



Coaching Today's Youth Athletes: A Coaches' Practical Guide

This guide aims to:

- 1) Better understand today's youth athletes,
- 2) Debunk myths about today's youth athletes,
- 3) Provide practical coaching strategies that strengthen communication, relationships, and engagement.



SPORT + SOCIÉTÉ
ENGAGÉE

2026

**GUILD
HALL**
SCHOOL



UNIVERSITY of
STIRLING



Chaire de recherche Sécurité
et intégrité en milieu sportif



UNIVERSITÉ
LAVAL

AUTHORS:

Felien Laureys, Ph.D. ¹
Emilie Belley-Ranger, Ph.D. ¹
Stephanie Radziszewski, Ph.D. ¹
Emilie Lemelin, Ph.D. ¹
Michael McDougall, Ph.D. ²
Daniel Gould, Ph.D. ³
Sophia Jowett, Ph.D. ⁴
Sylvie Parent, Ph.D. ¹

¹ Research Chair in Safety and Integrity in sport (SIMS), Université Laval.

² Faculty of Health, Sport and Society, The University of Stirling

³ Department of Kinesiology and the Institute for the study of youth sports, Michigan State University

⁴ Guildhall School of Music & Drama, and Tandem Performance Ltd.

TO CITE THIS DOCUMENT :

Laureys., F., Belley-Ranger, E., Radziszewski, S. Lemelin, E., McDougall., M., Gould, D., Jowett, S., & Parent., S. (2026). Coaching Today's Youth Athletes: A Coaches' Practical Guide. Research Chair in Safety and Integrity in Sport (Université Laval), University of Stirling, Michigan State University, Guildhall School of Musica & Drama.

COPYRIGHTS:

Coaching Today's Young Athletes: A Coaches' Practical Guide. © 2026 by Research Chair in Safety and Integrity in Sport, Université Laval is licensed non-commercial and no derivatives under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

To view a copy of this license, visit

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

For any requests regarding changes (including adaptations and translations) to this practical guide, please write to chaire.sims@fse.ulaval.ca.

Table of contents



The importance of quality coaching	4
Today's youth athletes	4
<i>Understanding today's youth athletes</i>	4
<i>Debunking myths on today's young athletes</i>	8
<i>Why do these myths persist?</i>	12
Practical coaching strategies for today's youth athletes	13
<i>Creating the environment</i>	13
<i>Developing the athlete</i>	16
<i>Developing the coach</i>	18
Conclusion	19
Want to learn more?	20
Putting it into practice	21
References	22

The importance of quality coaching

The coach plays an essential role in supporting youth athletes' development, both on and off the field. Research shows that factors such as a **strong coach-athlete relationship**, a holistic **"total child development"** perspective (rather than a singular focus on achievement and athletic success), the intentional use of strategies to develop specific skills and attributes, and coaching knowledge are all associated with positive youth development through sport. In essence, quality coaching matters.

To provide **quality coaching**, today's coaches need to understand the youth athletes they work with. This includes the pitfalls of generational thinking and the importance of moving beyond it. Rather than relying on broad generational stereotypes, coaches are encouraged to critically examine common myths about today's youth athletes and, instead, focus on athletes as individuals, each shaped by developmental, cultural and sports system influences. From this understanding, coaches can implement practical coaching strategies that help youth athletes meet the many challenges they face in today's complex world.

Today's youth athletes

Understanding today's youth athletes

Generational thinking

Coaching youth athletes today can feel more complex than ever. Athletes may appear more vocal, more sensitive, and less accepting of *"because I said so"*. A substantial proportion of today's youth athletes belong to Generation Z (typically defined as those born between 1997 and 2012). They are often (negatively) described by people from previous generations as:

- Being lazy,
- Having short attention spans,
- Overly sensitive, mentally fragile and less resilient,
- Lacking intrinsic motivation,
- Being screen-dependent and poor at face-to-face communication.



Although some of these observations may resonate with coaches' experience, they must be careful **not to fall into the trap of generalizing** when characterizing today's youth athletes. Not all youth athletes fit these observations, and relying on these generalizations can lead to misunderstandings in coaching practice.

These kinds of generalizations are known as **'generational thinking'**: the tendency to attribute fixed characteristics to entire age groups. Research on generational differences shows a clear pattern: each generation of young people has been criticized by older generations. Coaches have, for example, expressed that some (older) generations are *"easier to coach"* than others. In the table you can find other generalizations people voiced.

Common generalizations across generations

Theme	Gen X	Millennial	Gen Z
Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too obedient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions authority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejects authority
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rarely asks for feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs constant reassurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes feedback personally
Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suppresses it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over-identifies with it
Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sacrifices everything 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conditional commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily disengaged
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closed and minimal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talkative, validation-seeking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotionally reactive
Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impatient

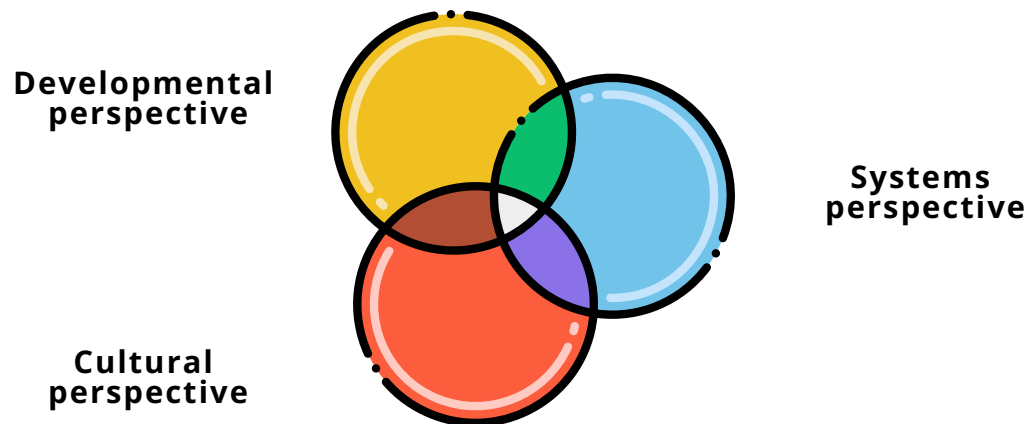
Attributing the challenges coaches experience simply to “generational differences”, may be a shortcut and a mistake. Instead, these challenges often reflect changing social norms, communication styles, and expectations within sport and society. As a result, effective coaching today does not require adapting to a *new generation* of athletes but rather adapting to the changing challenges athletes face.



The athletes themselves have not fundamentally changed; the context in which they develop and perform has.

Moving beyond generational thinking

Rather than relying on generational labels, coaches benefit from using three complementary perspectives of factors that influence today's youth athletes.



Developmental perspective

Youth athletes are not simply “Gen Z athletes”. This is not a homogeneous group. Rather, they are **individuals at different stages of physical, social, psychological, and cognitive development, with important variations in age and maturation**. Attention span, emotional regulation, planning skills, identity development, and learning preferences all evolve over time and differ between individuals.

Athletes develop sport-specific technical and tactical skills, while also noting changes in their physical and mental development. What may look like a generational issue (e.g., Gen Z athletes are awful planners) is often a normal developmental process (e.g., learning planning skills during adolescence) together with factors related to balancing parental, societal, academic and sports challenges.



If you want to learn more on **emotion regulation**, [view this guide](#).

Systems perspective (sports)

Athlete behaviour is also shaped by the sport-systems around them, such as coaching practices, club culture, communication structures, parental involvement, competition schedules, and performance expectations.

A systems perspective encourages coaches to look outward beyond the individual and think relationally.



Rather than just asking "*how do I influence my athletes?*", the question becomes "*how do the different parts of this system interact, and what role do I play within it?*".

This involves recognizing how other actors and structures shape athlete behaviour and understanding that outcomes emerge from the whole system rather than from any single influence.

Cultural perspective

Athletes grow up within specific cultural and social contexts. Digital life, social media, changing norms around mental health, and broader societal pressures all shape how athletes think, feel, and behave.

However, coaches are part of these same cultural contexts. Their beliefs, expectations and coaching practices are also shaped by cultural norms and past experiences.

From this perspective, people are not passive recipients of culture. **We actively interpret experiences and attach meaning to them.** For coaches, this means moving beyond dismissing athletes' meanings. Instead, coaches can seek to understand how athletes make sense of their experiences, while also reflecting their own assumptions and interpretations.

These different perspectives are important for coaches to consider, as athletes are always influenced by developmental, sport-system, and cultural approaches. The environment in which athletes grow up is one of the biggest forces shaping them who they are and are becoming. These influences will shape athletes' attitudes, values, and behaviours. More broadly, they also influence how sport evolves and is experienced, organized, and understood by everyone involved. Recognizing these dynamics calls for a **flexible and reflective coaching approach**, where coaches remain open to learning and adapting their practices in response to developmental changes, system pressures, and cultural patterns that shape the sports environment.

Debunking myths on today's youth athletes

In the following section, several common myths about today's youth athletes are discussed. Although evidence-based responses will be provided, the most effective way for coaches to deal with these myths is through **open communication** with their athletes. Ask how athletes experience these myths, how they feel about these labels, and where they think such beliefs come from. **Reflecting** on your own assumptions as a coach is also important. The questions included after each myth are designed to help coaches explore their own interpretations of athlete behaviour.

Myth: "Today's athletes can't manage their time."



Many youth athletes are simultaneously navigating school, sports, work, social life, and family responsibilities. Full schedules, combined with time management skills that are still developing, can sometimes lead to planning difficulties. What coaches could interpret as poor planning or organization, is often **ongoing skill development** (learning time management), not a lack of motivation or discipline.

Rather than assuming athletes are poor planners or criticizing them for always being late, coaches can reflect on the situation and start a conversation with the athlete about what may be causing these planning challenges. Furthermore, **today's athletes want to be involved in their sport's journey** and have a voice in decision making. Using a collaborative coaching approach with open communication with athletes in these challenging situations will stimulate athlete autonomy and their motivation. In contrast, excluding athletes from this conversation, and even repeating negative labels (e.g., "*you're always late*"), will work counterproductively and can become self-fulfilling. If there are no clear system-related factors (e.g., heavy school workloads or busy family schedules), but athletes struggle with planning or time-management skills, coaches can also help them develop these skills explicitly. For example, setting realistic short- and long-term goals together and clarifying expectations can support athletes in organizing their time more effectively.

From a broader sport-system perspective, it is also important to reflect on parental involvement, particularly with younger athletes. Youth athletes often depend more on their parents than older adolescents or adults. Opening a conversation about time management with parents can help align expectations, rules, and responsibilities. This shared clarity allows youth athletes to gradually take more ownership of their planning and time-management skills.

Reflection questions:



- How would you start a conversation with an athlete about being late without assuming a lack of motivation or discipline?
- What contextual factors might explain this behaviour?

Myth: “Athletes today can’t handle pressure, they used to be tougher.”



Today’s athletes often respond to pressure differently. They are more likely to question decisions, speak up, and express concerns when pressure feels excessive or unfair. This does not mean they lack resilience. Youth athletes themselves have pointed out that they have navigated major challenges, such as a global pandemic, increased academic and financial pressures, and social uncertainty. These athletes also rightfully reflect that **speaking up is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of great resilience.**

Importantly, research shows that athletes who feel forced to be obedient and suppress their feelings when trying to meet the coaches’ expectations may appear compliant but often experience lower well-being and poorer long-term performance. Athletes who negotiate with their coach in an open, constructive and flexible dialogue, are often engaged in the process and thus tend to show a greater sense of autonomy, motivation and engagement.

Setting high expectations or goals for athletes is still possible but make sure the youth athlete can participate in making decisions on their athletic pathway. Encourage open and respectful communication, where athletes know what is expected to reach goals.

Reflection questions:



- How do athletes in your group currently express pressure or stress, and how do you usually respond?
- How do you create space for open and respectful dialogue during training or competition?
- What does open and respectful communication mean to you as a coach and how might athletes define it differently?

Myth: “They are addicted to their phones and don’t focus anymore.”



Today’s youth athletes have grown up in a digital world, but **digital use is not inherently negative**. Often, youth athletes will use their phones for school, communication, entertainment and administration (e.g., doing homework, looking up test scores, learning a language, using digital platforms to communicate with the coach or teammates, listening to music). Having good digital skills allows them to work more efficiently (e.g., by rapidly switching between tasks), be more practical (e.g., instant information searching), or to use multitasking.

While boundaries around phone use are important, total bans may miss opportunities to **use technology as a performance and learning tool** (e.g., video feedback, tracking progress) and can even have the opposite effect (e.g., use in secret, compensation at other times of the day). However, it is important to **set clear and consistent rules** and boundaries on technology and phone use during practice and competition sessions.

At the same time, the digital environment has changed how both athletes and coaches access and use information. Online sources, such as social media, can be valuable, but they also require the ability to think critically about the quality and relevance of information. **Developing this critical perspective** is a shared responsibility. Coaches can support this process by modeling thoughtful digital habits, being mindful of their own media use, and encouraging athletes to question where information comes from and how reliable it is.

Reflection questions:

- What is your own phone use? If you experience boredom, for example, is the phone the first thing you reach for?



- When athletes use their phones, what assumptions do you make, and how might these influence your response as a coach?
- How can you set clear phone use boundaries while still using technology to support learning and performance?
- How can you communicate with athletes while respecting boundaries?



For more information on **boundary-setting**, [view this guide](#).

Myth: “Athletes today are just harder to coach.”



This belief reflects **stereotypical generational thinking** rather than the reality of athletes’ experiences. What may look like low motivation can instead be fatigue, fear of failure, developmental changes, or system-level pressures. Pre-judging athlete behaviour based on stereotypes often leads to misinterpretation.

At the same time, coaching today requires different skills and coaching approaches than 10 years ago. This asks coaches to move beyond methods they experienced as athletes themselves (“*I coach how I was coached*”). In some cases, difficulties in adapting alternative or more suitable coaching approaches for a given situation may be interpreted by coaches as athletes being harder to coach, rather than as a signal to reflect on one’s own coaching practice.

Instead, coaches are encouraged to **adopt a flexible coaching approach** and **reflect on athlete behaviour** using different perspectives:

- Developmental perspective: Athletes may be going through growth spurts or developmental changes that affect energy levels, focus, or mood. Fatigue can easily be mistaken for a lack of motivation.
- Systems perspective: Athletes operate within broader systems such as school, sport's clubs, and family structures. Heavy academic workloads, packed schedules, and expectations from multiple environments can create pressure and fatigue. What may look like low motivation could instead reflect these competing demands or a fear of failure shaped by the performance climate within the team or club.
- Cultural perspective: Sport and society shape shared beliefs about what a “good athlete” should be, such as always being tough, never showing weakness, or constantly striving to be the best. These cultural expectations can influence how athletes interpret pressure, success, failure, and effort.



Reflection questions:



- Would this behaviour be developmental rather than generational?
- Would it be helpful to ask athletes how I can better support them?
- What cultural or societal pressures might this athlete be experiencing?
- How might my coaching style or the club environment be contributing to this behavior?

Why do these myths persist?

Beliefs about today's athletes often persist because of how people interpret behaviour. Coaches, like all people, rely on mental shortcuts when making quick decisions. These shortcuts can be helpful, but they can also lead to misinterpretations. Several well-known psychological theories help explain why generational myths persist in sport.

Fundamental attribution error

People often explain behaviour by referring to personality (e.g., "this athlete is lazy") rather than context (e.g., "this athlete is exhausted after exams").

Confirmation bias

Once people believe something about a group, they tend to notice examples that confirm their belief and ignore examples that contradict it. For example, if a coach believes that *"this generation is distracted by phones"*, every moment an athlete is using their phone may reinforce that belief.

Outgroup homogeneity

People tend to see members of another group (i.e., the outgroup) as more similar than members of their own group (i.e., the ingroup). Coaches may therefore perceive an entire generation of athletes as having the same characteristics, even though athletes differ widely in personality, motivation and circumstances.

At the same time, youth athletes are still developing. Coaches are not only working with athletes at different developmental stages, but also with individuals who progress at their own pace. Recognizing this variability is essential to avoid oversimplification and to respond effectively to each athlete's needs.

Self-fulfilling prophecy

Labels can influence behaviour. When athletes are repeatedly labelled as "unmotivated" or "fragile", they may eventually start to behave in ways that match those expectations.



Being aware of these psychological tendencies can help coaches pause and ask an important question: *"What else could explain this behavior?"*

Looking at athlete behaviour through developmental, cultural and sport-system perspectives can help coaches move beyond simple stereotypes and better understand the realities athletes face today.

Practical coaching strategies for today's youth athletes

Coaching youth athletes today can sometimes feel more demanding than in the past. Athletes may ask more questions, express emotions more openly, and expect to be involved in decisions. They may also face different challenges than athletes did 20 years ago. At the same time, **what athletes need to develop and perform has not fundamentally changed**. Athletes still want to be challenged and to excel in their sport; however, the way coaches challenge and support them continues to evolve.

The following strategies can help coaches strengthen their relationships with athletes, deepen their knowledge and understanding of each one athlete in their team, and create environments that support communication, learning, motivation, and well-being. It is important to remember that every athlete is unique and brings their own attitudes, needs, expectations, and behaviours.

Ultimately, these strategies only work when coaches are willing to **adapt and individualize their coaching approach**. Doing so can significantly enhance the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.

Creating the environment

Create a safe and psychologically supportive sport environment

Athletes learn and perform best when they feel safe to express themselves without fear of humiliation or punishment. Coaches play a key role in **creating environments that are physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe**. This involves both proactive actions and appropriate responses when problems occur.

Proactive actions coaches can install:



- Acknowledging the importance of the coach-athlete relationship,
- Setting clear expectations for quality relationships that are characterized by respect, trust, commitment and collaboration,
- Promoting safe and positive team norms, that discourage harmful behaviors such as bullying or exclusion,
- Modeling respectful communication, such as positive reinforcement and feedback, empathy and compassion and/or active listening.

Coaches should also recognize and react to signs that athletes feel unsafe or uncomfortable. Responding calmly, regulating emotions during difficult moments, and using constructive discipline rather than punitive reactions can help maintain a safe and positive environment, are some examples of appropriate responses.



In a safe and positive environment, there is also a focus on learning. **Mistakes should be treated as opportunities for learning**, rather than reasons for embarrassment or criticism.

Creating a safe environment also requires looking beyond the coach-athlete relationship. Athlete experiences are shaped by both the broader sport-system and cultural context. This includes influences such as fellow athletes, parents, clubs, competition structures, organizational demands, and wider societal and sports norms. Coaches can benefit from considering where pressures (e.g., to win or perform) originate, who or what influences athlete behaviour, and how different parts of the system interact. In practice, this may involve more structured collaboration with parents, clearer communication with clubs or administrators, or identifying periods in the calendar where system pressures are particularly high.

It is also important to reflect on the values that are explicitly or implicitly promoted within a sports environment or club, for example through policies, procedures or everyday practices. In parallel, wider cultural messages about toughness, winning, failure, or identity can shape how athletes interpret their experiences. Being aware of both **system-level and cultural influences** helps coaches to more intentionally shape a safer and more supportive environment.



For more information on **boundary-setting**, [view this guide](#).

Foster belonging and team connection

Youth sports can play an important role in providing a sense of belonging. Athletes who feel included and respected regardless of background, gender, race, age or ability, are more likely to stay engaged and motivated.

Coaches can **support belonging and inclusion** by using inclusive language and involving athletes in developing team values. Team connection can be stimulated by encouraging peer support throughout the season. Coaches can also create opportunities for team bonding such as getting to know and understand one another.

It is important that expectations, norms and rules feel fair and transparent. When athletes understand why these exist, and if they are involved in producing and/or agreeing to uphold them, they are more likely to apply them (e.g., agreements on playing opportunities during games).

Build quality coach-athlete relationships based on relational qualities such as trust and appreciation

Effective youth coaching is built on **authentic quality relationships**. Today's youth athletes respond best to coaches who show genuine care and interest in them as individuals, not only as performers.

Simple actions can strengthen key relational qualities such as trust and respect, commitment and loyalty, responsiveness and cooperation in coach-athlete relationships. For example, the use of regular check-ins, either on individual or small group basis, where there, the aim is to get to know the athletes better and understand them as human beings. It also helps to listen to athletes before giving feedback or criticism. Be present and attentive during these interactions to increase building authentic connections.

The coach-athlete relationship is a unique type of interpersonal relationship.

While it may share certain qualities with friendships, parental or other types of relationships, its purpose and functional demands clearly distinguish it. Building a high-quality coach-athlete relationship means connecting with athletes as human beings, not just performers, within a framework of clear roles, rules and expectations, and boundaries guiding appropriate interactions. As such, developing a strong relationship does not mean becoming friends with athletes, as blurred boundaries can undermine the quality and effectiveness of the coach-athlete relationship. Effective coaches are able to connect with athletes while maintaining a sound leadership position, ensuring that their roles and the roles of their athletes remain well-defined and purposeful.

Parents should also be considered part of the broader environment. Especially for younger athletes, parents play an important role in supporting participation and well-being. Clear communication with parents helps align expectations and create a consistent support system around the athlete.



For more information on **positive involvement of parents**, view this guide.



Developing the athlete

In addition to creating the right environment, coaches can use strategies that support athletes' development directly. Many youth athletes today appreciate being involved in the training process and benefit from active, engaging learning experiences. Providing opportunities for involvement and autonomy can strengthen motivation, engagement, learning, and ultimately, performance.

Promote athlete voice and autonomy

Today's youth athletes value having a voice in their sport experience. When coaches invite athletes to contribute ideas or reflect on their development, athletes can develop confidence, responsibility, and leadership skills. **Autonomy-supportive and collaborative coaching approaches** have been shown to strengthen athlete motivation and engagement.

Supporting autonomy means **offering choice within a clear structure**. Coaches remain responsible for training design, safety, and long-term goals. Within this structure, athletes can be invited to participate, contribute, reflect and take responsibility in certain aspects. Coaches do not need to offer choices about everything. They decide where choice is appropriate and where clear direction is needed. This goes hand in hand with the opportunities and constraints of the sport-system. Time pressures, performance expectations or club culture may limit or enable how much voice athletes can have. Not every decision should be shared or negotiated either. For example, while the coach sets the training plan, they can involve athletes by asking questions such as: *"What do you need to thrive in this environment?"*, *"How can we make this drill more challenging or engaging?"* or *"How can I [as your coach] do better for you?"*. The key is to make deliberate choices when and how to involve athletes within your specific context.

Using an autonomy-supportive style **encourages athlete input** by allowing dialogue, offering meaningful choices and inviting responsibility. For example, coaches may ask athletes for input on drills or practice challenges, input on developing team rules or reflection on training or competition experiences.

Supporting autonomy does not mean lowering standards or giving up structure and discipline. On the contrary, a clear, consistent and transparent structure allows athletes to use their autonomy in a constructive way. This balance between structure and choice helps athletes take ownership of their development and leads to more effective training and performance. It gives athletes a voice in their own sport journey, allowing them to work alongside their coaches, take ownership of their development, and experience the power of true collaboration. In doing so, they learn that **progress is not something done to them, but something created with them** through shared effort and mutual involvement.

Emphasize a master-oriented climate

When athletes feel that improvement and learning are valued, they are more likely to remain engaged and motivated. Emphasizing effort, learning, and skill development encourages athletes to see mistakes as part of the learning process. This mastery-oriented approach supports motivation, persistence, and long-term engagement in sport.

Coaches can promote this approach by **setting developmental goals, providing constructive and task-oriented feedback, and recognising effort and progress** rather than a single focus on results. Importantly, this should be applied at both the group and individual level. An emphasis on individual goals or goals that are specific to individual athletes can for example help athletes understand what they need to focus on to improve both individual performance as well as collective performance (if they are part of a team).

At the same time, the climate coaches create is shaped by broader cultural and system influences (think back to the cultural and sport systems perspective). Coaches sometimes operate in environments where winning is prioritized, and mistakes are viewed as failures. They must also navigate factors such as competition structures, selection pressures, and expectations from parents or clubs. Recognizing these influences can help coaches make deliberate choices within their context and intentionally shape the environment they create.



For more information on using a **motivating style** to create this master climate, [view this guide](#).

Use engaging and developmentally appropriate practices

Practices should be structured, engaging, and adapted to the developmental stage of the athletes. Even when athletes are moving toward more deliberate practice¹, training sessions should still include elements of enjoyment and variety. Small games, challenges, or problem-solving activities can help **maintain engagement while supporting skill development**.



Youth athletes are still developing physically, emotionally, and cognitively. Growth spurts, hormonal changes, and identity development can influence energy levels, concentration, and emotional responses. Also remember that **athletes develop at different rates**, and every athlete might have different demands placed upon them during the season.

Coaches should therefore remain attentive to developmental differences and adjust expectations accordingly. By knowing and understanding each athlete, and having a quality coach-athlete relationship, coaches should be able to introduce challenges gradually and recognize when athletes are ready for new demands that can support both learning and well-being.

1. Deliberate practice refers to a special type of practice that is purposeful and systematic. It requires focused attention and is conducted with the specific goal of improving performance.

Setting the example as a coach

Model values and life skills

Coaches are **powerful role models**. Their behaviour influences how athletes manage emotions, communicate with others, and approach challenges. Youth athletes are often attentive to whether coaches act consistently with the values they promote. Demonstrating respect, emotional control, and fairness can therefore have a strong impact on these athletes. A strong signal is for example openly admitting mistakes and showing athletes how to learn from them, which models resilience and personal growth.



Sport also offers the unique opportunity to teach **transferable life skills**, such as self-control, goal setting, determination, time management, communication, leadership or emotion regulation. Coaches can intentionally integrate these skills into training and competition experiences.

Engage in continuous self-reflection and learning

Effective youth coaching requires **ongoing reflection, learning and openness to feedback**. Sports environments evolve over time, influenced by developmental, cultural, and sport-system factors, which will also change athletes' needs and expectations. Coaches who remain curious and open to feedback are better able to adapt to these changes.

Regular reflection can help coaches examine their own assumptions and coaching practices. This can include:



- Reflecting after practices or competitions,
- Asking athletes and other coaches for feedback,
- Discussing experiences with other coaches,
- Participating in coach-related forums, networks or communities,
- Engaging in continued coach education.

Maintaining a reflective mindset helps coaches remain flexible and responsive to the needs of the sports environment and the athletes they support.

Conclusion

Coaching today's youth athletes is largely about open, honest, and two-way communication. It requires a genuine effort to connect with each athlete and taking the time to reflect on your own practice. Setting aside regular moments for reflection is essential. Ask yourself, for example:



- What decisions did I make today?
- How did my training session go?
- How did I communicate with my team as a collective and with individual athletes?
- What went well and what could I do differently next time?

This also means reflecting on underlying assumptions and the more challenging moments: difficult conversations, giving critical feedback, how you respond when athletes give you feedback, or when you find yourself under pressure. These situations often provide the greatest opportunities for growth.

Regular reflection helps coaches remain flexible and responsive. Instead of coaching on autopilot, it increases awareness of your approach and supports you in moving beyond habits and labels. This makes it easier to adapt to the needs of each athlete, as well as the team as a collective. The goal is simple: be the right coach for the athlete in front of you, in that moment.



Coaching is not something you do *to* athletes, but something you do *with* them. When you involve athletes, listen to their perspectives, and give them a voice in their development, they become more engaged and motivated.

At the same time, coaching often becomes more rewarding and enjoyable. When coaches and athletes work together, both performance and the overall experience improve. It's a true **win-win**.

“People will forget what you said,
People will forget what you did,
But people will never forget how you made them feel.”
— Maya Angelou

Want to learn more?

Practical guides for coaches



[Click here](#)

Long-term athlete development in Canada

[Click here](#)

CTRI: 3 tips for working with teenagers

[Click here](#)

For Québec : développement du talent sportif

[Click here](#)

Student Athlete Mental Health Toolkit

[Click here](#)

Transitioning into post-secondary education

[Click here](#)

Putting it into practice

We now invite you to apply the principles and ideas presented above to your own coaching practice. To do so, try the following exercise.



Reflecting on generational assumptions

Reflection

-
- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Think about a coach who had a strong positive or negative impact on you as a young athlete. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What coaching approaches, values, attitudes, or beliefs did this coach demonstrate? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your past experiences may influence how you coach today. Reflect on your current coaching practice: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Which of my coaching habits come from this coach? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Now consider the three perspectives introduced in this guide (developmental, systems and cultural): | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do I hold assumptions about youth athletes that influence how I coach?• How might these assumptions show up in my coaching behaviours? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take a critical look at your habits and assumptions: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do these coaching habits support today's athletes?<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do they foster relationship-building, open and honest communication and engagement?• Do they align with the needs and values of today's athletes? |
-

Looking back at your list, intentionally decide which habits you want to keep or strengthen, and which you want to change or stop. Remember: you don't have to coach the way you were coached. You can choose to coach in ways that best support your athletes' development today.



Self-reflection framework

Reflection



Create a reflection framework you can use after each practice and competition. This helps you question your assumptions, beliefs, and coaching behaviours.

Use the questions below as a guide to reflect on your coaching approach:

- How did my training session go?
- What decisions did I make today?
- How did I communicate with my team as a collective and with individual athletes?
- What went well and what could I do differently next time?

In addition to your coaching behaviours, take time to reflect on your underlying assumptions:

- What might be my own blind spots?
- Do I have any biases that influence my coaching?
- How does my sense of identity shift, depending on the context?
- Which athlete behaviours frustrate me, and why?

Use these reflections to identify patterns over time and to guide small, intentional adjustments in your coaching practice.



Putting strategies into practice

Reflection

Think about how you can integrate the coaching strategies in your practice on the short term by defining several actions. When formulating actions, think about the SMART-principle (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound).

Strategies

Concrete actions I want to implement

Create environment

-
-
-

Develop athletes

-
-
-

Setting the example

-
-
-

References

- <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20171003-proof-that-people-have-always-complained-about-young-adults>
- MCC_CoachPracticeGuide_2025
- Gould, D., Nalepa, J., & Mignano, M. (2020). Coaching generation Z athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 32*(1), 104-120.
- McDougall, M., Saarinen, M., & Ryba, T. V. (2024). Coaching generation Z: A response to Gould et al. from a critical cultural perspective. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 36*(3), 409-421.
- Gould, D., Mignano, M., & Nalepa-Roth, J. (2024). Coaching Generation Z: A response to McDougall et al.'s commentary. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 36*(3), 422-428.
- McDougall, M., & Saarinen, M. (2024). Coaching Generation Z: Practice from a different perspective and base. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 36*(3), 429-439.
- Vance, M. R. (2019). *Generation Z: Perceptions from today's collegiate athlete on the coach-athlete relationship and its impact on success in athletics*. Concordia University (Oregon).
- Motiverend coachen in de sport – Aelterman
- Delrue, J., Reynders, B., Vande Broek, G., Aelterman, N., De Backer, M., Decroos, S., ... & Vansteenkiste, M. (2019). Adopting a helicopter-perspective towards motivating and demotivating coaching: A circumplex approach. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 40*, 110-126.
- Gould, D. (2016). Quality coaching counts. *Phi Delta Kappan, 97*(8), 13-18.
- Gould, D., Collins, K., Lauer, L., & Chung, Y. (2007). Coaching life skills through football: A study of award winning high school coaches. *Journal of applied sport psychology, 19*(1), 16-37.
- Fry, M. D. (2010). Creating a positive climate for young athletes from day 1. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, 1*(1), 33-41.
- Gould, D., & Wright, E. M. (2012). 18 The Psychology of Coaching. *The Oxford handbook of sport and performance psychology, 343*.
- Camiré, M., Trudel, P., & Forneris, T. (2009). High school athletes' perspectives on support, communication, negotiation and life skill development. *Qualitative research in sport and exercise, 1*(1), 72-88.
- Kendellen, K. & Camiré, M. (2015, June). Examining the life skill development and transfer experiences of former high school athletes. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 1-14*. <http://bit.ly/1S8GueZ>hlete relationship a mediating factor? *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology 9*(3): 213–231.

Research Chair in Safety and Integrity in Sport

2300, rue de la Terrasse
Pavillon de l'Éducation physique
et des sports, local 3290
Université Laval
Québec (Québec) G1V 0A6



SPORT + SOCIÉTÉ
ENGAGÉE



UNIVERSITÉ
LAVAL

