

How Consistent Coaching Decisions Can Support Athletes and Reduce Stress

As a coach, you have to [make a lot of decisions](#) that shape athletes' experiences, team culture and well-being. Who gets to start each game, how to resolve player disputes, when to make team culture adjustments, and the smaller everyday decisions made during practice carry consequences. Over time, that constant decision-making can be mentally taxing and fatiguing—and can lead to coach burnout. Without a clear, consistent decision-making framework in place, those decisions can also take a psychological toll on your athletes' mental health, as well as on your own.

Here, [TrueSport Expert](#) and licensed clinical psychologist, Dr. Melissa Streno, explains why you need a decision-making process in place, and why consistency is key throughout the season.

Understand your goal in decision-making

You may be wondering, “Why should a coach care about the psychological toll of their decisions?” Some coaches may have been taught that athletes should simply accept decisions without question. But a coach's authority is most effective when it is paired with clear expectations, transparent reasoning, and consistent follow-through.

“If boundaries, expectations, and decision-making protocols aren't clear from the start, or consistent, it's going to be a long season of questions, having to go back on your word, and picking up a lot of pieces,” says Streno. “And that takes a psychological toll on you and your team.”

“Making consistent decisions is not always easy. Coaches may feel pressure to give more playing time to a particular athlete, favor a specific player, or avoid disappointing a parent,” says Streno. “But a strong decision-making process can help coaches return to the standards that are right for the team rather than making choices based on pressure or preference.”

The good news, though, is that preparation can save you time and stress. “The hope is that putting processes in place makes a coach's job easier in the long run, meaning they can keep the focus on what really matters,” says Streno.

Set protocols early on

Creating decision-making protocols may sound daunting, but Streno explains that pre-season planning can make difficult calls easier throughout the season without getting stressed about your own personal preferences and internal biases.

At the team level, it's important to get clear on your overarching values and goals for the season. Have a conversation with your athletes about the team culture you want to create and build your decision-making process around those standards, says Streno. This may include decisions about team selection, playing time, starting lineups, position changes, leadership roles, attendance, and consequences for lateness or breaking the rules.

Creating a [decision-making checklist](#) that outlines all the common scenarios you might face during a season, and the factors that you should consider for each can help reduce decision fatigue. Writing down the criteria can help coaches recognize and manage personal preferences and internal biases, making it easier to make decisions that support the team rather than decisions based on pressure from a particular athlete or caregiver. When creating criteria, Streno suggests asking yourself questions like, “Would I treat every other player like this?” and “With the information I have now, would I still feel good about this decision in five years?” Streno recommends sharing protocols as appropriate with both athletes and caregivers before the season begins. When athletes understand how decisions will be made, they are less likely to be caught off guard by an outcome they do not like.

“Having a public record of these processes is helpful for athletes and caregivers, and it can reduce the psychological toll because if an athlete or caregiver isn’t happy about a decision, you have a clear record showing how that decision was made,” she says. “When a player isn’t happy about a decision, it’s so helpful to be able to refer back to your protocols and say, ‘Remember in that initial team meeting, we talked about what the expectations were for playing time in terms of how often you’re at practice, and what a good attitude looks like.’”

While every player should be subject to the [same standards](#), you may need to communicate differently with individual players. Some athletes respond well to brief, direct feedback, while others may need more context or time to process difficult decisions. Use the same established criteria and processes for every athlete, then communicate the decision in a way that helps each athlete understand the outcome, hear the feedback, and identify a path forward.

“For example, you might have a player who held a starting role consistently over the years,” she explains. “And maybe something changes and you need to pull them from the starting lineup. That can potentially be challenging psychologically for them, but if they know exactly how you’re choosing the starting lineup and can see the decision-making process, it’s easier for them because they know what they need to do in order to make the starting lineup again.”

Enlist your own team

Decision-making is still one of the hardest things that a coach faces. That’s why it’s important for coaches to have their own support team in place, both to help with hard decisions and consult when creating decision-making protocols. This can be informal, says Streno. Your “team of consultants” could include other coaches in your school, an athletic trainer, sports psychologist, fellow teachers, or even close friends whose opinions you trust. When initially establishing the protocols, it may be helpful to work with other coaches within your athletic program to develop a shared set of guiding principles. Each team may need to adapt those principles to their own circumstances, but a common foundation can create greater consistency across the program.

After your protocols are established, you may still be faced with tricky decisions when things you didn’t foresee or plan for come up. In these cases, know who you can talk to when you need a “gut check,” says Streno. “Another coach, colleague, partner, family member, or friend who will listen when you want to talk through a decision is so helpful,” she says. “Even if you’re feeling 99 percent sure of yourself, it’s helpful to have reassurance. Often, coaches feel like they’re alone on an island, so having someone you trust to consult with is hugely helpful.”

She suggests making a list of your “consultants” when you’re in the early stages of developing your protocols, since having these people in place before there’s an issue makes it easier to reach out as soon as you need help. “Hopefully, you don’t have to use your consultants during a season,” she says. “But it’s nice to know who you’re going to call when you need to run a scenario by someone. Knowing you have that support [takes away a huge amount of uncertainty](#) as well as that feeling of being alone with your decision.”

Be consistent

While it’s important to share and explain your decision-making and communication processes with everyone on the team and their caregivers as appropriate, it’s arguably even more important to follow those standards consistently. Unfortunately, that’s often easier said than done. Unforeseen situations come up frequently, and the temptation to deviate from your protocols will almost certainly happen at some point.

“With decisions like starting positions, there are [a lot of emotions and feelings](#) that can come up,” Streno says. “But if from the start, the expectation is that you will be consistent and stick to the protocols, those feelings also are more consistent.” There is less of a psychological toll when players aren’t living in uncertainty and know exactly what they need to do to earn playing time or make the starting lineup.

Consistency does not mean refusing to adapt when new information is important. It means returning to the team’s established values and criteria, explaining when an exception is necessary, and applying that reasoning fairly. When players are not left guessing, they can focus less on uncertainty and more on the steps they can take to earn playing time, improve their role, and contribute to the team.

Be intentional with your communication

Clear decision-making is only effective if athletes understand it. As you establish and implement protocols, regularly communicate your decisions and the reasons behind them to the team. Reiterate those decision-making processes and show athletes how you’re using your checklists and protocols.

“Be intentional with your communication,” says Streno. “Make sure athletes understand why decisions are made, not just what the decisions are. They should understand why you’re doing something in this specific way—don’t just tell them the decision and say it’s because you said so.”

Your decision-making plan should also include a communication plan. Often, coaches get caught in a whirlwind of text messages, emails, phone calls and in-person conversations. Before the season begins, share how and when decisions will be communicated with athletes and caregivers. Additionally, specify how an athlete should communicate back to you if they want to ask questions or raise concerns about a decision. A clear chain of communication can protect your time, encourage respectful conversations, and help athletes practice advocating for themselves.

Even the best protocols will not account for every situation. For example, a player may miss practice because of an illness, family emergency, school obligation, or another circumstance that warrants a closer look. In those moments, flexibility may be appropriate. However, be open with the team and explain to them why you're deviating from your protocols.

"It's okay to tell your athletes that you're human and you are fallible," says Streno. "We do have to be prepared for some flexibility and spontaneity if things come up. But in those cases, it's important to be clear and communicate with players about the change and be open about the fact that you're deviating from the protocols this time. And then come back to consistency again."

It's also important to remember that your actions on the sidelines [are a form of communication with your team](#). Even if you're not speaking directly to them, athletes are looking to you to know how they should respond when a referee makes a difficult call or the team is under pressure. Your reactions can shape the emotional tone of the team. Streno suggests working on your own distress tolerance and mindfulness as much as possible so that you're able to emotionally regulate during heated moments of a match.

"Whether it's during a game or at a practice or in a conversation with a parent, you're role modeling actions to the athletes," Streno says. "And you will have times where you struggle with this. In those cases, be intentional about owning those moments and using them as teaching moments. Talk with your team often about how to process emotions on the field and during competition. Share your own past struggles, and the ways that you've been able to regulate how you respond in stressful situations."

TAKEAWAY: Coaching requires difficult decisions, but athletes should not be left to guess about how those decisions are made. Before the season begins, establish clear, values-based criteria for common decisions. Share the appropriate parts of your process with athletes and caregivers, apply the standards consistently, and communicate openly when circumstances require an exception. A transparent decision-making process can reduce uncertainty for athletes, make difficult conversations more constructive, and help coaches make fairer decisions with less stress and second-guessing throughout the season.

[Download the Coach Decision-Making](#) Playbook before your season begins to build clear-consistent processes for decisions about team selection, roles, play time, expectations, communications, and more.

Put your values into practice: Clear decision-making starts with a strong coaching philosophy. TrueSport's *Your Coaching Philosophy and Ethics* module can help you define the values that guide your coaching, navigate challenging situations, and lead athletes and caregivers with fairness and integrity.

Button: [Build Your Coaching Philosophy](#)



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