

Twenty Positive Discipline Strategies for Coaching Young Athletes

The word discipline often elicits images of punishment, raised voices and the use of power to control the misbehavior of subordinates. But the “drill sergeant” image of demanding “good behavior” is only a very small part of a well-disciplined program.

You can have a huge impact on molding the character of young athletes by cultivating within each athlete a personal sense of responsibility for their own actions – in other words self-discipline. The overriding theme should be to encourage in each athlete the development of a sense of self-discipline that ultimately places the responsibility for self-control and discipline on the shoulders of the athlete. Coaching provides many such opportunities for teaching self-discipline, and many of the techniques discussed in this chapter can help to instill it. Athletes who understand the consequences of their actions are more likely to behave responsibly. Responsibility is not blame or guilt. Rather responsibility is an important character trait that helps athletes to understand that their ability to make good choices permits them to exert some degree of control over the consequences – both positive and negative – of those choices.

There is no single best method of cultivating discipline. However, a number of principles, when properly applied, can have a positive influence on the effectiveness of your coaching. Your choice of techniques should vary depending upon the circumstances. Misbehaviors are rarely directed at the coach personally. Coaches who see their role as one of developing athletes and facilitating their growth and maturity will see the techniques of positive discipline as important strategies for assisting their athletes rather than as a tool of keeping those athletes “in line”.

While lists concerning complex subjects rarely can be considered complete, lists can help simplify and organize what might otherwise be an overwhelming amount of material. Here are 20 simple guidelines that can influence discipline:

1. Establish your authority early. In other words, be prepared; know what you want done; confront discipline problems early before they get worse.
2. Relate in a warm, natural way, but **never** as a peer.
3. Get to know all your athletes by name and develop an understanding of their individual and collective personalities as quickly as possible. Discipline actions are most effective and have fewer side effects when they are clearly directed at specific individuals rather than generalized to the entire team.
4. Talk less. Keep in mind that while you are speaking, your athletes are less likely to be involved and participating. Furthermore, effective communication is based as much on effective listening skills as on verbal skills. Talk **with** your athletes not **at** them.
5. Avoid yelling. A firm, confident request or statement is usually far more effective than loud, threatening demands.
6. Avoid sarcasm. Show the same respect that you wish to receive.
7. Use corrective behaviors that are different from the ordinary. Silence, a sharp command, a scowl, or a simple clap of the hands are all effective means of correcting misbehavior in the proper circumstance if they are not used repeatedly.
8. View the problem from the athlete's frame of reference and always keep in mind the possibility that something you are doing



may be the cause. Assume initially that there had to be a justifiable reason.

9. Minimize public criticism. While public censure demonstrates to others that rules are enforced and that the perpetrator is not “getting away” with misbehaviors that others would be sanctioned for, scolding an athlete in public for misbehaviors that others have not engaged in is usually a poor choice of action. Public praise, on the other hand, can be very effective.

10. Develop a direct and sincere approach to praise. If an athlete is told what they did well and why, there is a greater likelihood that the approved behavior will be repeated. Do not give praise when it is undeserved. Praise must be an earned reward.

11. Have a sense of humor, but do not make learning a joke or use humor that is insulting to either yourself or the athletes.

12. Be enthusiastic and encourage enthusiasm.

13. Be fair with attention, praise, and opportunities. Fairness does not necessarily mean equal but rather that every athlete has an equal opportunity to earn such attention or praise within his or her skill or maturity level.

14. Give your athletes your complete attention when you are speaking to them. Such attention is a sign of respect both for the athlete and for what that athlete has to say. Those who wish to receive respect must be willing to give it.

15. Say “No” without feeling guilty; say “Yes” without feeling resentment. If you are uncertain what you wish to decide, say “I’ll think about it and get back to you by...” Then follow through by the deadline.

16. Do not be afraid to say “I’m sorry”; “I don’t know”; or “I made a mistake” when it

is appropriate to do so. Acknowledging errors without being apologetic will usually enhance your credibility, not detract from it.

17. Delegate responsibility in doses that your athletes can handle and from which they can learn. Most athletes will live up to your expectations if your expectations are based on a realistic assessment of their skills and maturity. Expectations are more powerful when expressed as “standards to be lived up to” rather than “rules to be broken.”

18. Be predictable. Predictability does not mean that your behavior is always the same. It means that your reactions to your athletes' behavior is consistent.

19. Be a model when it counts -- when there is pressure. Good behavior is often taught most effectively by modeling rather than by verbalizing.

20. Discipline quickly and briefly without holding a grudge. Welcome the athlete back as an equal member of the team once the punishment has been administered.

Effective disciplinarians need not be harsh to be effective. Having a “toolbox” of effective techniques permits the coach to pick and choose those techniques that are most appropriate depending upon the situation and the needs of the athletes being coached. Which of these 20 guidelines are already part of your coaching style? Which do you want to work on?