

## How to Motivate Mentally Well Athletes

Motivating athletes on your team is an important part of coaching. And providing motivation while protecting mental wellness can be challenging, especially for coaches who were made to believe in concepts like 'no pain, no gain' and a culture of punishment for failure.

Here, [TrueSport Expert](#) Kevin Chapman, PhD, clinical psychologist and founder of The Kentucky Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, explains a few ways that coaches can make simple shifts to their coaching style and language in order to provide motivation without compromising mental wellness.

It's important to note that these tips from Chapman assume that your athletes are in a good mental headspace. [But what defines a mentally well athlete?](#) "When we talk about mentally well athletes, we simply mean athletes who are emotionally balanced in the field of play, and also off the field of play," Chapman says. "In other words, you're not seeing a lot of emotional dysregulation. They have emotions, but they're able to regulate them on and off the pitch, court, or rink."

This is important to note because if you have athletes who are struggling with their emotional regulation, you're likely not equipped to help them in a meaningful way. [You can provide empathy and support](#), but any real mental performance work should be done with an expert. But for athletes who are generally not struggling with emotional regulation, you can make big changes to their levels of motivation with simple shifts.

"The goal for coaches is to capitalize on what we know about sports psychology to enhance performance and how athletes respond to critique and advice in training and competition," he says.

### **Aim for Finding Success Versus Avoiding Failure**

Reinforcement will always work better than punishment, Chapman says. This may be counterintuitive to how you were taught to coach, but [research](#) has shown that positive reinforcement will lead to better outcomes compared to negative reinforcement, or punishment.

"Reinforcement is defined as something that increases behavior. And punishment is defined as anything that decreases behavior," says Chapman. "As coaches, we want to increase good tendencies in our athletes, not just avoid the less-optimal ones." If you get an athlete to stop making a certain mistake on the court, you may avoid losing points that way—but you haven't taught them how to score more points. Rather than stopping your losses, focus on increasing your gains.

"I also like to call this success seeking versus failure avoidance," says Chapman. Success seeking means focusing on the outcome that you want to see as the coach, rather than telling an

athlete what not to do. For example, move from saying, "Stop turning the ball over," to "Focus on your ball control."

These two phrases are saying the exact same thing, but with [very different emotional outcomes](#) for the athlete hearing either statement. The positive statement has the added benefit of leading to better results for your athletes. When they're given a success seeking directive, they're hearing a suggestion that's within their control to act on.

### **Punishment leads to decreased performance**

["Punishment definitely decreases performance"](#) because punishment involves generating negative emotions," says Chapman. "If I'm punishing athletes without [providing any reinforcement](#), then it leads to negative emotionality and a decrease in performance."

A lack of positive reinforcement can also drive athletes away from your team or out of sport entirely. Remember, most youth athletes are playing sports primarily for fun. When it stops feeling enjoyable, athletes are less likely to continue, even if they have potential.

To be clear, this isn't to say that there shouldn't be consequences [for bad behavior on the team](#). Being chronically late to practice, showing disrespect to teammates, and breaking agreed-upon rules should have consequences, which should be clearly laid out at the beginning of the season for the team. "We're not talking about discipline, we're talking about punishment for sports performance," Chapman notes. "We know that athletes do well with structured environments that include rules and consequences."

### **Shift Focus to Positive Language**

Do a quick assessment: During practice, how often do you use words like *no*, *never*, *avoid*, *stop*, *quit*, *don't*, or *can't*? The more you can eliminate negative words, the more naturally motivating your language will be, says Chapman.

When you use negative language, you're focusing your athletes on the negative outcomes—and that makes those outcomes more likely. You can also give clearer instructions when you tell athletes exactly what to do, rather than what to avoid.

### **Identify Athletes Who Are Struggling**

Finally, as a coach, you can pay attention to the overall mental wellbeing of your athletes. If you notice that an athlete's ability to control their emotions has changed abruptly, that can be cause for concern. "If an athlete is suddenly struggling to control their emotions during a practice or game, that's a clear sign that the athlete needs a break in that moment at minimum, and they may even need to get some outside help," says Chapman.

Try to talk to the athlete, Chapman adds. "Ask about the emotions they're experiencing, and try to help them move through those feelings," he notes. "We do want to normalize big emotions. The big emotions aren't the problem. It's the responses to the big emotions that need to change."

## Takeaway

To motivate better performances and protect mental wellness, use positive reinforcement rather than punishment. You can deliver the same message in multiple ways, so whenever you can, utilize success seeking language when offering feedback.



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