Communicating
As a Coach
In chapter 1, you learned about the tools you need for coaching: comprehension, outlook, affection, character, and humor. These are essentials for effective coaching; without them, you’d have a difficult time getting started. But none of the tools will work if you don’t know how to use them with your athletes—and this requires skillful communication. This chapter examines what communication is and how you can become a more effective communicator.

Coaches often mistakenly believe that communication occurs only when instructing athletes to do something, but verbal commands are only a small part of the communication process. More than half of what is communicated is done so nonverbally. So remember this when you are coaching: Actions speak louder than words.

Communication in its simplest form involves two people: a sender and a receiver. The sender transmits the message verbally, through facial expressions, and possibly through body language. Once the message is sent, the receiver must receive it and, optimally, understand it. A receiver who fails to pay attention or listen will miss parts, if not all, of the message.

### Sending Effective Messages

Students need accurate, understandable, and supportive messages to help them along. That’s why your verbal and nonverbal messages are important.

### Verbal Messages

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” isn’t true. Spoken words can have a strong and long-lasting effect. And coaches’ words are particularly influential because young student athletes place great importance on what coaches say. Perhaps you, like many former youth sport participants, have a difficult time remembering much of anything you were told by your middle school teachers, but you can still recall several specific things your coaches at that level said to you. Such is the lasting effect of a coach’s comments to an athlete.

Whether you are correcting misbehavior, teaching an athlete a specific skill, or praising an athlete for good effort, you should remember several things when sending a message verbally:

- Be positive and honest.
- State it clearly and simply.
- Say it loud enough, and say it again.
- Be consistent.
Be Positive and Honest

Nothing turns people off like hearing someone nag all the time, and athletes react similarly to a coach who gripes constantly. Students particularly need encouragement because they often doubt their ability to perform in a sport. So look for and tell your athletes what they did well.

But don’t cover up poor or incorrect performance with rosy words of praise. Student athletes know all too well when they’ve erred, and no cheerfully expressed cliche can undo their mistakes. If you fail to acknowledge athletes’ errors, your athletes will think you are a phony.

An effective way to correct a performance error is to first point out the parts of the technique or tactics that the athlete performed correctly. Then explain—in a positive manner—the error that the athlete made and show her the correct way to do it. Finish by encouraging the athlete and emphasizing the correct performance.

Be sure not to follow a positive statement with the word “but.” For example, when coaching softball or baseball, don’t say, “Way to watch the ball into your glove, Jordan. But when you throw to first, be sure to push off your back leg so you can get a little more zip on the ball.” Saying it this way causes many kids to ignore the positive statement and focus on the negative one. Instead, say something like, “Way to watch the ball into your glove, Jordan. And if you push off on your back leg, you’ll get a little more zip on your throw to first. Okay, let’s go.”

State It Clearly and Simply

Positive and honest messages are good, but only if expressed directly in words your athletes understand. Beating around the bush is ineffective and inefficient. And if you ramble, your athletes will miss the point of your message and probably lose interest. Here are tips for saying things clearly:

- Organize your thoughts before speaking to your athletes.
- Know your subject as completely as possible.
- Explain things thoroughly, but don’t bore your athletes with long-winded monologues.
- Use language your athletes can understand and be consistent in your terminology. However, avoid trying to be hip by using their age group’s slang.

Say It Loud Enough, and Say It Again

Talk to your team in a voice that all members can hear. A crisp, vigorous voice commands attention and respect; garbled and weak speech is tuned out. It’s okay and, in fact, appropriate, to soften your voice when speaking to an athlete individually about a personal problem. But most of the time your messages will be for all your athletes to hear, so make sure they can! An enthusiastic
voice also motivates athletes and tells them you enjoy being their coach. A word of caution, however: Avoid dominating the setting with a booming voice that detracts attention from athletes’ performances.

Sometimes what you say, even if stated loudly and clearly, won’t sink in the first time. This may be particularly true when young athletes hear words they don’t understand. To avoid boring repetition and still get your message across, say the same thing in a slightly different way. For instance, when coaching wrestling you might first tell your athletes, “Remember to keep your feet wide when you’re in your stance.” If they don’t appear to understand, you might say, “When you’re wrestling on your feet, if you keep your feet spread apart, you’ll be better able to defend against your opponent’s attacks.” The second form of the message may get through to athletes who missed it the first time around. Remember, terms that you are familiar with and understand may be completely foreign to your athletes.

Be Consistent

People often say things in ways that imply a different message. For example, a touch of sarcasm added to the words “Way to go!” sends an entirely different message than the words themselves suggest. Avoid sending mixed messages. Keep the tone of your voice consistent with the words you use. And don’t say something one day and contradict it the next; athletes will get their wires crossed.

You also want to keep your terminology consistent. Many terms within a sport can describe the same or similar skill or technique. To be consistent as a staff, however, agree on all terms before the start of the season and then stay with them.

Nonverbal Messages

Just as you should be consistent in the tone of voice and words you use, you should also keep your verbal and nonverbal messages consistent. An extreme example of failing to do this would be shaking your head, indicating disapproval, while at the same time telling an athlete, “Nice try.” Which is the athlete to believe, your gesture or your words?

Messages can be sent nonverbally in several ways. Facial expressions and body language are just two of the more obvious forms of nonverbal signals that can help you when you coach. Keep in mind that as a coach you need to be a teacher first, and any action that detracts from the message you are trying to convey to your athletes should be avoided.

Facial Expressions

The look on a person’s face is the quickest clue to what he or she thinks or feels. Your athletes know this, so they will study your face, looking for a sign that will tell them more than the words you say. Don’t try to
fool them by putting on a happy or blank “mask.” They’ll see through it, and you’ll lose credibility.

Serious, stone-faced expressions provide no cues to kids who want to know how they are performing. When faced with this, kids will just assume you’re unhappy or disinterested. Don’t be afraid to smile. A smile from a coach can give a great boost to an unsure athlete. Plus, a smile lets your athletes know that you are happy to be coaching them. But don’t overdo it, or your athletes won’t be able to tell when you are genuinely pleased by something they’ve done or when you are just putting on a smiling face.

**Body Language**

What would your athletes think you were feeling if you came to practice slouched over with your head down and shoulders slumped? You were tired, bored, or unhappy? What would they think you were feeling if you watched them during a contest with your hands on your hips, your jaws clenched, and your face reddened? You were upset with them, disgusted at an official, or mad at a fan? Probably some or all of these things would enter your athletes’ minds. And none is the impression you want your athletes to have of you. That’s why you should carry yourself in a pleasant, confident, and vigorous manner. This posture not only projects happiness with your coaching role but also provides a good example for your young athletes who may model your behavior.

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### Coaching Tip

Avoid wild hand gestures or standing with crossed arms or with your hands in your pockets when coaching at a practice or a competition. These postures can cause athletes to feel that you do not care or are upset with or are indifferent to the actions of the team.

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**Improving Your Receiving Skills**

Now, let’s examine the other half of the communication process: receiving messages. Too often, very good senders are very poor receivers of messages. But as a coach, you must be able to fulfill both roles effectively.

The requirements for receiving messages are quite simple, but receiving skills are perhaps less satisfying and therefore underdeveloped compared to sending skills. People seem to enjoy hearing themselves talk more than they enjoy hearing others talk. But if you learn the keys to receiving messages and make a strong effort to use them with your athletes, you’ll be surprised by what you’ve been missing.

**Pay Attention**

First, you must pay attention; you must want to hear what others have to communicate to you. That’s not always easy when you’re busy coaching and have many things competing for your attention. But in one-on-one or team
meetings with athletes, you must focus on what they are telling you, both verbally and nonverbally. Make certain to establish and maintain good eye contact. You’ll be amazed at the little signals you pick up. Not only will this focused attention help you catch every word your athletes say, but also you’ll notice your athletes’ moods and physical states. In addition, you’ll get an idea of your athletes’ feelings toward you and other athletes on the team.

Listen Carefully

How we receive messages from others, perhaps more than anything else we do, demonstrates how much we care for the sender and what that person has to tell us. If you care little for your athletes or have little regard for what they have to say, it will show in how you attend andlisten to them. Check yourself. Do you find your mind wandering to what you are going to do after practice while one of your athletes is talking to you? Do you frequently have to ask your athletes, “What did you say?” If so, you need to work on your receiving mechanics of attending and listening. But perhaps the most critical question you should ask yourself, if you find that you’re missing the messages your athletes send, is this: “Do I care?”

Four tips for becoming a better listener:

1. Pay attention
2. Listen to content and emotion
3. Demonstrate that you understand what is being said.
4. Conclude the conversation by summarizing what you heard

Providing Feedback

So far we’ve discussed sending and receiving messages separately. But we all know that senders and receivers switch roles several times during an interaction. One person initiates a communication by sending a message to another person, who then receives the message. The receiver then becomes the sender by responding to the person who sent the initial message. These verbal and nonverbal responses are called feedback.

Positive Feedback

Your athletes will look to you for feedback all the time. They will want to know how you think they are performing, what you think of their ideas, and whether their efforts please you. You can respond in many different ways, and how you respond will strongly affect your athletes. They will react most favorably to positive feedback.
Praising athletes when they perform or behave well is an effective way to get them to repeat (or try to repeat) that behavior. Positive feedback should be an interscholastic coach’s primary approach. So rather than shouting at and providing negative feedback to athletes who have made mistakes, try offering positive feedback and letting them know what they did correctly and how they can improve. Sometimes the way you word feedback can make it more positive than negative. For example, instead of saying, “Don’t run with the ball that way,” you might say, “Run with the ball this way.” Then your athletes will focus on what to do instead of what not to do.

Positive feedback can be verbal or nonverbal. Telling young athletes, especially in front of teammates, that they have performed well is a great way to boost their confidence. And a pat on the back or a handshake communicates that you recognize an athlete’s performance.

Positive Discipline

Sometimes you’ll need to suppress a negative action like unsportsmanlike behavior. Positive discipline is a more effective form of discipline than traditional punishment. This cooperative style of discipline not only results in positive behavior from a team of young athletes but also teaches life lessons about self-control and responsibility.

Preventive and corrective discipline styles are two forms of positive discipline. In using preventive discipline, coaches

- set a routine for their teams;
- set rules and guidelines;
- outline expected behavior of each team member;
- create a team culture that is athlete centered; and
- remove blaming and shaming from their coaching techniques.

Corrective discipline is applied when an athlete misbehaves and doesn’t follow the team rules as set forth in the preseason meeting. Corrective discipline teaches the student athlete that they are responsible for their actions and the consequences.

Communicating With Others

Coaching involves not only sending and receiving messages and providing proper feedback to athletes but also interacting with school administrators, members of the staff, parents, fans, contest officials, and opposing coaches. If you don’t communicate effectively with these groups, your coaching career
will be unpleasant and short lived. So try the following suggestions for communicating with these groups.

**School Administrators**

In interscholastic middle school activities the coach is only one part of a much larger system; your school. Every coach should know the administrative chain of authority in your school before you start coaching. Make sure you meet with your school administration prior to your season so that you are clear on the chain of authority and what your responsibilities are as the coach.

Make sure that you know who is responsible for the following items prior to the start of your season:

1. Scheduling facilities for practice
2. Transportation for away games
3. Scheduling of contests
4. Eligibility guidelines of your school and the IESA

**Student Athletes**

Students who participate on an interscholastic athletic team should expect that their athletic experience will be an extension of their classroom education. Their coach should be engaged in their education process and help facilitate the learning of important life lessons. At the team preseason meeting the following items should be discussed:

1. Evaluation and selection process
2. Time commitment
3. Eligibility rules of the school and the IESA
4. Team rules

These items should also be covered with the parents at the parent meeting.

**Eligibility**

It is the interscholastic coach’s responsibility to ensure that the students who participate are eligible to participate. It is critical that you understand your schools policies as well as the Illinois Elementary School Association’s eligibility requirements (see IESA eligibility guidelines and bylaws in the appendix).

**Cuts**

Making team player cuts might be one of the most challenging steps to coaching interscholastic athletics. Make sure that you know your school’s policy
on cuts prior to beginning your season. For each student athlete, not making the school team is a very disappointing process. Whether you make the cuts at the beginning of your season or right before regional state series play, how you conduct this process can make a lasting impression.

Here is an example of how to make your team selection process as professional as possible.
1. At the end of your season, have one-on-one player conferences with your student athletes that will be returning.
2. Give them suggestions of things to work on in the off-season.
3. When next year’s tryouts begin make sure you have a clear evaluation and selection process for students and parents to understand.
4. After the conclusion of the tryout process the head coach should try and conduct a one-on-one session with those students who were cut to explain or inform why they were cut.

(Imagine you are a 12 year old standing outside the school office, trying to find your name on a list for the boy’s basketball team with all of your peers, and your name is not there. Person-to-person conversations may be difficult for you as a coach, but will help the student understand why they are being cut.)

Coaching Staff
Before you hold your first practice, it is important for the coaching staff to meet and discuss the roles and responsibilities that each coach will undertake during the year. Depending on the number of assistant coaches, the staff responsibilities can be divided in several different ways. The head coach has the ultimate responsibility for all phases of the competition, but, as much as possible, area coaches should be responsible for their groups or individuals. It is the role of the head coach to establish a culture that encourages sharing of ideas and insights.

Before practices start, the coaching staff must also discuss and agree on terminology, plans for practice, schemes, competition-day organization, and the method of communicating during practice and competition conditions. The coaches on your staff must present a united front and speak with one voice, and they must all take a similar approach to coaching, interaction with the athletes and parents, and interactions with one another. Discussions of disagreements should be conducted away from the team and competition area where each coach can have a say and the staff can come to an agreement.

Coaching Tip
As a head coach, enlist assistant coaches who work together and bring unique strengths to your staff. Avoid the trap of coaches who only mirror the strengths you bring to the team.
Parents

An athlete’s parents need to be assured that their child is under the direction of a coach who is both knowledgeable about the sport and concerned about their child’s well-being. You can put their worries to rest by holding a preseason parent orientation meeting in which you describe your background and your approach to coaching (see “Preseason Meeting Topics”).

At the parent preseason meeting make sure that you give the parents clear guidelines about their role and your expectations of them. As the head coach make sure you remember that parents are ultimately responsible for their children and desire only the best for them.

### Preseason Meeting Topics

1. Outline paperwork that is needed:
   - Copy of athlete’s birth certificate
   - Physical on file before practice
   - Code of Conduct form

2. Go over the inherent risks of youth sports and other safety issues.

3. Inform parents of any uniform and equipment handout date and time.

4. Review the season practice schedule including date, location, and time of each practice.

5. Go over proper conditioning attire for the first days of practice, including accessories.

6. Discuss nutrition, hydration, and rest for athletes.

7. Explain goals for the team and time commitment.

8. Cover methods of communication: e-mail list, emergency phone numbers, interactive Web site, and so on.

9. Discuss ways that parents can help with the team.

10. Discuss team rules and standards of conduct for coaches, athletes, and parents.

11. If needed, designate certification day, weight limits or requirements for sports such as wrestling.

12. Discuss the evaluation and selection process.

13. Discuss eligibility rules.


15. Provide time for questions and answers.
If parents contact you with a concern during the season, listen to them closely and try to offer positive responses. If you need to communicate with parents, catch them after a practice, phone them, or send a note through e-mail or the U.S. mail. Messages sent to parents through athletes are too often lost, misinterpreted, or forgotten.

**Fans**

When you hear something negative about the job you’re doing, don’t respond. Keep calm, consider whether the message has any value, and if not, forget it. Acknowledging critical, unwarranted comments from a fan during a contest will only encourage others to voice their opinions. So put away your “rabbit ears,” and communicate to fans, through your actions, that you are a confident, competent coach.

Prepare your athletes, too, for fans’ criticism. Tell them it is you, not the spectators, they should listen to. If you notice that one of your athletes is rattled by a fan’s comment, reassure the athlete that your evaluation is more objective and favorable—and the one that counts.

**Officials**

How you communicate with officials will greatly influence the way your athletes and fans behave toward them. Therefore, you must set an example. Greet officials with a handshake, an introduction, and perhaps casual conversation about the upcoming contest. Indicate your respect for them before, during, and after the contest. Don’t make nasty remarks, shout, or use disrespectful body gestures. Your athletes will see you do it, and they’ll get the idea that such behavior is appropriate. Plus, if the official hears or sees you, communication between the two of you will break down.

**Opposing Coaches**

Make an effort to visit with the coach(es) of the opposing team(s) before the competition. During the competition, don’t get into a personal feud with an opposing coach. Remember, it’s the kids, not the coaches, who are competing. And by getting along well with the opposing coach, you show your athletes that competition involves cooperation.