

6 Ways to Set Boundaries that Support Athlete Well-Being

Your role as a coach doesn't begin and end with practice and game days, and your responsibilities extend far beyond skills, drills, wins, and losses. When it comes to keeping athletes healthy and motivated, boundaries are essential and you can help athletes create boundaries for themselves, as well as establish team boundaries that promote both mental and physical well-being.

Here, [TrueSport Expert](#) and licensed clinical psychologist, Dr. Melissa Streno, explains how coaches can make simple adjustments to how they interact with their athletes to improve mental and physical well-being on and off the playing field.

1. Hold a pre-season or early season team meeting

[Team boundaries should be clearly stated from the very beginning](#), says Streno. Athletes should never have to wonder about things like communication protocols, the ability to skip a practice or competition if needed, or what's expected of them outside of regularly scheduled practice sessions. At the beginning of each season, hold a team meeting and lay out these boundaries and rules, and make sure that athletes and families have access to a document or email for future reference.

2. Encourage honesty about health

Often, athletes are nervous to share how they are feeling physically and mentally with a coach because they think they will be benched. Streno explains that while this may lead to more athlete participation in the short-term as athletes push through injuries, illness, and even mental health issues, this lack of communication can lead to more serious injuries, illness, and issues for athletes in the long-term.

From the start, [ensure athletes know that they won't be punished for needing a break](#). It's often better to let an athlete skip practice one day to recover from a cold or a minor muscle strain rather than forcing them to play through it, since that can potentially exacerbate the issue. Some athletes may even need occasional mental rest days, simply because the demands of school, work, and sport are weighing on them. Streno notes that it is important to truly stick to your word here and not penalize athletes who do miss practice for health reasons.

3. Set your own communication boundaries—and stick to them

Let athletes know the best way to communicate with you and with each other about team issues, says Streno. Should they email, or is there a team WhatsApp? During what hours can they expect a prompt response? [This helps preserve your own boundaries](#)—no coach wants to receive texts at midnight from an athlete asking about start time in the morning—and helps your athletes see what healthy boundary-setting looks like.

However, Streno is quick to note that once you make the boundaries clear, you have to practice what you preach. If you say that athletes should only expect responses from you via email during certain hours of the day, make sure that you're not sending emails outside of those times. You can even consider scheduling emails to model boundary-setting while maintaining some flexibility for yourself.

4. Plan how and when you will communicate important news

Athletes shouldn't be kept in the dark about when and how start lists and lineups for upcoming games will be posted, says Streno. There should be predetermined systems in place, so that students know that two days before the game, the starting lineup will be posted outside of the locker room by 4 p.m. There shouldn't be surprises or anxiety around the timing and style of already stressful news: Students shouldn't be checking emails, texts, and bulletin boards, anxiously guessing when and where the news will drop. Remember, young athletes [are already inundated with huge amounts of information coming at them in all directions](#), so making your communications as clear as possible can be extremely beneficial.

5. Help set expectations around “extra” activities

Unfortunately, a lot of young athletes are [caught up in a "keeping up with the Joneses" mentality](#) around things like extra coaching, regular chiropractor visits, working with sports psychologists, and playing for multiple teams. "I have athletes who are pulled out of school early to go to training before their other training, then they don't get home until 9 p.m., have dinner, do homework, get to bed at midnight, and get up at 5 a.m. to do it all over again," she says. "No wonder injuries and burnout are happening so frequently." Make sure that your athletes understand that these extras will not necessarily guarantee them better results or better spots within the starting lineup, says Streno.

6. Evaluate why athletes are pushing the boundaries

Finally, the key to setting strong boundaries for your athletes is to assess which boundaries are and aren't working. If your athletes are constantly texting you with questions after hours, this may seem like a boundary violation, but upon further reflection, you may realize that they're asking vital questions that you have failed to address in the appropriate channels. So, their seemingly problematic communication is actually based on a lack of communication on your part. Similarly, if several athletes are consistently asking to skip practice due to mental fatigue, you may need to check in on why they need the break. Are they over-scheduled elsewhere, or is the team dynamic emotionally taxing?

Takeaway

As a coach, you're in a unique position to help athletes learn to manage their own boundaries, and to set boundaries for the whole team that will help improve overall wellness. These boundaries aren't just good for the athletes; they can also benefit you and lead to better team performance.



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