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OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC  
COMMITTEE

# QUALITY COACHING FRAMEWORK 2020



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# Quality Coaching Framework 2020

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TEAM  
USA

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# Acknowledgments

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The quality of an athlete’s sport experience is directly dependent on the quality of the coaching received. The *United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee Quality Coaching Framework 2020 (USOPC QCF 2020)* provides an overarching set of principles that will inform, not prescribe, how to coach most effectively. The *USOPC QCF 2020* is a vetted, carefully crafted, evidence-based resource that establishes a common language and principles of quality coaching for all those working in Team USA coaching contexts.

The collaborative group that has authored, vetted, edited and completed this framework is dedicated to helping as many Americans reach the top of the podium as possible. Quality coaching and results-driven leadership are essential to putting athletes in the best position to maximize their full potential and well-being as they strive to be their best.

Lead author and world-renowned expert Dr. Wade Gilbert has guided the USOPC family to identify quality coaching at all levels of sport while also explaining the principles that are essential to success. The collaboration with Ted Miller and Human Kinetics, who served as our publisher and partner in this project, added a depth of research and knowledge from across the coaching and sport industry that has allowed this framework to be placed in a position for success in the modern context of sport.

Additionally, the members from our extended network of National Governing Bodies and coaching educators who were essential in developing this framework were able to root this document in relevance and reality for all in the field of coach education or development to bring these principles to life. Their contributions will benefit sport within the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic movements for years to come.

Lastly, we extend a heartfelt thanks to Chris Snyder, Christine Bolger, Nadine Dubina, Aubrey Watts and all other USOPC staff who contributed to the success of this framework. Your vision and commitment to serving our nation is an amazing team effort and an example of true servant leadership in the coaching profession.

The *United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee Quality Coaching Framework 2020* is meant to promote the incredibly positive attributes of sport coaching while furthering the legacy of Team USA. Please utilize this framework in a manner to advance your programming, coaching, athlete well-being and overall success.

Go Team USA!



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## Introduction

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# Value of a Coaching Framework

The right kind of coaching can help athletes reach their full potential and inspire a lifelong love of sport and physical activity. The wrong type of coaching can have just the opposite effect: burnout, dropout, injury, loss of enthusiasm or worse. The right kind of coaching must therefore be standard practice in serving American athletes. It is the type of coaching that the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) expects from all Team USA coaches.



## Advance the Coaching Profession

Sport coaching as a profession has advanced significantly, as has the understanding of athlete development. The latest scientific breakthroughs and highly effective coaching practices are regularly shared through thousands of academic journals and coaching newsletters. In addition, social media and digital sports programming present a constant barrage of coaching advice, although some are more enlightened than others.

Because it is so difficult for busy coaches to keep pace with the ever-expanding body of coaching information, the USOPC and other groups have distilled and disseminated the information in various forms. The American Development Model,<sup>1</sup> the International Olympic Committee Consensus Statement on Youth Athletic Development,<sup>2</sup> the *International Sport Coaching Framework*<sup>3</sup> and *National Standards for Sport Coaches*<sup>4</sup> are prime examples. Moreover, many USOPC National Governing Bodies (NGBs) have worked tirelessly to integrate these lessons and principles into their coaching education programs.

Despite these efforts, a visit to any sport venue in the United States will reveal that there still remains a considerable gap between what is known about quality coaching and what is practiced on a daily basis. To that end, the USOPC has taken the initiative to create a framework that outlines the core values and best principles that should guide and align collective coaching practices in the U.S.

## Strengthen Team USA

The USOPC defines Team USA coaching contexts as any coach-led activity conducted under the umbrella of and endorsed by U.S. NGBs, from grassroots sports to high-performance coaching. The *USOPC QCF 2020* will serve multiple functions for a wide range of beneficiaries working in these Team USA coaching contexts, including the following:

- Coaching education program providers who are (1) refining the structure and content of existing coaching education programming and (2) designing new coaching education programs
- NGB workgroups, which are charged with creating NGB- and sport-specific coaching standards
- NGB administrators, who (1) evaluate the quality of the coaching education programming they provide to their constituents and (2) evaluate and recognize quality coaches
- Coaching scientists and coach developers working in universities and organizations that partner with the USOPC's coaching education department and with NGBs in ensuring alignment of development efforts



- Sport organizations, programs and coaching associations that need guiding resources to support quality coaching

The *USOPC QCF 2020* will also help the USOPC's coaching education department make important progress toward achieving these mandated goals and objectives:

- Advance the profession of coaching in the United States through recognition and exposure
- Promote coaching certification and positive examples of coaching principles in action
- Close performance gaps by raising awareness of and supporting coaching education programming that is aligned through collaboration with NGBs and other partner organizations
- Support Team USA and the USOPC's sport performance division in the delivery of education about high-performance coaching while developing resources to support NGBs
- Deliver programming from the USOPC to fill gaps in current NGB and U.S. programming

## Provide Principles for Success

This document consists of six chapters, each focused on a different, but related, component of quality coaching. The chapters highlight the coaching principles associated with each subject.

The USOPC prefers "best principles" instead of "best practices." Prescribing best practices implies that there are specific strategies that will work well in any coaching setting. The phrase "best principles," on the other hand, acknowledges that practices always will need to be adapted to the local sport setting. Regardless of the situation, though, the practices should always be firmly grounded in universal principles of quality coaching.

These principles will be reinforced by key sources of information available on the *USOPC QCF 2020* page of the USOPC's Team USA website. And those sources will be further supported by a suggested reading list and Internet links to resources such as videos, webinars, online commentaries and articles.

Coaching is complex. The USOPC understands there is no single right way to coach that will fit for every unique coach, athlete and sport. However, the *USOPC QCF 2020* provides a common set of principles for making evidence-based, informed decisions about how we collectively should think of, speak about and enact quality coaching. We hope and trust you will find it helpful in your very important role.

# 1

## Quality Coaching

This chapter defines quality coaching in the Team USA context as follows:

The consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes' competence, confidence, connection and character in specific coaching contexts.<sup>1</sup>

This integrative definition of coaching effectiveness that serves as the foundation for the *USOPC QCF 2020* has been widely adopted by coaching scientists, coach developers and leading sport and coaching organizations around the world.<sup>2,3,4</sup> It is based on decades of applied research



and a comprehensive review of coaching, teaching, expertise, positive psychology and athlete development literature. In its development, the definition was vetted by coaches, coaching educators and major sport organizations around the world—including the USOPC.

Quality coaching, the definition says, has three distinct components: coaching knowledge, athlete outcomes and coaching environment. All three components are required to deliver quality coaching in any particular situation, as depicted in figure 1.1. So important are these components that a chapter is devoted to each in the forthcoming pages of the *USOPC QCF 2020*.

## Essential Coaching Knowledge

Coaches need knowledge in many areas because coaching is complex and coaches assume multiple roles. There are three broad types of coaching knowledge:

1. **Professional knowledge: Know your sport and how to teach it in a positive and inclusive environment.** Coaches should understand the sport culture, tradition, rules and history; be aware of the skills, tactics, training and safety requirements of the sport; perceive athletes' development and learning needs; and be able to apply their knowledge.
2. **Interpersonal knowledge: Know how to relate to and lead others.** Coaches must have the ability to connect to and work effectively with athletes and others involved in the sport setting, including officials, administrators, parents and program stakeholders. They should also communicate effectively, monitor and control their emotions and demonstrate leadership skills.

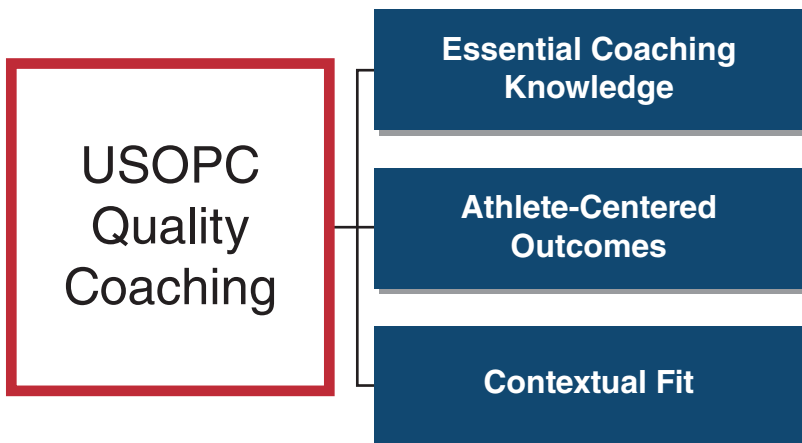


FIGURE 1.1 USOPC quality coaching components.

3. **Intrapersonal knowledge: Know yourself and how to sustain improvement efforts.** Coaches need a clear sense of purpose and core values, and they must strive to maintain perspective and balance. They should be aware of their coaching strengths and areas for improvement, and they should have the will and wherewithal to reflect and continually get better.

## Athlete-Centered Outcomes

Athlete well-being must be the priority for all coaches. Quality coaching leads to more than just capable participants and competitors: Quality coaching is driven by a quest for holistic athlete development, making better people while also making better athletes. These desired athlete outcomes generally can fit into four areas, referred to as the Four C's of athlete development. Coaching with an emphasis on building the Four C's demonstrates a commitment to athlete well-being—*building* athletes instead of *using* athletes:

1. **Competence:** sport-specific technical, tactical and performance skills; ability to adapt and improvise in competition; improved health and fitness; and healthy training habits
2. **Confidence:** self-belief, resilience, mental toughness and sense of positive self-worth
3. **Connection:** positive bonds and social relationships with people inside and outside of sport
4. **Character:** respect for the sport, ethical and morally responsible behavior, integrity and empathy

## Contextual Fit

With a quick search of the Internet, any coach can easily find and access countless training activities and recommended coaching strategies. Though such prescriptive coaching resources are readily available, they should not be implemented without attention to context. Quality coaching requires the ability to adapt one's coaching knowledge to the specific needs of the athletes and fit the distinctive features of the environment in which one coaches.

Although every coaching situation is unique in some way, it is helpful to consider what constitutes quality coaching in four defined environments that share many common characteristics. These coaching environments align closely with the stages of athlete development identified in the American Development Model (ADM),<sup>5</sup> as shown in table 1.1. More details on the ADM are provided later in the *USOPC QCF 2020*, starting on page 27.

**TABLE 1.1** Coaching Environment Alignment With Athlete Development Stages

Coaching environment	ADM athlete development stage
<b>Participation sport for children</b> Playful early exposure to the sport experience, with an emphasis on mass participation and building physical literacy	Stage 1: Discover, Learn and Play
<b>Participation sport for adolescents and adults</b> Opportunities to continue sport participation across the life span, with an emphasis on personal health, wellness and social connections	Stage 2: Develop and Challenge Stage 4a: Participate and Succeed Stage 5: Thrive and Mentor
<b>Performance sport for young adolescents</b> Competitive sport experiences that increasingly emphasize deliberate practice in pursuit of advanced skill development and performance	Stage 3: Train and Compete
<b>Performance sport for older adolescents and adults</b> Highly competitive sport experiences limited to a select few who are highly committed to achieving the highest possible level of expertise	Stage 4b: Excel for High Performance

**CHAPTER 1 | Takeaway**

Quality coaching does not happen by accident. Teaching, learning and honing quality coaching skills requires a mindful and diligent effort to address each of its three components while always giving primary concern to athlete well-being:

1. Essential coaching knowledge
2. Athlete-centered outcomes
3. Contextual fit

# 2

## Essential Coaching Knowledge

Becoming a quality coach requires a foundation of core knowledge that covers a wide range of subjects. Every coach enters the role with a unique foundation of education and experience. When first learning to coach, new knowledge is stored as isolated bits of information. With additional experience and careful reflection, coaches begin to see patterns, and the knowledge becomes more organized and easy to retrieve. The use of this process, referred to as building mental representations,<sup>1</sup> is a defining characteristic of quality coaches. Expert coaches differ from novices both in the quantity and quality of mental representations of their knowledge.

Skillful coaching rests on a strong foundation of essential coaching knowledge. In the United States, the *National Standards for Sport*





**FIGURE 2.1** Coaching knowledge components.

*Coaches*<sup>2</sup> traditionally has served as valuable guidance in identifying essential coaching knowledge. Since these standards were first introduced in 1995, much has been learned about quality coaching from the vast amount of coaching and athlete development research that has emerged. It is now widely recognized, including in the updated *National Standards for Sport Coaches*<sup>3</sup> released in 2019, that the foundation of essential coaching knowledge consists of professional knowledge, interpersonal knowledge and intrapersonal knowledge (see figure 2.1).<sup>4,5</sup>

## Professional Knowledge

Professional knowledge relates to two main functions of coaching: designing quality training sessions and guiding athletes to optimal performance in competitions. The ability to effectively teach and guide athletes requires a deep understanding of the history, rules and unique demands of the sport. Therefore, coaches' professional knowledge is measured by their experience and expertise, teaching and learning abilities, and aptitude for competition coaching.

### Sport Experience and Expertise

At a minimum, knowledge of sport-specific rules and safety issues<sup>2</sup> and mandatory requirements is a must for coaches in any environment. Also beneficial is an understanding of the sport's unique tradition and culture, which can be learned in part by studying or observing the sport. However, much of the traditions and cultures inherent in each sport are only learned through direct participation in the sport. In the performance sport

setting, therefore, some level of experience as an athlete in the sport is advantageous, although certainly not required. Direct experience as an athlete can help coaches to better relate to the challenges encountered by their athletes, and it has also been shown to build the athletes’ trust and confidence in the coach.<sup>6</sup> But that does not mean that the best athletes in a sport will necessarily be the best coaches.

## Teaching and Learning Abilities

Coaches who conduct training sessions that are most beneficial to athlete development

- set, or insist that athletes set, challenging and specific practice goals;
- keep athletes physically and mentally active throughout practice;
- give athletes choices and seek their input on practice design and
- conduct competitive and gamelike practice activities.<sup>7</sup>

These features collectively constitute what is often referred to as deliberate practice.<sup>1</sup> This type of practice is purposeful, intentional and designed to help athletes improve their skills. The ability to design deliberate practice training sessions requires an awareness of four basic principles of athlete learning (see table 2.1).

**TABLE 2.1** Principles of Athlete Learning and Sample Coaching Strategies

Athlete learning principle	Sample coaching strategy
1. Prior knowledge can help or hinder athlete learning.	Have athletes explain or demonstrate a skill before attempting to teach it to gauge their readiness to learn the skill.
2. Athlete motivation directly influences the learning process.	Ask athletes for feedback on the difficulty of learning activities to help find the right challenge–skill balance.
3. Skill mastery requires athletes to learn component skills.	Try describing, and then walking through, the steps needed to perform a skill before teaching it to your athletes.
4. Combine deliberate practice with targeted specific feedback.	Identify in advance feedback cues and bandwidths to help athletes meet learning and performance standards.

Reprinted, by permission, from W. Gilbert, 2017, *Coaching better every season: A year-round system for athlete development and program success* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 127.



Teaching is the heart of coaching. Knowledge of these four basic athlete learning principles provides a solid foundation for becoming a better teacher. Quality coaches take great pride in learning how to teach effectively.

## **Aptitude for Competition Coaching**

Optimal athlete performance in competition requires careful guidance before, during and after competition. Prior to competition, quality coaches strive to ensure their athletes are well rested and peaking at the right time. They also facilitate precompetition routines that help athletes find their individual zones of peak psychological and emotional states. Immediately before the competition, they ensure their athletes are sufficiently fueled to meet the energy demands of their event.

During competition, quality coaches carefully monitor athlete performance and intervene when needed. The ability to directly coach athletes during competitions varies widely depending on the rules and characteristics of each sport. However, as a general rule of thumb, quality coaches emphasize the three E's of competition coaching to guide their athletes to optimal performance: examine, encourage and educate.<sup>7</sup>

Competition coaching does not end with the athletes' performance. The moments following a competition are prime opportunities to start preparing athletes for the next competition or training session. Quality coaches encourage athletes to use postcompetition time to rest, recover, reflect on their performance and process their emotions—whether the main emotion is joy from succeeding or frustration after falling short.

## **Interpersonal Knowledge**

Interpersonal knowledge is a coach's ability to build positive and productive relationships with others. Whereas professional knowledge provides a foundation for knowing *what* to coach, interpersonal knowledge equips coaches with an awareness of *how* to coach each unique athlete and to work with others in the sport environment.

Interpersonal knowledge in coaching is most associated with emotional intelligence and transformational leadership.<sup>8,9</sup> Developing emotional intelligence and transformative leadership skills improves communication and contributes to positive and appropriate coach–athlete relationships. Athletes, and parents of young athletes, trust coaches to create safe environments. Quality coaches understand that abuse of that trust is never acceptable.<sup>10</sup>

## Emotional Intelligence

Quality coaching requires keen observation skills since coaches spend much of their time observing their athletes and thinking about how to create the right conditions for athlete development. In addition to observing an athlete's skill development, the coach should also be monitoring the athlete's feelings, emotions and motivation. Unlike technical or tactical skill deficiencies, which often are relatively easy to spot, the affective state of an athlete can be extremely difficult to gauge. Coaches with strong emotional intelligence are especially effective in

- perceiving emotions (identifying their own feelings and the emotions of others),
- using emotions (generating emotions to improve attentional focus, decision making and problem solving),
- understanding emotions (recognizing the causes of emotions and how emotions influence the behaviors of others) and
- managing emotions (controlling their own emotions and teaching athletes how to identify and regulate their emotions).

## Transformational Leadership

Leadership in sport is one of the most studied and complicated aspects of coaching. Athletes rely on coaches for leadership. However, quality coaches also teach their athletes how to become good leaders.

Current leadership models emphasize shared and transformational leadership. Coaches should therefore distribute leadership roles and responsibilities among their athletes and across their programs. When athletes and other members of the coaching environment are empowered to lead, it builds confidence and ownership in the sport experience. This leads to a greater sense of cohesion, sometimes referred to as collective efficacy.

Transformational coaches serve as positive role models, inspire others with a compelling vision, encourage and support athlete input and act in the best interest of their athletes. Transformational coaches serve athletes to help them achieve their goals. (This contrasts starkly with transactional leadership: Transactional coaches use athletes to meet their own needs.) Research shows that leadership that is shared and transformational enhances coach-athlete relationships and athlete enjoyment while contributing to improved performance.

## Intrapersonal Knowledge

It is now widely recognized that coaches themselves are performers, too.<sup>11</sup> Performing at their best requires that coaches constantly reflect and update their coaching strategies. This requires intrapersonal knowledge, the third type of knowledge that underpins quality coaching. Whereas professional and interpersonal knowledge concern what to coach and how to coach, intrapersonal knowledge is all about self-awareness, reflection and striving for continuous improvement.<sup>2,3</sup> This is essential for helping a coach identify his or her core values, improve coaching abilities and sustain a coaching career.

### Self-Awareness

Coaches coach for many reasons: to give back to sport, to help others grow and reach their goals, to earn a living and so on. But quality coaches don't just have a rationale for coaching—they have a *purpose*. A strong sense of coaching purpose should act as both a pull and push for coaches. It should serve to inspire coaches (pull) toward their vision and goals. It should also motivate (push) coaches to hold themselves accountable to the same high standards they set for their athletes.

A coaching purpose might be considered a coach's "why." A coaching "why" may not be evident or well defined early in a coaching career, but for astute coaches it becomes increasingly obvious and easy to articulate through regular reflection.

### Reflection

Intrapersonal knowledge is improved when coaches engage in regular and systematic reflection, which is the process of thinking about coaching. Quality coaches use two types of reflection: reflective practice and critical reflection.<sup>12</sup> Both types of reflection are stimulated by coaching dilemmas.

Coaches engage in reflective practice when they try to solve coaching problems. Problem solving is a regular part of coaching, and quality coaches seek out possible solutions from a wide range of sources. The best coaches often conduct experiments to test potential solutions. This might involve asking another coach or an athlete for feedback on the strategy before implementing it.

But the best coaches don't just aim to solve problems; they pause to analyze problems, referred to as critical reflection. With critical reflection, coaches first ask themselves probing questions—such as why something is a problem—before they try to generate solutions.

Because coaches are often pressed to make quick decisions, reflective practice is much more common than critical reflection. However, periodically suspending the tendency to try to solve a problem quickly, and setting aside time for inquiry and reflection, is a valuable way for coaches to revisit and refine their coaching purpose while also identifying areas for continuous improvement.

## Continuous Improvement

Quality coaches are confident, yet humble enough to recognize that there is always more to learn. Legendary college basketball coach John Wooden said it best when he stated, “It’s what you learn after you know it all that matters most.”<sup>13</sup>

Coaches typically wait until the end of a season to reflect on things they need to improve. The best coaches, however, are constantly identifying aspects of their coaching that need improvement.

Although small learning gains may be possible during the season, the best opportunity to improve as a coach comes from self-guided study in the off-season. Learning efforts are most effective when coaches focus their studies on either a topic or a coach. High-impact topics can be identified by reflecting on athlete and coach performance from the past season. To select a coach to study, the coach could review popular coaching autobiographies or ask peers to identify their favorite coaches from among all sports.

The learning benefits that come from regular and rigorous self-guided study are magnified when connected to the learning networks of other coaches. Participating in social media networks frequented by other coaches and attending coaching clinics are valuable ways to build and sustain a learning network. Building strong learning and support networks is critical, both for continuous improvement and for maintaining perspective as a coach.

### CHAPTER 2 | Takeaway

To coach effectively, it is not enough to have played or watched the sport, or to have merely read about how to coach. Quality coaching requires essential professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge used in coaching practice to meet the needs of athletes in that setting. Informed daily decisions and behaviors that serve the best interest of athlete well-being, the team and the program are the ultimate demonstration of quality coaching.

# 3

## Athlete-Centered Outcomes

All great journeys start with the end in mind. For coaches this means identifying what they hope their athletes will learn, become and achieve while in their guidance. Those desired outcomes serve as primary goals—meaningful and realistic targets that will keep the athletes’ development on track. Those target outcomes, when appropriately selected and set, also serve to engage and motivate athletes and foster their continued participation in sport.



This chapter is used to explain the value of adopting an athlete-centered, coach-driven approach that emphasizes the holistic development and well-being of athletes. This approach is effective because target outcomes are determined according to athletes' needs, and the process is guided by ethical coaching decisions and actions.

## An Athlete-Centered, Coach-Driven Approach

An athlete-centered, coach-driven approach that empowers athletes while improving their enjoyment, satisfaction, motivation and performance requires the coach to

- jointly set challenging, yet realistic, goals in line with the athletes' age and ability;
- encourage the athletes' input and initiative;
- provide a rationale for coaching decisions;
- recognize the athletes' goal progress as well as performance achievements;
- provide supportive, positive and constructive feedback;
- deliver coaching that meets each athlete's unique learning and development needs and
- account for life factors outside of sport that may affect goal attainment.

An athlete-centered, coach-driven approach requires selflessness and unconditional dedication to helping athletes reach their goals.<sup>1,2</sup> A defining characteristic of quality coaches is their focus on empowering and serving their athletes, not themselves.

This approach starts with the coach and athlete jointly identifying target outcomes. Although the coach should have some goals in mind, offering the athlete an opportunity for input in setting the targets will increase the athlete's motivation and commitment to the goals. The coach's role is to guide and shape the discussion with the athlete so that target outcomes are challenging yet realistic and attainable with support from the coach. This requires an accurate assessment of the athlete's current abilities, strengths and limitations.

The target outcomes should include both objective performance measures (e.g., times, distances, rankings and wins) and more subjective process measures (e.g., effort, attitude and work ethic). This approach is consistent with what is commonly referred to as a SMART way to write goals.<sup>3</sup> Goals are SMART when they are **S**pecific (clearly written), **M**asurable (progress

can be observed and tracked), **A**ttainable (appropriate training resources and coaching support are provided), **R**ealistic (within reach of the athlete's current level of performance) and **T**ime bound (have a due date).

After establishing appropriate target outcomes, the next step is for the coach to create the right conditions for the athlete to achieve the desired goals. In addition to designing training sessions and aiding the athlete during competition, quality coaches provide feedback and support as the athlete strives to achieve the goals. Strategic use of genuine, positive and constructive feedback keeps athletes focused on the targets and helps nourish their desire to sustain the effort required to achieve their aims.<sup>3,4</sup>

Coaches should carefully monitor athletes' progress and then work with them to adjust their goals as needed. Coaches must be diligent in tracking the results of training and competition, and they should be alert to factors beyond sport participation that may influence the athletes' ability to achieve their goals. By consistently showing interest in athletes' lives outside of sport and concern for their overall well-being, coaches empower athletes to share information and insights that can help coaches make athlete-specific recommendations.

## Holistic Development and Well-Being of Athletes

A concern for developing the whole athlete should drive all coaching objectives and actions. Coaching with a concern for athletes' holistic development and well-being means taking into account the personal, emotional, cultural and social identity of each athlete and how this identity influences sport development and performance.<sup>5</sup> This is true across the athlete development spectrum—from young children<sup>6</sup> to masters athletes.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned in the first chapter, a common framework for setting comprehensive athlete outcomes is the Four C's model<sup>8</sup> (see table 3.1).

**TABLE 3.1** The Four C's Model of Comprehensive Athlete Outcomes

Athlete outcome	Description
Competence	Sport-specific technical, tactical and performance skills; overall health, fitness and physical well-being
Confidence	Self-belief, resilience, mental toughness and sense of positive self-worth
Connection	Interpersonal skills, ability to build and sustain meaningful and positive relationships
Character	Respect for the sport and others, integrity, self-discipline, and ethical and moral decision making

- **Competence.** The desire to help athletes improve their skills is often cited as a primary motive for becoming a coach. Similarly, athletes typically list development of new skills as one of their primary motives for sport participation. The ability to perform the techniques involved in a sport requires a solid foundation of overall health, fitness and physical well-being. Therefore, quality coaches seek the holistic skill development of their athletes, going beyond teaching sport-specific techniques and tactics to include informing athletes about healthy training and lifestyle habits related to areas such as nutrition, rest and recovery, and injury prevention. This allows athletes to fully develop their potential and take ownership of the skills needed for achievement. Quality coaches also encourage and empower athletes to experiment with self-initiated, creative ways of training and performing skills.
- **Confidence.** Knowing how to perform sport skills is not enough; reaching an athlete's development or performance potential is not possible without strong self-belief in his or her ability to execute techniques successfully when it matters. Athletes must learn to perform under pressure in competitions and endure repeated failures when learning complex sport skills. Teaching athletes strategies for conquering self-doubt and frustration, and building their confidence through techniques such as positive self-talk and imagery, is critical to holistic athlete development and the achievement of athlete-centered outcomes.
- **Connection.** Many great athletes are strong-willed and independent. Although these characteristics are valuable for developing a competitive spirit, athlete development will be stunted unless they learn how to train and compete *with*, not just *against*, others. All sports, whether individual or team in nature, require some level of cooperation with and support from others. Teams learn and perform best when there is a high level of trust and commitment to common goals. Even when training and competing alone, athletes need to learn how to receive and use feedback from others and participate with other athletes. Part of an athlete's development is gaining the trust and respect of others in his or her sport network.
- **Character.** The achievements of an entire sporting career can be destroyed by a single moment of unethical behavior. Holistic development and athlete well-being hinge on the coach's systematic and deliberate efforts to build athlete character. Simply participating in sport does not build character; it is the coach who determines whether the sport experience builds character or *characters*. The first step in building athlete character is to establish core values and standards that clearly describe what is expected and what behaviors



are acceptable. The best way to teach core values and standards is to model them as a coach.

## Ethical Coaching Decisions and Actions

*The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well. (Olympic Creed)*

Striving for victory is honorable; training and competing ethically is a greater victory. The Olympic Creed serves as a timeless reminder to coaches that they have a responsibility to behave ethically. When coaches make ethical decisions and act with integrity, they demonstrate their commitment to athletes' welfare. Conversely, unethical coaching behaviors reflect a lack of regard for athletes' development and well-being.

Ethical coaching entails doing the right thing. It is grounded in the principles of duty and virtue. It requires the courage to consistently make morally sound choices—not merely comply with rules or mandates.

But coaching is complicated, and coaches routinely face ethical and moral dilemmas. When facing such dilemmas when coaching in the Team USA context, coaches can refer to agreed-upon codes of conduct for guidance.<sup>9</sup>

A valuable resource is the USOPC Coaching Code of Conduct.<sup>10</sup> The Coaching Code of Conduct utilizes the constructs of five ethical behavioral areas to guide the actions of Team USA coaches in training and competition. The code of conduct was carefully created within the Olympic and Paralympic movement through a working group made up of coaching educators and developers who operate across the sport landscape. The five ethical behaviors are presented in table 3.2, and you can find the full Coaching Code of Conduct at [TeamUSA.org/CoachingEducation](https://www.teamusa.org/CoachingEducation).

The USOPC wants all coaches in the Olympic and Paralympic movement to review, understand and uphold the code of conduct while operating with Team USA. All National Governing Bodies, organizations, clubs and levels of sport should have a code of conduct for all their coaches, as a way to constantly remind those charged with developing athletes of the responsibility they have to be athlete-centric in their coaching.

In addition, the USOPC works collaboratively with the U.S. Center for SafeSport<sup>11</sup> to support response and resolution efforts for allegations of ethical misconduct across the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic sport movements. The primary goals of SafeSport are education and prevention, and the organization offers a comprehensive online training course along with an array of educational materials to prevent abuse in sport.

**TABLE 3.2** USOPC Coaching Code of Conduct: Ethical Behaviors

Ethical behavior	Description
<b>Competency</b>	Ability to do something successfully or efficiently
<b>Respect</b>	Regard for feelings, wishes, rights or traditions of others
<b>Integrity</b>	Quality of being honest and having strong moral principles/moral uprightness
<b>Responsibility</b>	Having a duty to deal with something and the ability to act independently and make decisions without authorization, being accountable or to blame
<b>Concern for others' welfare/safety</b>	The condition of being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk or injury

**CHAPTER 3 | Takeaway**

A coach’s foremost duty is to serve athletes’ best interests, doing so in an ethical manner. The Four C’s provide a useful set of comprehensive athlete-centered outcomes around which coaches can both plan and assess their success. The USOPC’s Coaching Code of Conduct offers coaches a sound, values-based reference to guide their actions.

# 4

## Contextual Fit

The U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee supports more than 50 National Governing Bodies (NGBs), which work directly with their respective International Federations to administer each sport at the national level. The NGBs share a similar mission: to provide Americans with the opportunity to explore sport in our country, develop their skills and ultimately have an opportunity to represent our nation at international competitions such as the Olympics or Paralympics.

Athletes' passion for sport is often sparked when they are young, when they score their first goal or simply experience the thrill of sport competition for the first time. That passion is enhanced and channeled by talented and dedicated coaches representing each NGB.

Successful coaches adjust their approach to the athletes, settings and circumstances, because they know the most effective coaching is context specific.<sup>2,3</sup> Those same coaches also recognize that holistic athlete development requires the right kind of coaching at the right time in the athlete's journey. Team USA coaches must strive to customize their actions, interactions and prescriptions to positively serve millions of members and provide inspiration for every American athlete—whether it's a young



athlete on the path to Olympic or Paralympic competition or a reserve player on a club team—to live their dreams.

## Types of Coaching Contexts

Coaching has been described as a process of guided improvement and development in a single sport and at identifiable stages of development.<sup>3</sup> The needs of a young child just beginning the sport experience journey are vastly different from the needs of a three-time Olympian at the apex of his or her career. The principles of quality coaching remain the same, but the manner in which the coach translates those principles into coaching practice will help determine whether athletes continue to develop and enjoy their sport experience.

*Participation sport* and *performance sport* are the two globally accepted labels to categorize the way in which athletes engage in sport. Participation sport emphasizes involvement and enjoyment, while performance sport focuses more on competition and achievement. Within each of these two broad types of sport engagement there are three subdivisions:

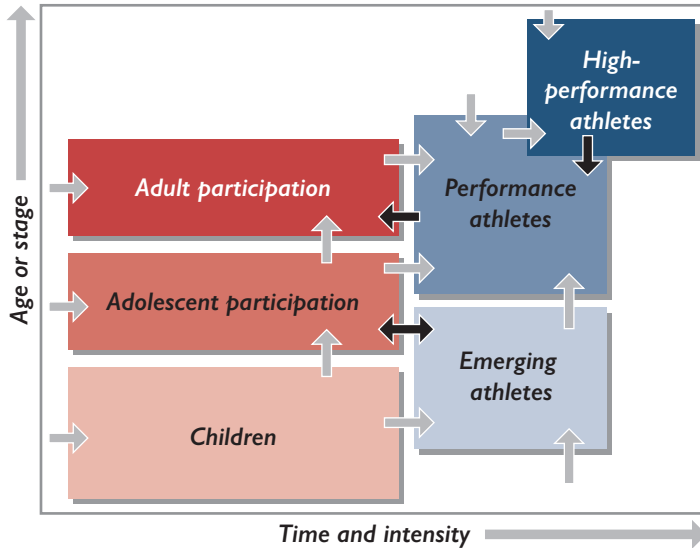
Participation	Performance
Children	Emerging athletes
Adolescents	Performance athletes
Adults	High-performance athletes

These two types of sport engagement and their three subdivisions can be found in the comprehensive sport participation map provided in figure 4.1. Note that the sectors in the map are interconnected.

Athlete development will vary across sports and be unique to each individual. Individual athletes may enter or move through and between the various groups at different stages in their lives. For example, an adolescent performance athlete may decide to transfer to a different sport; that may move him or her into a different sport engagement group.

Coaches are also likely to change from one season to the next. Although some athletes have the same coach accompany them throughout their sport journey, most athletes have to transition to a different coach when they move to a different season or stage of development.<sup>4</sup>

Because there are so many variables, sporting pathways are individual, context specific and nonlinear. This is why it is so important for each coach to adjust based on the sport engagement group of the athletes and the unique circumstances and setting.



**FIGURE 4.1** Sport participation map.

Reprinted, by permission, from International Council for Coaching Excellence, the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations, and Leeds Metropolitan University, 2013, *International Sport Coaching Framework, Version 1.2* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 20.

## American Development Model

The USOPC, in partnership with the NGBs, created the American Development Model (ADM)<sup>5</sup> to help Americans realize their full athletic potential and utilize sport as a path toward an active and healthy lifestyle. The ADM was inspired and informed by the principles that underpin the long-term athlete development (LTAD) model,<sup>6</sup> which proposed seven stages of athlete development intended to achieve three outcomes (physical literacy, improved performance and lifelong participation).

The ADM is an evolution of the LTAD model that fits the Team USA coaching context while promoting sustained physical activity, participation in sport and Olympic and Paralympic success (see figure 4.2).

The ADM's ultimate goal is to create positive experiences for American athletes at every level of sport participation. Sport administrators, coaches and parents who subscribe to the model help to maximize athletes' abilities to their full potential and improve the health and well-being of future generations in the United States.



**FIGURE 4.2** American Development Model.  
©2020 United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee. All Rights Reserved.

The USOPC and its NGBs embrace the ADM and strive to use it for full benefit to the athletes, coaches, teams and organizations they represent. In doing so, the USOPC advocates these five principles:

1. Universal access, to create opportunity for all athletes
2. Developmentally appropriate activities that emphasize motor and foundational skills
3. Multisport or multiactivity participation
4. Fun, engaging and progressively challenging atmosphere
5. Quality coaching at all age levels

These principles are consistent with research-based recommendations for quality sport experiences in the American sport context. For example, the Project Play initiative in the United States has translated these principles into eight strategies for building a strong foundation of early, positive sport experiences:<sup>7</sup>

1. Ask kids what they want
2. Reintroduce free play
3. Encourage sport sampling
4. Revitalize in-town leagues
5. Think small
6. Design for development
7. Train all coaches
8. Emphasize prevention

By promoting these types of strategies and the concepts found in the ADM, the USOPC aspires to keep more children engaged in sport longer, in order to achieve four key outcomes:

1. Grow both the general athlete population and the pool of elite athletes from which future U.S. Olympians and Paralympians are selected
2. Develop fundamental skills that transfer between sports
3. Provide an appropriate avenue to fulfill an individual's athletic potential
4. Create a generation who loves sport and physical activity and who transfers that passion to the next generation

Working with the NGBs across the United States, the USOPC hopes to impact the sporting community by driving NGBs, their clubs, members and athletes to do the following:

- Have a visual model that outlines the progression of an athlete through the sport from start to adult participation.
- Drive an athlete-centric, coach-driven model that has quality coaching and coach education as key factors in the athlete's growth and positive experience.
- Organize the competition culture of the sport and competition providers in that sport to make events and outcomes as balanced and as age- or developmentally-appropriate as possible for the best sport experience possible.
- Make foundational motor skills and physical literacy a priority for all sports and all athletes as they develop and grow in the sport.
- Make sure that smart and creative activities, games and teaching methods are being utilized during practice on a daily basis for maximum engagement and retention.

## Developmental Model of Sport Participation

A complementary model to LTAD is the developmental model of sport participation (DMSP),<sup>8</sup> a model that breaks athlete development into three stages. The DMSP is grounded in the belief that, due to the unique demands of each sport and wide variance in individual athlete development profiles, no specified ages or lengths of time can be associated with each of its three phases.

1. **Sampling phase.** Athletes take part in multiple sport activities and develop all-around foundational movement skills in an environment characterized by fun and enjoyment. Participation in this phase should not be restricted by skill level, because the goal is to maximize participation and expose athletes to the sport.
2. **Specializing phase.** Athletes begin to focus on fewer sports, possibly favoring one in particular as training demands increase. Participation opportunities may decrease at this phase, and athletes are typically grouped by skill level.
3. **Investment phase.** Athletes commit to achieving a high level of performance in a specific sport. This phase of athlete sport participation is typically limited to a small group of athletes who are identified as showing promise for high-level performance.

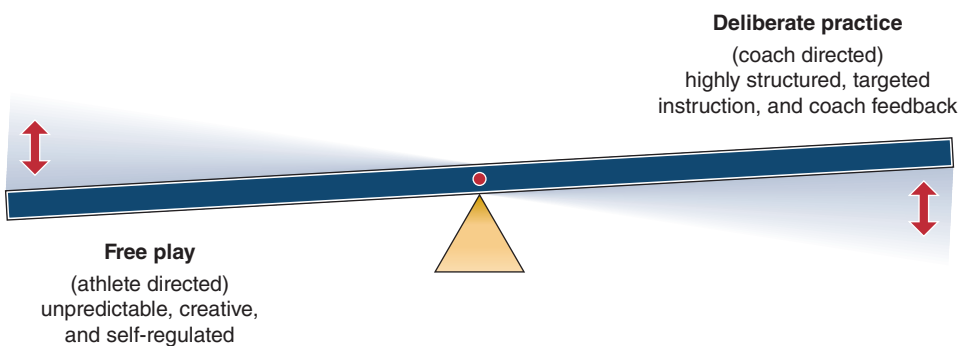


The DMSP phases are intended to provide a general framework for considering how athletes are developing and the type of coach they need as they move through the different phases.

Two points of emphasis in DMSP have important implications for coaching: unstructured play and sport diversification. Although it is clear that a high amount of focused, deliberate practice is needed to become a skilled athlete, research shows that expert athletes grow up in environments that allow for frequent play.<sup>9</sup> Deliberate practice is challenging and requires intense focus. If coaches fail to counterbalance such focused practice with opportunities for free play, they place their athletes at increased risk of emotional and physical burnout and overuse injuries. Free play activities are organized and led by the athletes themselves to maximize enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. The most beneficial balance between deliberate practice and informal, unstructured free play will vary based on performance level, the point in the competition season and the particular makeup of the team. Coaches who most adeptly provide the proper mix of deliberate practice and free play do the best job of fostering their athletes' talent development (see figure 4.3).

The DMSP also addresses the issue of early sport specialization by encouraging sport diversification, or sampling. Early sport diversification has proven to lead to longer, more successful involvement in sport.<sup>10</sup> Early sport specialization generally fails to help athletes achieve their best performances later in their career, which is the goal of LTAD.

Considerable evidence shows that high-performance athletes sample many different sports, as opposed to specializing in just one sport at an early age.<sup>11</sup> Most college and Olympic athletes in the United States played multiple sports until high school, and college coaches typically



**FIGURE 4.3** Balanced approach to developing athletic skill and talent.

Reprinted, by permission, from W. Gilbert, 2017, *Coaching better every season: A year-round system for athlete development and program success* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 113.

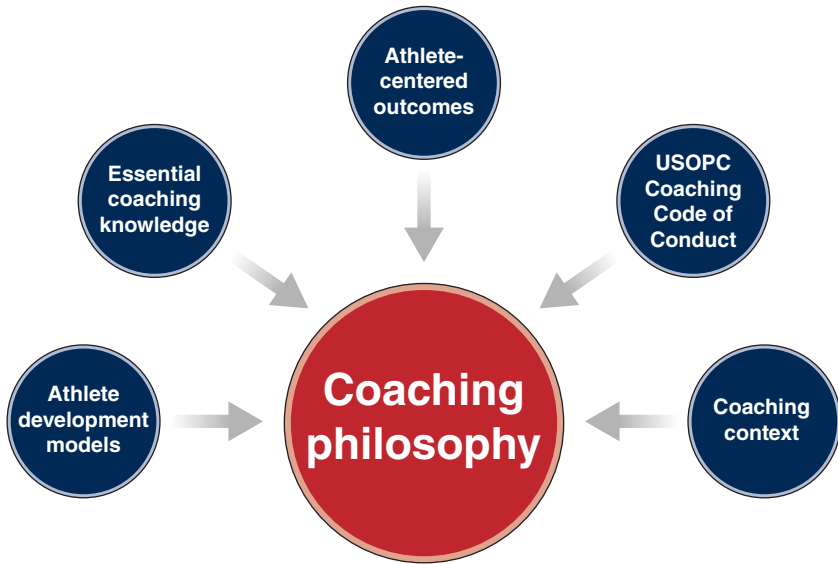
prefer recruiting multisport athletes. Sport sampling is also one of the key recommendations of the International Olympic & Paralympic Committee consensus statement on athlete development.<sup>12</sup> Due to the unique competition demands of each sport, there is no common age recommendation for when athletes may need to transition from sport sampling to sport specialization. In sports such as gymnastics, where elite-level performance is commonly achieved at a young age, LTAD timelines obviously require some modification.

## Matching Coaching Philosophy to Coaching Context

Every coach has distinct strengths, personalities and views based on their own life experiences. These views help make up the coach's coaching philosophy. A coaching philosophy describes how a particular coach approaches his or her role, and it guides everyday coaching decisions and actions.

When coaching in the Team USA coaching context, coaches must ensure that their unique coaching philosophy is aligned with the principles and values that underpin the *USOPC QCF 2020*. The information presented earlier in this chapter regarding athlete development models and their rationales should be considered when creating and or evaluating a general coaching philosophy. When coaches move across different stages and phases of the athlete development map, they need to make adjustments to their coaching philosophy. This will ensure they are staying true to an athlete-centered, coach-driven approach that provides athletes with developmentally appropriate instruction and performance support.

The many factors that should influence a coaching philosophy when coaching in the Team USA context are depicted in figure 4.4.



**FIGURE 4.4** Factors to consider in creating a coaching philosophy.

#### CHAPTER 4 | Takeaway

A key component of quality coaching is an understanding of athlete development principles. Quality coaches use knowledge of these principles to adapt their coaching philosophy to the coaching context. The best coaching approach is one that is suitable for the sport experience in which athletes are participating and the athletes' development needs.

# 5

## Evaluate and Recognize Quality Coaching

How do we know whether a coach is doing a good job activating the principles set forth in the *USOPC QCF 2020*? Unfortunately, far too few administrators, coach developers and coaches consider that basic ques-



tion. Even fewer establish the assessment criteria, tools and process to answer it objectively and accurately.

Sports organizations cannot be successful for long if administrators, coach developers and coaches themselves fail to effectively monitor and evaluate coach performance. The effectiveness of a coach on developing athletes will be haphazard, based on intuition and hope instead of credible evidence and careful planning that serve to close development gaps. In short, what matters must get measured.

Effective, ongoing coach evaluation is essential, as is proper recognition of quality coaching. Coaches who demonstrate the desired behaviors should be praised and supported, or at least acknowledged. The USOPC's approach to quality coaching recognition is outlined later in this chapter.

## Step-by-Step Evaluation

When evaluations are done poorly or are perceived to be an administrative mandate without any meaningful follow-up, the evaluation process will not be well received. At worst, it will be a source of stress and frustration for everyone involved. A quality evaluation system includes four steps.

### Step 1: Determine What to Evaluate

The evaluation process starts by deciding what to evaluate. All program evaluation systems should include tools for measuring athlete development. As discussed in previous chapters, athlete development should span the Four C's: competence, confidence, connection and character. Therefore, athletes' progress toward achieving target outcomes across each of the Four C's should be evaluated on a regular basis.

Although the primary role of the coach is to develop athletes, in many Team USA coaching contexts coaches also play an active role in administration, fundraising, athlete recruitment and event planning. The ability to create a quality sport experience that results in comprehensive athlete development often hinges on how well a coach fulfills such duties. Therefore, evaluation should encompass as many of the key responsibilities of a coach as possible. Practicality is also an important factor in program evaluation, meaning sport administrators should collect only the quality-related information that can be gathered and summarized efficiently.

### Step 2: Specify Sources of Feedback

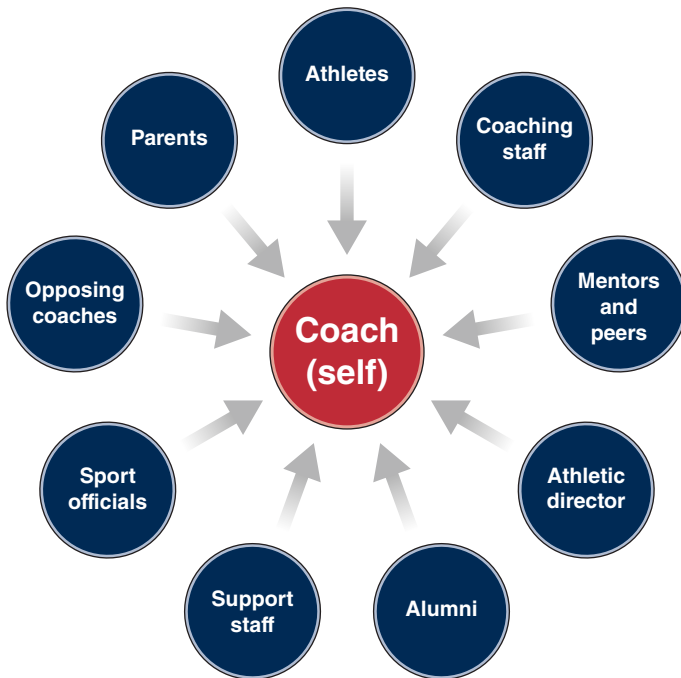
Once evaluation items have been identified, decisions will need to be made about who should be asked to provide evaluation feedback. An effective evaluation system ensures that information is collected from all key program stakeholders. At a minimum, coach self-evaluations should

always be supplemented with feedback from members of the coaching staff and athletes. This is the only way to ensure a balanced and comprehensive approach to making evaluation decisions. Program feedback from athletes on leadership councils and from senior or departing athletes can provide particularly helpful insights on how to improve a program.

Program evaluation can be further enhanced by collecting feedback from others who have experience with the program or the coach. Just as professionals in fields such as business are encouraged to ask a wide range of people for feedback when conducting an evaluation—commonly referred to as a 360-degree evaluation—coaches also benefit from adopting this approach.<sup>1</sup> Feedback might be solicited from athletic administrators, opposing coaches, game officials, formal or informal mentors, program alumni and trusted coaching colleagues (see figure 5.1).

### Step 3: Select Evaluation Methods and Collect Data

After securing reliable and accurate information sources, the next concern is how to gather the data efficiently and in the most useful form possible.



**FIGURE 5.1** Potential sources for coach or program evaluation.

Reprinted, by permission, from W. Gilbert, 2017, *Coaching better every season: A year-round system for athlete development and program success* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 233.

Options for evaluation tools are endless, with many examples available for coaches and administrators to either use or adapt to meet their specific needs.<sup>2</sup> A combination of objective and subjective evaluation tools may be most useful. Examples of objective evaluation tools include knowledge tests and ratings of the coach's performance achievements, adherence to rules and policies, and observable behaviors. Subjective evaluation tools are often used to measure things that are not easily quantified, such as attitude, work ethic and motivation.

All evaluation efforts should include observation of the coach in action with her or his athletes. Regardless of how the observation is conducted (videotaped or live, self-evaluated or with others), the effort should be guided by examining how effective the coach is at developing athletes. A valuable way to approach observation is to watch the coach during a training session with the following three questions in mind:<sup>3,4</sup>

1. How does the coaching facilitate or fail to facilitate athlete development?
2. What evidence is there that the athletes achieved the intended learning goals for the session?
3. How can the coaching be revised to provide stronger opportunities for athlete development and achievement of learning goals?

#### **Step 4: Decide How to Use the Results**

The final step in the evaluation process is determining how the results will be used. Coach and program evaluations typically are either formative or summative. Formative evaluations are used to provide feedback on what is working well and what needs to be improved. Summative evaluations are used to make judgments on coach or program quality, and they are often used to make decisions about whether to retain, reassign or remove a coach. An effective coach and program evaluation system is both formative and summative. The results should be used to help coaches improve while also providing evidence of coach and program growth.

A formal method for reporting evaluation results, such as writing an evaluation narrative or preparing an end-of-season statistical report with summary observations from selected feedback sources, is essential. Evaluation reports should be kept on file for formal debriefings and to spot trends across seasons, years and quadrennials.

Evaluation works best when it is done regularly and when results are used to make constant incremental improvements. Evaluation systems should be approached with an "evolution, not revolution" mindset. Unfor-

Unfortunately, many coaches and program administrators avoid conducting meaningful and regular evaluations as a matter of practice because (1) they don't feel they have the time or (2) they are content with the status quo. This is a serious mistake, because neglecting to evaluate typically results in having to invest a lot of time to fix exacerbated problems that were once minor issues when administrators and coaches realize that the status quo is no longer acceptable.

## Long-Term Program Development

Just as athlete development is optimized when coaches embrace a holistic, athlete-centered approach, coach development is optimized when a holistic, long-term program development (LTPD) approach is adopted.<sup>5</sup> The LTPD approach is most effective when coaches and sport program administrators

- have a clear sense of shared purpose,
- are sensitive to the unique profile and characteristics of the context and
- operate like a learning community.

Table 5.1 summarizes the key differences between a traditional sport program approach and the LTPD approach. The LTPD approach works because it keeps coaches and program administrators focused on continuous improvement aligned around a shared purpose and open communication. The goal is sustained development and achievement, not short-term wins.

## Close High-Impact Performance Gaps

Effective program evaluations conducted with a long-term development mindset constantly reveal areas for improvement. Indeed, the task of trying to address every exposed performance gap can be overwhelming.

A more efficient approach is to focus on a few key performance weaknesses that, if fixed, have the potential to lead to the greatest gains in development and performance. High-impact performance gaps are significant issues that directly affect other performance aspects of the system. Even a small improvement in these performance gaps can potentially produce big results.

In sports such as field hockey or soccer, individual guarding or marking may be cited as an important performance issue, but poor fitness may be an underlying high-impact performance gap. Regardless of how skilled an athlete is at shooting, if he or she is not fit enough to gain the strate-



**TABLE 5.1** Characteristics of Traditional Versus LTPD-Oriented Sport Programs

Characteristic	Traditional sport program	LTPD-oriented sport program
Shared purpose	Poorly identified vision and values	Clearly articulated vision and values
Mindset	Short-term “win now”	Long-term continuous improvement
Methods	Sporadic improvements and setbacks with inconsistent or unclear processes for improvement	Plan, do, check and adjust cycles based upon current condition, target condition and performance gaps
Techniques	Metrics and rewards/punishments are extrinsic and top-down and often create fear	Mutually agreed upon targets and metrics that create alignment and intrinsic motivation
Collaboration	People operate in intellectual silos	Systems thinking tools employed to surface mental models and enhance communication and collaboration
Leadership	Charismatic hero-leader, characterized by excessive achievement orientation	Servant-leader, characterized by a humble yet focused mastery orientation
Decision making	Little consensus, with influence gained through politics and manipulation	Collaborative learning teams of problem solvers using shared power and collaboration
Communication	Limited and controlled	Open and shared
Processes	Inconsistent tools and programs with sporadic implementation and results; leads to resistance to change	Consistent tools and processes used to improve and standardize instruction, methods and relations
Results	Variable, based on capabilities of current athletes and coaches	Program excellence sustained over time across all sports

Reprinted, by permission, from M. Siwik, A. Lambert, D. Saylor, R. Bertram, C. Cocchiarella, and W. Gilbert, 2015. “Long term program development (LTPD): An interdisciplinary framework for developing athletes, coaches, and sport programs,” *International Sport Coaching Journal* 2(3): 305-316.

gic advantage needed to get into an optimal position to shoot, then the shooting performance issue will never be adequately resolved. Another high-impact performance issue might be team trust. If teammates don't trust each other enough to sacrifice personal glory for team success, then it is unlikely that they will do the work such as pressuring a defender in order to put teammates in optimal scoring situations.

Once performance gaps have been identified, have multiple people familiar with the program review and rank the items on the list. Then sum the ratings and compare the rankings. This exercise will illuminate the high-impact performance gaps that should be addressed first. Such systematic addressing of high-impact performance gaps provides the greatest return on investment in seeking continuous program and coaching improvements.

## **Build on Coaching Strengths**

Although it is important to identify performance gaps, there is a growing recognition that identifying and building on strengths is a powerful way to stimulate continuous improvement. This is referred to as a strengths-based approach to evaluation, as opposed to a deficits-based approach. In simple terms, the strengths-based approach involves emphasizing the positive rather than the negative.

Coaching strengths are those instinctive coaching characteristics such as behaviors, feelings or ways of thinking that are authentic and energize optimal performance. By focusing on their strengths, coaches act in ways that are aligned with their purpose and core values. When people use their strengths, they are more engaged with their work and also report greater happiness, a surge in energy and performance and enhanced optimism.<sup>6</sup> Also, focusing on strengths builds coaching confidence and resilience—both of which are essential for sustaining effort and energy as a coach.<sup>7</sup>

The strengths-based approach is founded on five core principles:<sup>8</sup>

1. Focus on what is right, what is working and what is strong.
2. Every person has strengths and deserves respect for their strengths.
3. Our areas of greatest potential are in the areas of our greatest strengths.
4. Weaknesses can best be fixed when we are making the most of our strengths.
5. Using our strengths is the smallest thing we can do to make the biggest difference.

Although perhaps not self-evident when starting a coaching career, the best coaches learn over time what aspects of coaching suit them best. A simple technique coaches can use to spot their natural strengths is to answer the following three questions at regular intervals (for example, at the end of each month of coaching).

- *What was my best day of coaching this past month, and why was this the best day?*
- *In what specific coaching situation was I at my best this past month?*
- *What aspects of coaching most energized me last month?*

## Recognize Quality Coaches and Their Impact

At the Olympic and Paralympic Games, it is only athletes who receive medals. Coaches do not receive medals and do not get to stand on the podium to be celebrated by their peers, family or country at the Games. It is up to the athletes and the National Olympic & Paralympic Committee to honor the coaches and staff who contributed to the team's success.

Recognition of quality coaching is something that the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee takes very seriously at each Olympic and Paralympic Games. Coaches in the U.S. system are not all receiving full-time wages and operating under professional contracts. The majority of coaches in the United States are volunteer coaches at the youth level or part-time coaches in the scholastic or club systems. They are pushing to help athletes achieve while nurturing the sports they love. Ideally, all the coaches in an athlete's pathway of development will strive to be quality coaches and to maximize that athlete's potential at all moments. For this reason, the USOPC is seeking additional ways to recognize the impact coaches have on athlete development and performance.

Using an evaluation process based on quality coaching factors helps identify coaching growth and impact beyond just the outcomes of the season. Many coaches are retained or celebrated based on wins or championships, but quality coaching happens at all levels and manifests itself in many ways. Each organization should recognize results and actions in ways that are meaningful to the coaches. Table 5.2 provides examples of coach recognition offered by the USOPC and suggests other options an organization might consider to acknowledge quality coaching.

Recognizing quality coaching in a variety of ways ensures that coaches feel valued and rewarded for their work. Bringing attention to those who are doing a truly quality job can help foster a culture of quality coaching and should therefore be a priority of every administration.

**TABLE 5.2** USOPC Coach Recognition Examples and Suggestions

Program	Description	Additional suggestions
Order of Ikkos	<p>Program conducted during the Olympic and Paralympic Games in which U.S. medalists may award a coach of their choice the Order of Ikkos Medal. The medal is produced by the USOPC, and the recipient coach is listed in the Honor Roll of Coaches for that Games.</p>	<p>Have athletes award a coach some token of appreciation that celebrates the athlete-coach connection. Creating an award or ceremony to celebrate this will build memories for a lifetime.</p>
Coach of the Year awards	<p>The USOPC allows NGBs to award annual coaching recognition plaques in eight categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Olympic Coach</li> <li>• Paralympic Coach</li> <li>• Developmental Coach</li> <li>• Volunteer Coach</li> <li>• Sport Science Coach (Doc Counsilman Award)</li> <li>• College Coach</li> <li>• Service Provider</li> <li>• Coach Educator</li> </ul> <p>Once the NGBs select their winners, the USOPC then determines a national winner from the NGB honorees.</p>	<p>Annual coaching awards for your organization or program allow coaches to join a long list of previously recognized peers. An awards program can also incorporate criteria that are rooted in quality coaching principles, evaluation results and athlete and organization feedback.</p>
Newsletters or publications	<p>The USOPC publishes the <i>Olympic &amp; Paralympic Coach</i> magazine, which frequently have articles from top-quality coaches in the U.S. These publications are great ways to give public recognition and notoriety for coaches who are innovative and serving as positive role models for Team USA. These publications also offer a platform for coaches to be recognized as experts in their field.</p>	<p>Does your program have a website or blog? Have your coaches who exhibit quality principles write an article, participate in a podcast or share a video talking about best principles or concepts that would be of interest to the community. This gives the coach some recognition and visibility.</p>

Program	Description	Additional suggestions
Speaking events	Each year the USOPC holds coaching programming to develop top-level Team USA coaches. The USOPC consistently looks for coaches in the Team USA system to present to up-and-coming coaches, while also looking for ways to highlight key areas where that coach is innovating the profession.	You can celebrate your coach's knowledge by having him or her speak at a town hall meeting, do a keynote address at a banquet or speak to your school board on what is involved in quality coaching.

## CHAPTER 5 | Takeaway

All coaches should have a process to formally evaluate the progress of both their athletes and their own coaching. By making systematic evaluation a habit, coaches can start to think about long-term program development and how they can close performance gaps for their athletes, themselves and the program. In addition to closing gaps, adopt a strength-focused approach to development. Lastly, it's important to publicly recognize quality coaching and its impact and to further engage coaches in the community who are making a difference, both on and off the field of play.

# 6

## Coach Well-Being

Every time coaches step on the field of play, whether to encourage an athlete, run a training activity or provide guidance in competition, coaches are in the spotlight. Quality coaches invest in developing the habits and learning the self-management skill of well-being to be their most effective and authentic self to best serve their athletes.

One of the saddest ironies in sport is that although coaches strive to provide an enjoyable and healthy experience for their athletes to develop and



perform optimally, too often they approach their job in a manner that has the opposite effect on their own well-being. High tension, poor nutrition, sleep deprivation, family conflict and social alienation are common in coaching. Such self-destructive behaviors are neither desirable nor sustainable, and they must be discouraged.

Serving others, as coaches do their athletes, can be physically and emotionally exhausting. Few coaches make it through a competitive season or cycle without experiencing fatigue and anxiety. Left unchecked, these feelings can drain coaches' passion and motivation. In severe cases, these problems can lead to mental health issues and dropout.

The coach is not the only one who is negatively affected when his or her well-being is compromised. The athletes' development and performance suffer, as do relationships with family and friends, sometimes irreparably.<sup>1,2</sup> Yet, inexplicably, coach well-being has largely been neglected by most sport organizations.<sup>3</sup>

In making coach well-being a foundational component of its *Quality Coaching Framework 2020*, the USOPC rightly brings this factor to the forefront. The USOPC seeks to promote an environment in which coach well-being is readily identified and properly addressed. Rather than passively letting coaches succumb to the negative consequences, the USOPC is encouraging a set of proactive measures that will prevent coaches from incurring such a fate through positively influencing well-being. After all, quality coaches are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy coaches.

## Stress Protection

Coaching can bring moments of great joy and fulfillment. It can also spawn serious stress, more than most coaches can handle. The first step in combatting coach stress is to identify its five primary sources (see table 6.1).

The second step in managing stress is to design strategies that help coaches effectively cope with it. The most successful approach is for coaches and leaders within the organization to develop strategies (see table 6.2) and then commit to a comprehensive stress-reduction plan. Although this plan should be tailored to the specific coaching environment, all plans should have two key aspects: (1) providing coaches guidance on how to self-manage stress and (2) having the organization focus on the infrastructure, systems and support personnel (e.g., coach developers) needed to help coaches deal with stress positively.

## Support Networks

Coaches tend to prefer to work independently and address personal and professional issues without assistance from others. But just as athletes

**TABLE 6.1** Five Major Sources of Coach Stress

Stressor	Description
1. Communication and conflict	Mismatch between coach and administrator philosophies, interference from parents, miscommunication and lack of trust among coaching staff, communication with officials
2. Pressure and expectations	Pressure from self and others to meet unrealistic performance targets, being evaluated as a coach based solely on athlete results, lack of job security
3. Athlete discipline and team dynamics	Lack of commitment, focus, effort and character by athletes; team cohesion issues related to role acceptance and playing time; recruiting, selecting or dropping athletes from the team
4. Program support and isolation	Inadequate support for the program (recognition, funding, facilities, equipment) or personal development as a coach (no formal opportunities to learn with and from other coaches)
5. Sacrificing personal time	Conflicting demands with family, strain on relationships, keeping pace with multiple roles and workload, health issues due to lack of sleep or regular physical activity

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**TABLE 6.2** Stress-Reducing and Coping Strategies

Stressor	Coach-level strategy	Organization-level strategy
Communication and conflict	Steps and methods for parents, athletes or other program stakeholders to share concerns	Clearly described expectations and job responsibilities shared with coaches
Pressure and expectations	Setting realistic athlete development and performance goals that are regularly adjusted as needed	Agreed-upon metrics for measuring coach and program success that are periodically reviewed and updated
Athlete discipline and team dynamics	Clear explanation of team values and athlete behavior standards; consequences for behaviors that do not align with values and standards	Efficient and quick response protocols for reporting and resolving coaching concerns with administrators
Program support and isolation	Regular interactions with coach mentors	Creation of coach learning and support networks—real and virtual
Sacrificing personal time	Daily physical activity built in to work schedule (e.g., walking or active meetings, joining athletes during physical training sessions)	Regular and frequent checks with coaches to ensure they have the tools needed to perform their best



require a support team to excel and sustain, so do coaches. Indeed, a strong coaching network can be a great source for emotional and social support.

The best coaching networks are filled with “energy givers.” These are action-oriented peers who are positive and enthusiastic and will boost the spirits and reduce the tension of those around them. Coaches, therefore, should fill their network with colleagues who have most of the qualities listed in figure 6.1.<sup>4,5</sup>

- 
- Exude positive energy and enthusiasm
  - Display uncommon drive
  - Work with a clear sense of purpose
  - Are service- and other-oriented
  - Hold others accountable
  - Are trustworthy
  - Known for their relationship skills
  - Offer frequent and genuine praise
  - Show humility and gratitude
  - Are good listeners
  - Open to learning from others
  - Show positive body language
- 

**FIGURE 6.1** Checklist for identifying candidates for a coach support network.

Reprinted, by permission, from W. Gilbert, 2017, *Coaching better every season: A year-round system for athlete development and program success* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 359.

Although a network of energy givers providing emotional and social support can help to lower stress and heighten spirits, peers who stimulate a coach intellectually can serve to enhance coaching skill and nourish personal wellness.<sup>6,7</sup> Coach developers and sport organizations can facilitate the creation and implementation of effective learning communities by

- scheduling time for regular ongoing discussions about coaching (in-person meetings at competitions, creating virtual meeting spaces, coordinating conference calls);
- assigning a coach to serve as a peer facilitator (responsible for keeping the group focused and engaged in the network) and then training that person for the role; and

- sharing the results of coach learning group discussions via social media updates, coach storytelling and reports of best principles in action in coaching newsletters and magazines.

## Self-Care

Support—on organization, group and individual levels—is vital to long-term coach wellness. But no factor is more critical to coach well-being than the coach’s own commitment to self-care. Coach well-being would be much higher if the coaching community subscribed to the notion that those who are helped most are those who help themselves.

Unfortunately, too few coaches take that approach. Instead, they neglect their own needs and place personal well-being at the bottom of their list of priorities, while they work intently and tirelessly to develop their athletes and programs. They deplete their energy tanks without pausing regularly to fill them.

Coaches must be convinced of the need to monitor their personal energy gauge as they do their vehicle’s gas gauge—and to replenish it before it runs low. An incentive system that rewards coaches for conducting regular wellness checkups may be a good start. One tool that coaches can use to periodically check their health status is provided in figure 6.2.

Armed with a better awareness of the specific areas of coach wellness that need to be recalibrated, coaches—perhaps with some initial assistance from those who support them—can then focus on designing self-care strategies that address each coach’s unique wellness needs.

## Work–Life Balance

Coaches are notorious for neglecting their own physical activity and sleep.<sup>8</sup> The surest way to improve coach wellness is to build physical activity and good sleep habits into daily routines.

Due to their experience as athletes, coaches often equate physical activity with intense physical training. For coach wellness, though, physical activity should be thought of much more broadly. Walking the dog, yard-work and playing catch with family or friends are all examples of physical activity that help a coach stay fresh—physically and mentally.

Whether coaching young athletes in a volunteer capacity or leading a national team in an elite position, a coach never seems to have enough time for sleep. This is particularly challenging when coaches travel with their athletes for competitions, sleeping in unfamiliar surroundings and adjusting to different time zones or environments. Coaches can follow some simple tips for improving the quality of their sleep:<sup>9,10</sup>

**Instructions:** Circle the answer that best represents how you feel right now about coaching. The higher the score, the greater the risk that a coach will succumb to stress and burnout.

Question	Not at all how I feel	Somewhat how I feel	Exactly how I feel
1. I don't look forward to coaching as much as I used to.	1	2	3
2. I feel physically and emotionally worn out from coaching.	1	2	3
3. I don't feel that I can cope very well with the demands of coaching.	1	2	3
4. I don't feel like I'm accomplishing many worthwhile things as a coach.	1	2	3
5. Athletes and others I work with don't show the same level of commitment that I do.	1	2	3
6. I don't feel supported in my coaching.	1	2	3
7. There is a lack of communication and trust where I coach.	1	2	3
8. I don't feel secure in my current coaching position.	1	2	3
9. I question if the amount of time and energy I spend on coaching is worth it.	1	2	3

**FIGURE 6.2** Coach wellness checkup.

Reprinted, by permission, from W. Gilbert, 2017, *Coaching better every season: A year-round system for athlete development and program success* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 342.

- Aim for seven to nine hours of sleep each night.
- Sleep, and wake, at approximately the same time each day.
- Develop, and adhere to, a presleep routine (how you prepare for bed each night).
- Avoid screen time in the hour before bedtime. At a minimum, use a blue light filter on electronic devices.
- Ensure that the bedroom is cool and as dark as possible. Wear an eye mask if needed.
- When possible, take a brief nap during the afternoon (no more than 30 minutes and not after 3 P.M.).
- When traveling, bring your own pillow.

The long workday of a coach often causes great strain on personal relationships. Sadly, coaches often realize too late that they have neglected to spend sufficient time with family and friends while pursuing their coaching goals. Quality coaching requires intentional efforts to prioritize family and life.<sup>8</sup>

Obligations beyond regular coaching duties, such as coaching clinics and camps, can mean even more time away from family and friends. This can add tension to already-strained relationships. When possible, coaches should consider some way of fitting family time around such events. This can work if, prior to the coaching event, the coach clearly communicates the responsibilities and commitments he or she will have during the event.

A simple and time-tested self-care strategy for coaches is to set aside time at the start of each day to do something for themselves.<sup>12</sup> Time management experts often refer to this as “starting the day on offense.” Coaches spend most of each day playing “defense”: responding to other people’s needs and problems. This can become exhausting, and it can also lead to frustration and feelings of resentment if coaches feel like they are never making progress toward their own goals.

Other proven strategies for improving coaches’ work–life balance include making priority lists and delegating some responsibilities to others. Successful coaches put first things first. The various things that we need to do and want to do—both in work and in personal life—are not equal in importance and urgency. Leadership guru Steven Covey has created a simple framework to organize tasks into one of four categories:<sup>13</sup>

1. **Critical and urgent:** things that are very important and that we must do now
2. **Critical but not urgent:** things that are important but can be done later without jeopardizing our ability to complete the task effectively

3. **Not critical but urgent:** things that are not that important but do need to be done soon (these are the types of things that coaches should try to delegate when possible)
4. **Not critical and not urgent:** things that we often do, or think we are expected to do, that add little or no value to our work or life (these are things we should try to eliminate or discontinue as much as possible)

Delegating some less urgent, or less critical, coaching responsibilities is a valuable way for coaches to improve their work–life balance. This makes it even more important for coaches to surround themselves with trusted assistants and supportive colleagues and friends.

Finally, the best way to increase the likelihood that coaches will embrace and achieve a healthy work–life balance is for the organizations and programs that employ them to truly support them in that effort. That means not only explicitly stipulating the need for such balance in coaches' job descriptions and expectations, but also monitoring that coaches are taking care of themselves.

## CHAPTER 6 | Takeaway

Athlete development suffers when coach health and wellness are neglected. Quality coaching requires mental, emotional and physical conditioning. Coach wellness starts with an awareness of common sources of coaching stress. Armed with this knowledge, coaches can take regular steps to refresh and reload so they can be at their best more often. To stay fresh, coaches should make time each day to fill their own tanks, and they should surround themselves with others who are energy givers. With well-being included as a quality coaching principle, coaches can consistently perform at their peak while sustaining physical, mental and emotional health.

# Assurance of a Quality Experience

Much of sport’s appeal comes from the opportunity to conquer the many challenges it presents to both athletes and coaches. Yet, try as they might, there are no guarantees that the results will be exactly what the athletes and coaches hope for.

Quality coaching is not a destination; it is an ongoing process of continual improvement across the athlete development journey. Quality coaching may not guarantee championships and medals, but it can ensure that the quest for such outcomes will be well worth it. Team USA is fortunate to have many excellent coaches who provide their athletes such positive experiences. The principles set forth in the *United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee Quality Coaching Framework 2020* are the base upon which we can assure our athletes the coaching they need to be the best they can be while enjoying the journey on their sport pathway. By following these principles, Team USA coaches will also gain greater satisfaction from their role as mentors, both on and off the field of play.



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# UNITED STATES OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC COMMITTEE

The mission of the USOPC is “Empower Team USA athletes to achieve sustained competitive excellence and well-being.”

Core principles of the USOPC:

- We promote and protect athletes’ rights, safety and wellness.
- We champion the integrity of sport.
- We respect the important role of our member organizations and support their need for success.
- We set clear standards of organizational excellence and hold ourselves and all member organizations accountable.
- We engage as a trusted and influential leader to advance the global Olympic and Paralympic movements.
- We honor and celebrate the legacy of Olympic and Paralympic athletes.

Through the *Quality Coaching Framework 2020*, the USOPC hopes all Team USA coaches—from parent volunteers to full-time coaches—can utilize these concepts to grow coaching in the United States and help American athletes achieve sustained competitive excellence and well-being.



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