



The use of positive discipline in sport: A coaches' practical guide

This document will help to:

- 1) debunk/unravel myths related to punishment and common tactics used in coaching, and;
- 2) provide effective alternatives to help coaches manage disciplinary incidents.

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THE USE OF PUNISHMENTS

WHAT IS A DISCIPLINARY INCIDENT?

A disciplinary incident is when an athlete demonstrates **disruptive behaviour** or **disregards established conduct rules**.

Examples:

1. While explaining a drill, an athlete yells out "this is boring."
2. During a game an athlete gets mad and starts a physical fight with a teammate.

42%

of competitive -
level coaches

38%

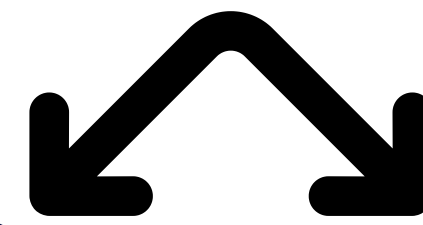
of local-level
coaches

observe at least **1-2 disciplinary incidents** per practice or game.

WHAT ARE PUNISHMENTS?

Negative reactive practices commonly used in response to athletes' wrongful behaviour with **the goal of decreasing the possibility that the behaviour will be repeated**.

Two forms of punishment exist



REMOVING a POSITIVE stimulus

- Benching an athlete
- Excluding or ignoring an athlete
- Stripping an athlete from a leadership role
- Excluding an athlete from team events

ADDING a NEGATIVE stimulus

- Over criticizing an athlete
- Telling an athlete they are weak
- Assigning push-ups or laps
- Restricting an athletes movement
- Throwing an object or hitting an athlete

Why do coaches use punishments?

As a coach, do any of these reasons lead you to use punishment?

Diminished sense of competence and knowledge

- As a coach, you may **struggle with managing challenging behaviour** and feel as though you **lack proper tools** to be able to tackle disciplinary incidents. Studies have shown that:

Higher sense of
competency



Positive attitudes and practices
(e.g., when managing athletes'
challenging behaviours)



Increased ability to
adapt based on
athletes' need

Prior experience

- Your **experiences as an athlete** may contribute to your use of punishment as a coach.

Normalization

- Certain punishments (e.g., the use of violence) are **normalized and even glorified** by coaches, athletes and are viewed as necessary for performance and to prevent unwanted behaviours.

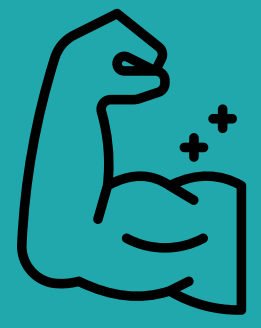
Lack of knowledge

- Coaches' may lack the knowledge and training on alternatives to punishment that are more effective with dealing with disciplinary incidences.

DEBUNKING COMMON MYTHS

Punishing athletes...

Myth # 1 : Motivates athletes and improves performance



Punishment fosters fear but doesn't boost performance or motivation; studies suggest the opposite. It can **undermine athletes' confidence, leading to poor performance and decreased motivation.**

Myth # 2 : Promotes adaptability and tests dedication



Studies show that punishment diminishes athletes' self-competence, **leading some to quit sports.** It also **reduces enjoyment** and may **create a negative association with exercise in the long term.**

Myth # 3 : Increases mental and physical toughness



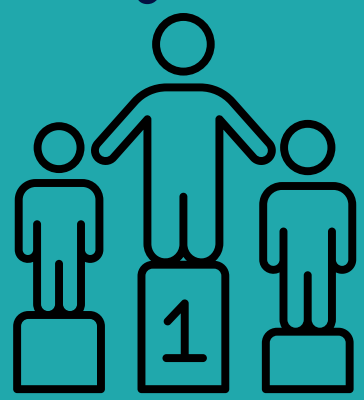
Using punishment may actually have the opposite effect. It may **lead to injuries** (e.g., when using exercise as punishment), **fatigue, negative self-perception, and a diminished sense of worth as an athlete.**

Myth # 4 : Promotes respect for the coach



Contrary to the belief that punishment builds respect and demonstrates a coaches' leadership, research shows that such behaviours **provoke anger, breed resentment, and erode trust and respect.**

Myth # 5 : Increases competition between athletes



Creating a competitive rather than cooperative team climate has been linked to **increased negative behaviours** (e.g., cheating to win, hazing).

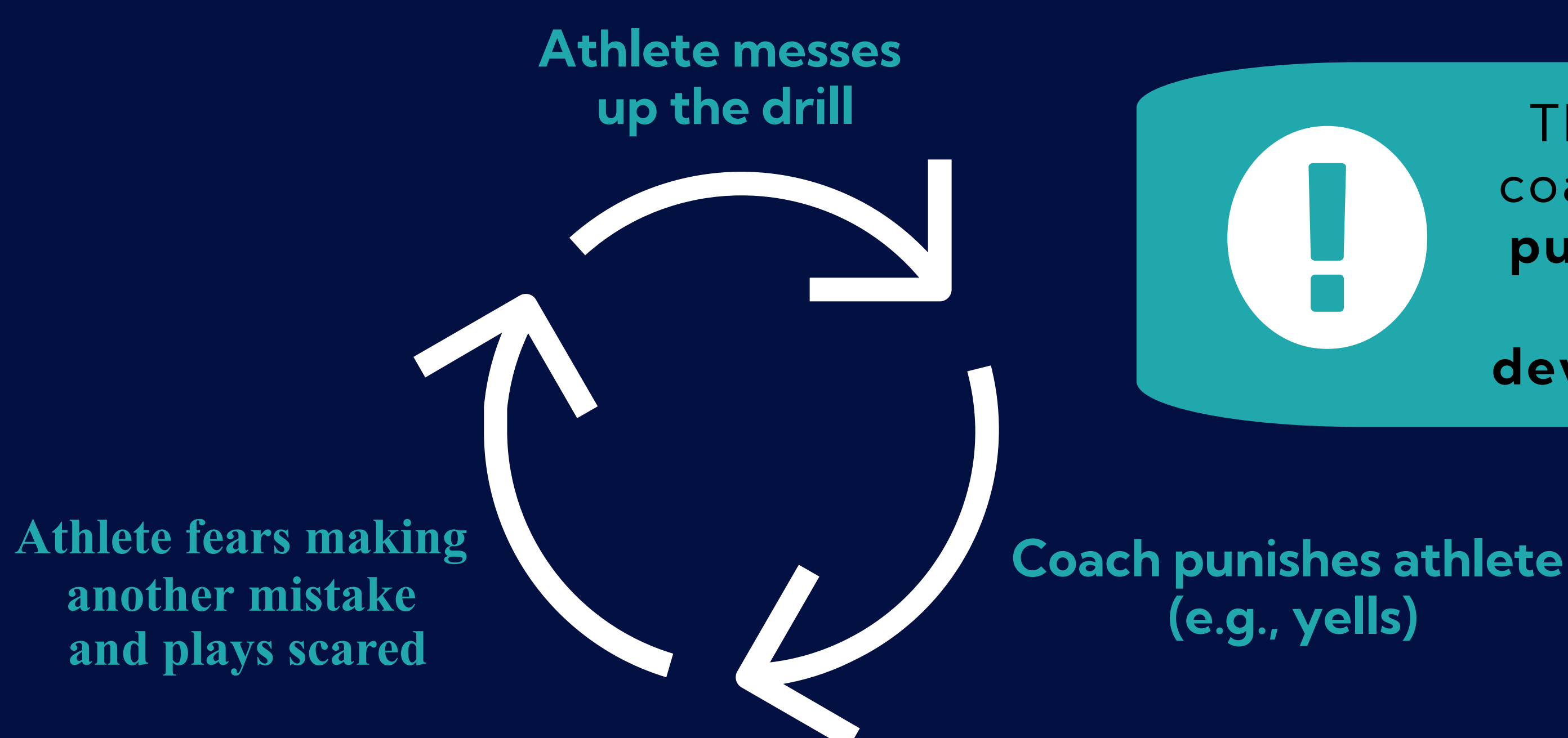
Myth # 6 : Decreases unwanted behaviours in the future



Behavioural studies advise against using punishment as it **fails to promote the development of desired attitudes and behaviours.**



Punishment: A vicious cycle...



This vicious cycle may lead coaches to **spend MORE time punishing athletes** and **LESS time coaching and developing athletes' abilities.**

POSITIVE DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES

WHAT IS POSITIVE DISCIPLINE?

An **educational practice** used by coaches to **help athletes learn which behaviours are expected of them, fostering self-control, competence, and self-direction**



Positive discipline is associated with **improved self-esteem, enhanced coach-athlete relationships, increased empathy, a greater ability to regulate emotions and distinguish right from wrong.**

WHAT ARE PROACTIVE PRACTICES?

Preventative practices implemented to **teach and reinforce desired behaviour** and alter the environment to **AVOID** the occurrence of disciplinary incidents and unwanted behaviours.

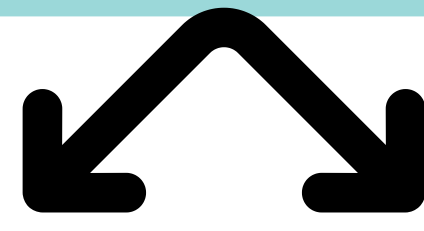
| Proactive practices | Examples: |
|---|--|
| <p>Building a strong coach-athlete relationship: Involves nurturing trust, respect, and authenticity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster a blame-free culture. • Promote a climate of camaraderie instead of performance. • Supporting athletes' autonomy by providing a rationale for requested tasks and considering athletes' perspectives. • Offer choices to empower athletes to make responsible decisions, understand that they have control and can take ownership of their actions. | <p>"It must be stressful to juggle preparing for the tournament and the end of the semester (perspective taking)."</p> <p>"Please stop bouncing the ball while I'm speaking. Either you keep the ball in your hands, or you carry it to the basket."</p> |
| <p>Support athletes' self-control skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage athletes to take responsibility for their actions • Involve athletes' in determining the goal behaviour. • As a coach, model positive self-control skills. • Coaches and athletes can use non-verbal signals (e.g., coach shaking their head) for discreet behaviour adjustments. | <p>"What strategies do you think would help you manage your frustration better during games, and how can the team support you in implementing these strategies?"</p> |
| <p>Establish clear expectations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish clear and consistent rules and routines at the start of the season or before each practice/game. • Define expected behaviours positively, specifically, and measurably. • Use visual reminders (e.g., tables or lists) to reinforce expectations. • Apply these standards equally to all athletes to avoid any perception of differential treatment. | <p>"Gather by the board after three whistles."</p> <p>"While waiting for a drill, I expect you to stay in line behind one another while respecting each other's space. If I see pushing, you will be sent to the end of the line."</p> |
| <p>Plan the environment and diminish dead time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diminish the amount of dead time by alternating between rest and active exercise. • Plan the environment by establishing greeting and departure routines to control players' movements. | <p>Ensure that exercises during practice involve the most amount of athletes possible.</p> |
| <p>Functional analysis of unwanted behaviours:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine any aspects that may have triggered the unwanted behaviour. • Establish what purpose the unwanted behaviour serves the athlete. | <p>If an athlete pushes in line it may be to make their friends laugh."I see that it's important for you to make your teammates laugh. Breaks are the best times to do so."</p> |
| <p>All athletes learn differently:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapt exercises to facilitate athlete's learning such as, showing or repeating certain information. | <p>Demonstrate/run through an exercise slowly to ensure athletes understand.</p> |

WHAT ARE REACTIVE PRACTICES?

Practices that are implemented **directly** after an athlete's behaviour to either **INCREASE** a **DESIRED** behaviour or **DECREASE** an **UNWANTED** behaviour.

How to **INCREASE** desired behaviour using **REACTIVE PRACTICES**?

Immediately reward desired athlete behaviour with positive reinforcements. This helps **clarify expectations** and **encourages repetition** of these behaviours. Such reinforcements also **acknowledge positive behaviours** that might otherwise go unnoticed.



Verbal reinforcements

- Congratulations
- Encouragements
- Praises
- Positive feedback

Example: "I saw you try that new move we practiced! It looks like you're really improving."

Behavioural reinforcements

- Approving glances
- Thumbs up
- Clapping
- Nodding your head

Reinforcements can have a **ripple effect**. If an athlete witnesses a coach reinforce their teammate this will motivate others to adopt the same behaviours.



BE SURE TO REINFORCE ALL ATHLETES! HOWEVER, OVERUSE OR REINFORCING RANDOM BEHAVIOUR REDUCES THEIR EFFECTIVENESS!

Recommendation:

For **every** negative feedback provide **6** reinforcements

How to **DECREASE** unwanted behaviour using **REACTIVE PRACTICES**?

RIGHT AFTER an unwanted behaviour, **LOGICAL CONSEQUENCES** (i.e., directly related to the behaviour) can be used to change the behaviour and educate the athlete on alternative options. If the athlete is highly emotional, **wait until they have calmed down** to provide feedback. If you're emotional, **take a deep breath** before responding.

1 Provide a specific and direct command

- Use a calm yet firm tone of voice
- Establish eye contact
- Use the athlete's name
- Only give one command at a time

"Alex, when I blow the whistle, keep the ball in your hands."

2 Inform the athlete that the behaviour is unacceptable, provide an explanation and expectations

"Kicking the ball in-between drills is dangerous because you can hit another player. Please keep the ball in your hands when I whistle."

3 Request a gesture related to the disruptive behaviour

"I would like you to go apologize to Andy for hitting him with the ball."

4 Reinforce future positive behaviour

"I saw you keep the ball in your hands after I blew the whistle! We got to do more during practice!"

Recommendations when implementing these practices:

- **Consequences should be used sparingly** as frequent use decreases their effectiveness.
- Consequences should be **logically related** to the transgression and explained to the athlete. Ensuring the athlete **understands their responsibility** in the problematic situation is key for a consequence to create lasting effects.
- **Punish the athletes involved in the incident and not the entire group**. This may lead to animosity among the group or even bullying between athletes.

Ignoring minor inappropriate behaviours

If an athlete engages in behaviours that **disturb you as a coach but have minimal impact on other athletes**, you can choose to deliberately **ignore these minor inappropriate behaviours** (i.e., avoid looking at the athlete or saying anything).

Example : An athlete takes a very long time coming to the huddle for the explanation of the next drill.

- Continue ignoring the behaviour despite frustration or impatience. **Once the athlete adapts their behaviour be sure to reinforce them and explain why their behaviour was inappropriate.**
- During this time, it can be helpful to **reinforce athletes' who are engaging in the desired behaviour.**



It is important to **ignore the behaviour and NOT THE ATHLETE!** This technique should be used **sparingly** and **only for minor behaviours.**

What to do if an athlete exhibits dangerous behaviours

In cases when an **athlete may cause harm to themselves or others**, they can be removed from the group.



Coaches' should **still implement proactive practices** (e.g., explaining why the athlete is being removed).

It is important to tell the athlete that they can only return once:

- 1) they have calmed down ;
- 2) they agree to exhibit positive behaviours.

Physical force should **NEVER** be used to remove an athlete.

Example : "I understand you're angry right now but, hitting your teammates puts them at risk of getting hurt."

DO YOU NEED SUPPORT?

Coaching can be **difficult and stressful** with the **expectation to perform and develop athletes**. It is important to prioritize your mental and physical health.

Want to learn more about positive discipline practices?

- [Safe sport 101](#)
- [Coaches perception on exercise as punishment](#)
- [Conditioning and Reinforcement](#)
- [Applying Behavior Management Strategies in a Sport-Coaching Context](#)



PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Think about a disciplinary incident that occurred in the past **3 months** while you were coaching.

How did you handle the situation ?

Was this strategy effective?

Now that you have learned more about positive discipline.
What other practices would you have implemented?

| | |
|--|--|
| PROACTIVE PRACTICES | |
| REACTIVE PRACTICES TO INCREASE DESIRED BEHAVIOURS | |
| REACTIVE PRACTICES TO DECREASE INNAPROPRIATE BEHAVIOURS | |

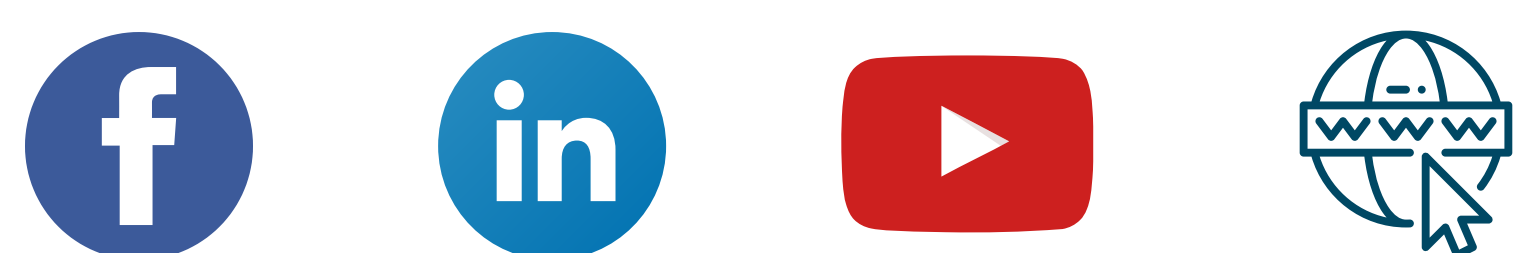
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