



Promoting a Positive Body Image among Athletes: A Coaches' Practical Guide

This guide aims to :

- 1) Define athletes' body image,
- 2) Debunk myths related to weight control, appearance and body image in sports contexts,
- 3) Propose effective strategies to promote a positive body image among athletes.



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Understanding athlete's positive body image

Body image refers to how a person sees and feels (both positively and negatively) about their body, including what they believe their body is capable of. It influences thoughts, emotions, and behaviors someone has in relation to their body.

Body image includes how people view themselves and what they believe others might think about their bodies. It can shape their thoughts, judgments, emotions, sensations, and comfort in their body. Importantly, body image is **dynamic**, it can **change over time** and varies from person to person based on four main factors:



Physical characteristics:

Age, physical appearance, biological changes (puberty), etc.



Psychological characteristics:

Personality traits, self-esteem, tendency to internalize norms, etc.



Social experiences:

Beliefs, values, and behaviours of those around, etc.



Social, cultural and sport environments:

Norms, messages, requirements, and pressures conveyed by sports culture and society in general (social media, training environment), etc.

A positive body image is associated with:

- Higher self-esteem,
- Improved performance,
- More confidence in ones' body and what it can do, not just how it appearance,
- The ability to see one's body as unique, as it truly is, accept it, and treat it with kindness,
- Stronger confidence in one's body's needs and limits,
- A positive relationship with food, physical activity, sport, and the adoption of health-promoting behaviours,
- Greater enjoyment of sport and increased likelihood of long-term participation, as well as improved overall physical and mental health and well-being.

Alternatively, **negative perceptions of body image** can lead to psychological problems and body-control behaviours (food restriction, use of dietary supplements, compensatory or excessive exercise) and to eating disorders, decreased physical and mental health, well-being, and athletic performance.

Body image pressures in sport

When practiced in a healthy and inclusive environment, sport can serve as a protective factor that promotes the development of a positive body image among athletes.

Conversely, sport culture and the training environment can expose athletes to situations that can amplify body image concerns and a desire to alter their bodies to improve performance.

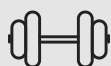
*Situations that can amplify body image concerns**

Athletes' level and type of sport

Choosing and committing to on sport at an early age and/or high-level competition pressures from a young age can increase athletes' exposure to "ideal" body standards and increase pressure to conform to it



- Practicing a technical-artistic sport (**gymnastics, dance, artistic swimming**) where judges evaluate the performance and where appearance can play an important role, can increase the desire to be thin,



- Practicing a **weight-category sport** (judo, boxing, weightlifting) with regulations requiring athletes to belong to a specific weight class can increase weight control,



- Practicing an **endurance or gravity-based sport** (swimming, track and field, cycling, climbing) where lean or low body mass is idealized to optimize performance, can raise the desire to be thin,



- Practicing a **team sport** (volleyball, soccer, hockey) where a certain body type (e.g., being tall to be at the center at volleyball) is favored for specific positions and involves a team selection process can increase the desire to reach that specific body type.

Stereotypical athletic ideals

The society, the sport culture and social media promoting physical standards and dictating physical attributes (body shape, height, muscularity, physical abilities, etc.) one should or should not have to be considered an athlete, can increase weight control in the pursuit of those ideals.

*Adapted from : ÉquiLibre (2025), Le corps de l'athlète. *Corps et sport*. equilibre.ca/sport

Body Composition Monitoring (e.g., weigh-ins, skinfold testing, bodpod)

This type of monitoring increases pressure to reach a potentially unrealistic weight for athletes and reinforces its importance, which can contribute to excessive weight-related concerns.

Revealing and non-inclusive sport uniforms and clothing

When very tight, revealing, and non-inclusive (for all body types) outfits can heighten appearance-related concerns, particularly among female athletes.

A sport culture focused on controlling body composition and appearance

The widespread presence across many sporting cultures of pressures surrounding the achievement of the “perfect body” to enhance performance, increases the pressure experienced by athletes to attain bodily ideals.

Sport environment

The beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals in the athletes’ environment (teammates, parents, coaches, judges, opponents, etc.) can influence their body image.

Considering these situations, an athlete’s body can quickly become the center of attention both by the athlete and/or everyone surrounding the athlete. An approach focused on controlling weight or body composition can rapidly lead to the adoption of behaviors that may compromise well-being, overall health, and athletic success. Furthermore, these pressures can also create a sport culture that fosters body shaming, recognized as a form of psychological violence.



To learn more about issues related to body image, how to recognize if an athlete is concerned about their body, and how to respond in such situations, explore the resource *Le corps de l'athlète* (in French only) from ÉquiLibre’s “Corps et sport” toolbox: equilibre.ca/sport

What is body shaming?

The International Olympic Committee defines psychological violence as any unwelcome act including confinement, isolation, verbal assault, humiliation, intimidation, infantilization, or any other treatment which may diminish the sense of identity, dignity and self-worth. This is the most commonly reported form of violence, often because it is normalized or rationalized in sport (e.g., believed to be 'necessary' for performance).

Forms of violence related to body image

In relation to athletes' bodies, we can find three main forms of **psychological violence** in sport contexts:

1 Negative verbal comments that are degrading or humiliating
(e.g., insults, belittling remarks, humiliating or degrading comments related to weight and appearance)

Examples :

"Yikes, off-season was rough on your waistline!"



"You should probably buy bigger shorts — those are way too tight on you now."

"It's probably your weight gain that's affecting your performance. If you want more playing time, you should consider losing a few pounds."

"Your teammate looks like they've eaten too much cake this weekend."

2 Physical acts
(e.g., constant anthropometric measurements, such as weigh-ins, food withdrawal, additional physical exercises, performance enhancing drugs and imposed restrictive diets)

3 Denial of attention and support to an athlete who does not meet the coach's expectations
(e.g., removal or threat of removal from the team due to an athlete's weight, no playing time because of weight-issues)

In sport environments where weight and body composition control are normalized or perceived as necessary to enhance performance, athletes who do not meet these standards can be shamed.

Body shaming

Shaming is a social process that involves expressing a negative judgment or disapproval, either intentionally or unintentionally. It occurs when a person does not meet social norms or expectations.

Body-shaming refers to the act of humiliating someone based on aspects related to the shape or size of their body. It can harm both the physical and emotional well-being of athletes. Body shaming can be perpetrated by a parent, peer, coach, or member of the sports organization. It can take many forms, such as experiencing or witnessing ridicule, yelling, excessive forced training, or highly restrictive diets.

When these actions and ideologies are present in a sport context, the pressure placed on athletes to achieve an “ideal” body can be significant. As a result, body shaming is often used by certain individuals within the sport environment to push athletes toward weight or body composition control and to enhance performance.



Importantly, when a sport environment includes body shaming, many athletes will pre-emptively act to avoid experiencing shame. For instance, if an athlete witnesses their teammates’ bodies being commented on by their coach, they may engage in unhealthy body regulation tactics to avoid being the subject of comments.

In that way, participation in sport can increase the risk for the perpetration of psychological violence related to weight and body composition control.



Examples of body shaming or abusive behaviors

Comments/ Verbal

- A coach openly commenting on an athlete’s body, either in private or in front of others or using degrading nicknames,
- Telling athletes that their injuries are caused by excess weight.

Behaviours during training

- Preventing athletes from drinking water during training to avoid weight changes,
- Punishing athletes who exceed the coach’s weight expectations through extra training or strength and conditioning, ignoring them, or preventing them from competing,
- A coach who focuses solely on weight or appearance, thereby diminishing the technical aspects of their coaching.

Behaviours outside training and/or at all times

- Weighing athletes in public and making athletes’ weights public in order to support certain decisions (e.g., playing time, team selection),
- Restricting an athlete’s food intake,
- Placing excessive importance on the athlete’s weight and appearance.

Debunking myths on body image

Myth: anaging body weight is normal and necessary to ensure athletic performance.



Although an athlete's weight, body composition, and shape can influence sport performance, changing weight or body **composition is not directly associated with improved performance.**

There are many other significant determinants of performance:

Physical abilities:

- Strength
- Power
- Endurance
- Coordination
- Technical and strategic abilities
- Genetics

Lifestyle habits:

- Sleep
- Recovery

Environment:

- Living environment
- Family environment

Psychological abilities:

- Stress management
- Mental preparation
- Confidence
- Psychological traits

When weight or body composition becomes a target for sport performance, the efforts and behaviors aimed at changing it, risks compromising other key performance factors (e.g., sleep, recovery, physical health, concentration, mood, self-confidence), increasing the risk of eating disorders, and harming athletes' overall health and well-being. Moreover, weight is not something a person has full control over, as it is influenced by numerous complex factors, many of which are not modifiable (e.g., genetics, socioeconomic context, puberty).

Weight-centered approaches can also result in decreased motivation, satisfaction, and desire to participate in sports. Thus, athletes who have experienced weight control from their coach can also experience anxiety or depressive states. It can also become an obsession for athletes, leading to unhealthy behaviours.



"I got so obsessed with how much I weighed because it was something I [felt I] could personally control. So, I almost became obsessed with losing weight and meeting my weight goal and not thinking about [my sport]."

- National Team Athlete (Willson & Kerr, 2022)



To better understand the links between weight, body composition, and performance, explore the resource *Le poids de la performance* (in French only) from ÉquiLibre's "Corps et sport" toolbox: equilibre.ca/sport

Myth: Comments on an athlete's body have no influence on their peers.



Even if the intention is good, both negative and positive comments, even when directed at a single person, can lead to negative consequences among athletes who hear them or to whom they are directed. These comments can have severe consequences on self-esteem and body image. Athletes, especially if highly motivated to perform, may try to change their body or weight to meet the coach's expectations or avoid receiving similar comments.

These remarks can also reduce athletes' confidence in their sport and lead to disengagement. Even discussions around weight and body image—without direct comments—can negatively affect long-term performance and body satisfaction.

Special attention should be paid to comments that are intended to be positive because they can be interpreted in a way that hurts the person they are directed at or those who witness them. Indeed, a comment intended to be positive, such as a compliment (e.g. *"You seem well! Did you lose weight?"*) or a nickname, can also cause harm.

Although such comments are often spontaneous and sometimes unconscious, you never know how they will be received and interpreted by the person concerned or by those who hear them. There may also be a lack of awareness regarding the mindsets or behaviours that are inadvertently being valued, reinforced, or encouraged.

Myth: It is my role as a coach to provide nutritional advice.



As a coach, you have significant influence over athletes, and the way you talk about food, body image, and performance will have a meaningful and lasting impact. That said, most **coaches are not nutritionists** (and that's completely normal!), so it is not your role to monitor or evaluate athletes' eating habits. Rather, your role is to promote a positive relationship with food by encouraging balance, enjoyment of eating, and listening to one's own body.

Therefore, be vigilant: nutritional advice that is not appropriate—even when well intended—can have serious harmful consequences. Respect your professional boundaries and refer the athlete to a nutritionist or the appropriate health professional, depending on the resources available.

In any case, keep in mind that asking or forcing an athlete to adopt problematic body-control behaviours (e.g., food restriction, taking dangerous supplements, training excessively) constitutes psychological violence, and being aware that an athlete is engaging in these behaviours and failing to intervene constitutes neglect.



To refer one of your athletes to a nutritionist, consult the [Ordre des diététistes et nutritionnistes du Québec](#)

To better understand the coach's role in athlete nutrition, discover *Le développement d'une relation positive avec l'alimentation et le sport* (in French only) at ÉquiLibre's "Corps et sport": equilibre.ca/sport

Myth: As a coach, I don't need to worry about issues related to body image and body shaming because I work mostly with male athletes.



Although girls and women may be at higher risk of body dissatisfaction, a significant proportion of boys and men experience it as well. Body image concerns can affect any athlete, regardless of gender, age, or the sport they practice.

While we often associate body dissatisfaction with a desire to lose weight, there are many other ways in which athletes want to change their body to meet athletic and performance ideals. Regardless of gender, young athletes are particularly vulnerable! To reach their goals, perform better, please their sports circle, and pursue their careers, they may be willing to do anything—even adopt practices or behaviours that put their physical and mental health at risk. This highlights the importance of promoting the development of a positive body image among all athletes, starting at a young age!

Effective strategies to promote a positive body image

As a coach, you play an important role in shaping and transmitting the messages and practices related to achieving the athletic ideals of your sport. Thanks to your special relationship with athletes, you can help them take care of their bodies, their health, and their overall well-being, while supporting their athletic success! To do so, here are a few tips from ÉquiLibre's [*Corps et sport*](#):



Reduce the emphasis on weight and appearance

1. Set goals that do not aim to change body composition

Focus on the many other performance determinants that athletes can control. Concentrate on athletic qualities, strategic and technical aspects, such as improving strength, endurance, mobility, technique, strategic mastery, and mental preparation.

In addition to athletic qualities, and strategic and technical aspects, remember that personal growth, the development of new skills, and the values acquired throughout sports practice are important developmental goals to instill in athletes.

2. Value the uniqueness of athletes

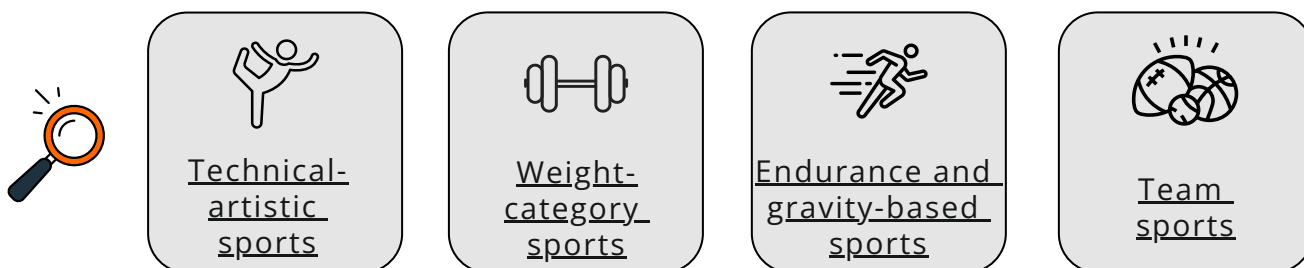
There is no single model for success! Each athlete has athletic qualities and skills that allow them to practice their sport and develop unique talents and competencies. Focus on the athletic aspects and qualities that define athletes much more than on their appearance (effort, values, teamwork, perseverance, leadership, attitudes, resilience, passion, etc.).

3. Question the relevance of anthropometric measurements (body composition monitoring)

Anthropometric measurements are a major source of anxiety and concern for athletes. They often do more harm than good for athletes and their performance. If you aim to reduce the emphasis on weight, it is important to reassess their relevance and how they are managed.

To do so, watch this video from ÉquiLibre's *Body and Sport* toolbox:

Step 1: Click on your athlete's sport category below to access the video:



Step 2: access the *factsheet #11*:

To access the video capsule, consult *factsheet #11: Pistes d'action afin de diminuer l'importance accordée au poids et à l'apparence en contexte sportif* and click on the section related to anthropometric measures (in French only.)

4. Do not tolerate mocking or bullying behaviours

In situations involving remarks, teasing, insults, or bullying related to weight and appearance—whether among athletes in your group, athletes from other groups (e.g., opponents), or between different actors in your environment—it is essential to intervene quickly! These behaviours are unacceptable, and delaying or failing to act could reinforce the social acceptability of stigma among the athletes involved in the situation.



To learn more about how to reduce the emphasis on body control among athletes, check out the tool *Le poids de la performance* (in French only) from ÉquiLibre's "Corps et sport" toolbox: equilibre.ca/sport



For more information on **conflict management**, [view this guide](#).



For more information on **actions to take as a bystander** of bullying, [view this guide](#).



Promote healthy and safe training environments that value body diversity

1. Encourage positive attitudes and behaviours related to food

A quality, varied, and balanced diet is essential to meet an athlete's needs. However, the relationship they develop with food is just as important as what's on their plate! To achieve this:

- **Focus on listening to individual needs rather than restriction.** Explain to athletes that it's important to eat what they enjoy in a varied way, without guilt or judgment. A healthy, thriving body is a body that performs better.
- **Avoid categorizing foods as 'healthy' or 'unhealthy.'** No single food has the power to positively or negatively affect health, weight, or performance! The quality of a diet is measured over several days, even weeks.
- **Provide a flexible training environment where food is accessible.** This will allow athletes to train while meeting their body's needs.
- **Encourage athletes to listen to their internal signals** and the sensations that foods create before or after training.



To learn more about satiety, check out the page [Hunger cues](#) from the Government of Canada

Keep in mind that the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors acquired today influence an athlete's physical and mental health, well-being, and performance, while shaping their relationship with food for life.

Warning: Respect your professional boundaries!



Nutritional advice must be provided by qualified professionals (e.g., registered dietitians). If you are concerned about an athlete who appears to have a difficult relationship with food, or if the athlete's needs go beyond your expertise, **respect your professional limits and refer the athlete to a nutritionist** or the appropriate health professional in your setting.



To learn more about how to improve athletes' relationship with food, physical activity, and sport, check out the tool *Le développement d'une relation positive avec l'alimentation et le sport* (in french only) from ÉquiLibre's "Corps et sport" toolbox: equilibre.ca/sport

2. Promote a positive relationship with physical activity and sport

Avoid using physical activity as a form of compensation or punishment, as this can harm athletes' relationship with their bodies and with physical activity. Instead, instill an approach where the motivation to practice their sport and to train is linked to values deeper than appearance, such as self-improvement, enjoyment, pride, collaboration, satisfaction, and health.



For more information on **punishment**, [view this guide](#).



For more information on how to **promote a healthy motivation** among athletes, [view this guide](#).

3. Expose athletes to body diversity

- Diversify the illustrations and images you include on your club or team's website, in your communications, presentations, etc.
- When people in motion appear in images and posters in locker rooms or on bulletin boards in your sports environment, make sure they represent individuals of different weights, genders, sizes, cultures, abilities, etc.

4. Help athletes question athletic body ideals

- Explain to athletes that most images shared by the media are not representative of reality, and athletic ideals are difficult to achieve and maintain—even for athletes.
- Help athletes, especially teenagers, develop critical thinking and better analyze the images and ideals around them (Who is sharing the image or information? Who benefits from selling a product? What are the promises? Is there scientific evidence? Etc.).



To learn more about athletic ideals, body representation in sports contexts, and your role in creating inclusive sports environments that value diversity, check out the tool *Les idéaux athlétiques* (in french only) from ÉquiLibre's "Corps et sport" toolbox: equilibre.ca/sport

3 Adopt compassionate practices

1. *Becoming aware of your own biases to act differently*

Take the time to reflect with kindness and to question certain **beliefs and biases** that may be deeply **ingrained in your sport's culture**. How do these influence your actions and your approach with athletes? For example:

- Do you have biases toward athletes whose physical characteristics or athletic qualities differ from your sport's ideals? Do these biases influence your interactions and interventions with them?
- Do you give equal opportunities to all young athletes who want to progress in their sport?
- Do you give weight and body composition related advice based on your personal experiences instead of recommending follow-up with a sports nutritionist?
- Do you intervene when your athletes make fun of a teammate's or an opponent's appearance?

Without intending to—and often without even realizing it—we all make positive and negative judgments about others. That's being human! Having prejudices, unconscious biases, or needing to rethink one's approach does not mean being a bad person. What matters is becoming aware of them and reflecting on their potential impact on our attitudes, practices, and words towards athletes, in order to act without causing harm.

2. *Being a Role Model*

As a coach, you are a meaningful role model and a trusted person for athletes! **Your attitudes, words, and behaviours matter**—both in how they relate to athletes and to yourself. Take the time to reflect on your own relationship with your body, food, and physical activity, and consider how this may influence your actions with athletes.

- **Be mindful of the comments you make about your own weight and appearance,**
- When sharing meals with athletes, convey the pleasure of eating in a warm, caring, and non-judgmental atmosphere,
- Provide a flexible training environment where food is accepted and accessible. This will allow athletes to train while meeting their body's needs and will help foster a trusting relationship with their sport environment.



Being a good role model does not mean being perfect; rather, it means inspiring athletes by being authentic and by demonstrating respect and inclusivity toward your own body and the bodies of others.

3. *Respecting your own professional boundaries*

Be attentive to athletes' concerns and needs. If you are worried about an athlete who seems to have a difficult relationship with their body, food, or physical activity, or if the athlete's needs go beyond your expertise, **respect your professional boundaries** and refer the athlete to a nutritionist, psychologist, physician, or the appropriate health professional.

Want to learn more ?

Coaches' Practical Guides



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Putting it into practice

Reflect on an event that occurred in the past few months, during which you or someone else made negative comments or acted in a way that ridiculed an athlete's weight or appearance.

1. What potential negative effects might this behavior have caused for the athlete and others witnessing the situation?

2. How could you have communicated or acted differently to promote a positive body image for your athlete?

3. Why did you make that negative comment, or why did you act that way? What other aspect could you have focused on instead?

4. From the alternative behaviors listed in the section "Effective strategies to promote a positive body image", choose one you would like to work on in the coming weeks. Keep a journal of the training sessions where you successfully applied it, and when you didn't, reflect on how you could have acted differently.

If these questions make you feel uncomfortable, know that this is completely normal. Society instills beauty standards through the media, the environment we live in, and the people we interact with. It is therefore important to become aware, at your own pace, of the beliefs you hold about body image and weight and to gradually change your perspective and actions.

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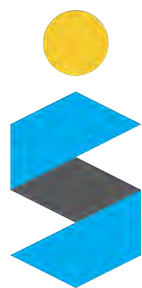
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