication, while respecting privacy and professional responsibilities, is a big part of what makes a circle of care useful for athletes.

Make it clear that feedback about your coaching is welcome, too. For instance, if a mental performance consultant starts to notice that many of the athletes feel stressed after your critical halftime assessments, they should feel comfortable raising that concern with you and trust that you'll listen and consider it without reacting defensively.

Finally, establish a way to coordinate support without broadly sharing sensitive information. A shared, access-controlled system may help track agreed upon next steps and follow-up responsibilities, with athlete and caregiver permission as appropriate. Keep sensitive health details private and share only the information needed to coordinate care.

"Keeping track of when the experts are in communication with various athletes lets everyone have a better understanding of how the team is functioning and lets you as the coach know who and what to check in on," Sumler says. "It's less about knowing exactly what's going on and more about being able to better support the athletes. When you have a different point person for each concern or issue, keeping track of this helps avoid things falling through the cracks. We want to be able to see how things are going and know if more or different support is needed."

TAKEAWAY: For coaches, letting go of the 'have to do it all' mindset can be the best thing for your team's health and development. Building a trusted circle of care can help you meet their needs while protecting your own well-being. Whether this means bringing in dedicated staff, such as athletic trainers, or simply having a list of trusted experts that you recommend to caregivers and athletes, start by identifying your team's needs and available resources. Build relationships before problems arise and establish clear communications so everyone understands how to connect athletes with support.

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