Coaches’ Role on the Athletic Health Care Team

As a coach you are likely to be involved in each portion of the athletic health care relay—prevention, recognition and first aid care, assessment and treatment, and rehabilitation.

Your roles are defined by

- certain rules of the legal system and rules of your school administration,
- expectations of parents, and
- interactions with other athletic health care team members.

Legal Definitions of Your Role

Basically, the legal system supports the theory that a coach’s primary role is to minimize the risk of injury to the athletes under the coach’s supervision. This encompasses a variety of duties.

1. Properly plan the activity.
   a. Teach the skills of the sport in the correct progression.
   b. Consider each athlete’s developmental level and current physical condition. Evaluate your athletes’ physical capacity and skill level with preseason fitness tests, and develop practice plans accordingly.
   c. Keep written records of fitness test results and practice plans. Don’t deviate from your plans without good cause.

2. Provide proper instruction.
   a. Make sure that athletes are in proper condition to participate.
   b. Teach athletes the rules and the correct skills and strategies of the sport. For example, in football teach athletes that tackling with the head (spearing) is illegal and also a potentially dangerous technique.
   c. Teach athletes the sport skills and conditioning exercises in a progression so that the athletes are adequately prepared to handle more difficult skills or exercises.
   d. Keep up-to-date on better and safer ways of performing the techniques used in the sport.
   e. Provide competent and responsible assistants. If you have coaching assistants, make sure that they are knowledgeable in the skills and strategies of the sport and act in a mature and responsible manner.

3. Warn of inherent risks.
   a. Provide parents and athletes with both oral and written statements of the inherent health risks of their particular sport.
   b. Also warn athletes about potentially harmful conditions, such as playing conditions, dangerous or faulty equipment, and the like.

4. Provide a safe physical environment.
   a. Monitor current environmental conditions (i.e., windchill, temperature, humidity, and severe weather warnings).
b. Periodically inspect the playing areas, the locker room, the weight room, and the
dugout for hazards.
c. Remove all hazards.
d. Prevent improper or unsupervised use of facilities.

5. Provide adequate and proper equipment.
   a. Make sure athletes are using equipment that provides the maximum amount of
      protection against injury.
   b. Inspect equipment regularly.
   c. Teach athletes how to fit, use, and inspect their equipment.

6. Match your athletes appropriately.
   a. Match the athletes according to size, physical maturity, skill level, and experience.
   b. Do not pit physically immature or novice athletes against those who are in top
      condition and are highly skilled.

7. Evaluate athletes for injury or incapacity.
   a. Require all athletes to submit to preseason physicals and screenings to detect
      potential health problems.
   b. Withhold an athlete from practice and competition if the athlete is unable to compete
      without pain or loss of function (e.g., inability to walk, run, jump, throw, and so on
      without restriction).

8. Supervise the activity closely.
   a. Do not allow athletes to practice difficult or potentially dangerous skills without proper
      supervision.
   b. Forbid horseplay, such as "wrestling around."
   c. Do not allow athletes to use sports facilities without supervision.

9. Provide appropriate emergency assistance.
   a. Learn sport first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). (Take the ASEP
      CPR/AED for Coaches course or a course with the American Safety & Health Institute,
      American Red Cross, American Heart Association, or the National Safety Council.)
   b. Take action when needed. The law assumes that you, as a coach, are responsible for
      providing first aid care for any injury or illness suffered by an athlete under your
      supervision. So, if no medical personnel are present when an injury occurs, you are
      responsible for providing emergency care.
   c. Use only the skills that you are qualified to administer and provide the specific
      standard of care that you are trained to provide through sport first aid, CPR, and other
      sports medicine courses.
   d. If an athlete is a minor, obtain a signed written consent form from their parents before
      the season. For injured adult athletes, specifically ask if they want help. If they are
      unresponsive, consent is usually implied. If they refuse help, you are not required to
      provide it. If fact, if you still attempt to give care, they can sue you for assault.

Some states expect coaches to meet additional standards of care. Check with your athletic director to
find out if your state has specific guidelines for the quality of care to be provided by coaches.

You should be familiar with each of these 9 legal duties. The first 8 duties deal mainly with
preventative measures, which are explained more thoroughly in chapter 2. This book is primarily
designed to help you handle duty number 9.