Coaches’ Nine Legal Duties

Chris Thompson, a football player for West Seattle (Washington) High School, was paralyzed in a football game when he lowered his head and tackled an opponent, severing his spinal cord. The coach and school district were sued on the grounds that the coach should have warned Chris about the dangers of tackling with his head down. The court ruled in favor of Chris, who was awarded $6.3 million. This famous, if not infamous, case shocked the sport world and, more than any other event, led to the recognition that coaches have a duty to warn their players of the risks in their sport.

The last thing I want to do is frighten you away from coaching, but in today’s litigious society you need to know your legal duties as a coach, not only to avoid a lawsuit such as the one just mentioned, but more important, to reduce the risk of injury to your athletes and others.

If Athletes First, Winning Second is your philosophy, then you will want to do all you can to protect your athletes. That requires you to become the best-trained coach possible. The information below describes the most well-established duties of a coach and some of the actions that you can take to fulfill your legal duties as a coach.
1. Properly plan the activity.
- Teach the skills of the sport in the correct progression.
- 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.
- Keep written records of fitness test results and practice plans. Don’t deviate from your plans without good cause.

2. Provide proper instruction.
- Make sure that athletes are in proper condition to participate.
- 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.
- 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.
- Keep up-to-date on better and safer ways of performing the techniques used in the sport.
- 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.
- Provide parents and athletes with both oral and written statements of the inherent health risks of their particular sport.
- Also warn athletes about potentially harmful conditions, such as playing conditions, dangerous or faulty equipment, and the like.

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

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

6. Match your athletes appropriately.
   - Match the athletes according to size, physical maturity, skill level, and experience.
   - 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.
   - Require all athletes to submit to preseason physicals and screenings to detect potential health problems.
   - 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.
   - Do not allow athletes to practice difficult or potentially dangerous skills without proper supervision.
   - Forbid horseplay, such as “wrestling around.”
   - Do not allow athletes to use sports facilities without supervision.

9. Provide appropriate emergency assistance.
   - Learn sport first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and AED administration. ASEP’s Sport First Aid and CPR/AED for Coaches courses meet or exceed established standards in most cases.
   - 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.

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.
Sport has always been a vital part of Rainer Martens’ life. He has coached at the youth, high school, and collegiate levels and has studied sport as a research scientist. The founder and president of Human Kinetics, he also started the American Sport Education Program, the largest coaching education program in the United States. An internationally recognized sport psychologist, Martens is the author of more than 80 scholarly articles and 15 books, including Successful Coaching, the best-selling coaching book ever published, and Directing Youth Sport Programs. He has also been a featured speaker at more than 100 conferences around the world and has conducted more than 150 workshops and clinics for coaches and athletes at all levels.

To order a copy of the book Successful Coaching, 3rd Edition, click here or call toll-free at 800-747-5698.