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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.^{1,2} 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.³ 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.^{3,4}

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.⁵ This is true across the athlete development spectrum—from young children⁶ to masters athletes.⁷ As mentioned in the first chapter, a common framework for setting comprehensive athlete outcomes is the Four C's model⁸ (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.⁹

A valuable resource is the USOPC Coaching Code of Conduct.¹⁰ 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 SafeSport¹¹ 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
Competency	Ability to do something successfully or efficiently
Respect	Regard for feelings, wishes, rights or traditions of others
Integrity	Quality of being honest and having strong moral principles/moral uprightness
Responsibility	Having a duty to deal with something and the ability to act independently and make decisions without authorization, being accountable or to blame
Concern for others' welfare/safety	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.