

How to coach with a Balance is Better philosophy

12 KEY THINGS COACHES CAN DO TO INCORPORATE A
BALANCE IS BETTER PHILOSOPHY INTO THEIR COACHING

How can coaches bring the Balance is Better philosophy to life?



In this guide, Andy Rogers, National Coaching Consultant at Sport NZ, outlines 12 key things coaches can do to incorporate a Balance is Better philosophy into their coaching.

Like parents and teachers, coaches have a unique opportunity to positively impact the lives of all young people. If you are a fellow coach of young people, I congratulate and thank you for the inspiring work you do. I also hope you share as much excitement for this opportunity (and responsibility) as I do.

In this guide, I'm going to share some of my thinking about what makes a great coach for young people. Or in other words, how to coach with a Balance is Better philosophy?



1. Look beyond the scoreboard to measure success

Yes, a core part of a coach's role is supporting athletic development and striving to win, but importantly, great coaches take a holistic approach to supporting youth development and believe that positively impacting young people more broadly in life (e.g. family, schooling, character development, etc.) is important too.

What does this look like?

Great coaches look beyond the scoreboard and measure their success in the following ways:

- They look at an athlete's development over time.
- They look at whether athletes are happy – can you see smiles, is the body language positive?
- They think about why players come back to them the next season (and the ones that do not).

As Coach Reed puts it, great coaches focus on "developing warriors not winners".



2. Redefine winning by providing a programme focused on the wellbeing of people – look to support winning in the long run

Following on from the previous point, where success is more than the points on the scoreboard, great coaches believe that the lessons learned through participating in sport transcend the playing field and contribute to shaping the character of young people. To optimise the sport experience, great coaches provide planned and intentional experiences that shape behaviour and develop young people's character.

What does this look like?

Often for coaches, this starts with themselves by modeling the values, attitudes, and behaviours, that will help support their athletes to win in the long run. By learning about character strengths and ways to develop them, great coaches can help their participants increase performance both on and off the field.





3. Understand that great coaches don't coach sport, they coach people

Great coaches understand that by aiming to develop better people they will also develop better sport participants.

What does this look like?

Great coaches know how to use sport to build a growth mindset in young people. (+)

Great coaches aim to develop more than sport skills they know their role is about building confidence, motivation, knowledge, and understanding. They don't just focus on developing physical, technical, and tactical competence. Great coaches also focus on the psychological, emotional and social development of their players, and establishing a team with positive organisation values. (+)

4. Be purposeful in developing self-leadership skills

Great coaches know how to and are thoughtful about supporting sport participants to gain courage, self-belief, and self-confidence. They help young people to develop resilience and perseverance and learn the importance of always giving their best effort no matter what the situation. Coaches also help athletes develop interpersonal skills. They assist participants to become better communicators, build stronger relationships, and work more effectively in team situations.

How do coaches do this?

To learn how great coaches can take a strengths-based approach to help sport participants to gain courage, self-belief and self-confidence, watch [Transforming Character Strengths into Positive Results, with Dr. Ralph Pim.](#)

To learn how coaches can support participants to become better communicators, build stronger relationships, and become more effective team members, read Lara Mossman's article on [the approaches coaches can apply from the field of Positive Youth Development.](#)



5. Be a servant coach

Great coaches make the humble decision to first serve the needs of others. Doing so removes ego and self-interest and instead places listening, respect, and well-being as a priority. Great coaches have the best interest of young people at heart. They listen to them and understand them. Sport should be about delivering quality experiences based on the needs of young people. Knowing your participants' motivations and aspirations will assist you to provide coaching that supports their needs.



As Coach Reed puts it in his excellent article, [That's not how I learn](#), coaches should,



"Move beyond supreme ruler of the field to being a servant of the child. Instead of acting like we know it all and they are mere vessels into which we pour our knowledge, what if we saw them as those we serve and our goal is to help them unlock their own knowledge? It is not about us, it is about them. It is not to show them how smart we are, it is to help them become smarter. It is not to replicate the player we were, it is to unlock the player they will become"

What does this look like?

Know what it means to take a holistic approach to understand the participant. Do you know why your athletes play sport? Do you know about their family, about what else is going on in their life? Do you understand what makes them tick? For an insight into taking a holistic approach to understanding a participant, watch this [interview with Coach Dave Knowles](#).



Learn how to truly listen. If you haven't already, I suggest reading Coach Reed's article, [That's not how I learn](#).



6. Coach for all young people – understand that one size does not fit all

Great coaches are inclusive and know how to cater for all levels of abilities, motivations, and aspirations. Great coaches are versatile in their approach so that their actions best meet the needs of the young people they coach (this starts with getting to know young people, their families, and the community they belong to)

What does this look like?

- ▶ In this discussion about [how to develop individual learning plans for players](#), Dave Wright and Dan Wright do a good job at explaining some of the individual considerations coaches need to have of their participants.
- ▶ Read and watch the clips in this [interview with Paralympic Swimmer and Wheel Chair Rugby Player, Cameron Leslie](#), to get an insight into some of the experiences he had as a child. Cameron relays a great story about how one PE teacher designed a class session for Cameron that all the student's participated in.



Consider how the environment will support participants' psychological needs.

Support networks such as peers, family, and coaches play a critical role in providing a sense of belonging for athletes. Great coaches ensure participants know they are valued, cared about, and have social connections. Great coaches allow participants opportunities to input and contribute toward decisions. Great coaches design programmes that enhance participants' competency. They know that competency builds confidence and confidence leads to mastery. Great coaches understand that participants who focus their attention on mastering



personal goals generally choose to engage in sport for longer periods, thus maximising their potential.

What does Self Determination Theory inform us about a participant's psychological needs?

Self Determination Theory is a theory of human motivation and personality that helps psychologists analyse people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs. It helps us think about what goes into making quality sport experiences, by providing a lens to think about how we create a sport environment that supports the participant to be self-motivated and self-driven (i.e. intrinsically motivated) Ultimately, positive sport environments are conducive for supporting young people to have high intrinsic motivation for doing that activity. That is, the environment supports young people to want to keep doing the activity because they enjoy the activity itself, as opposed to other extrinsic motivators (reward, recognition, to please a parent, etc.). Research shows that high intrinsic motivation equals an increased likelihood that a young person will continue to be involved in an activity.

Self Determination Theory states that intrinsic motivation is underpinned by the nurturing of three key psychological needs: **Autonomy**, **Relatedness** and **Competency**. [Watch this video for an introduction to these psychological needs.](#)



So how might coaches apply Self-Determination Theory into their practice?

Competence – participants are able to use their capability to make an impact

Consider:

- ⊕ • How do you design your training sessions? Is the difficulty of the task aligned with the level of skill of the participants? If there are varying skill levels in a group of participants, how might you modify some of the constraints in the training to support or further challenge individuals?
- ⊕ • How do you feedback on progress and a sense of development to the participant; how do you feedback that they are impactful? – do you use praise or affirmation?
- ⊕ • Is your coaching philosophy process-oriented or outcome-orientated?

Relatedness – participants feel a sense of belonging in a community with others

Consider:

- How do you show your participants that you care about them, as people and not just players? As the

coaching adage goes, “Players don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care”. Often this starts with knowing your participants holistically.

- How do you facilitate connection, cohesion, and community between participants? Do you have any ceremonies, symbols, or rituals?
- Relatedness is a two-way street, how do you demonstrate that you value the fact your participants care for you?





Autonomy – participants have a sense of choice and are able to engage in things that align with their internal values and beliefs

Consider:

- How do you get feedback from participants to help design training? Do you ask them for input at the end of sessions or before? Do you give them choice over the activities that they might do? You could take this one step further and let players lead training sessions. ▶
- How much freedom for decision-making do you provide your participants, especially in competitions?

More resources: I would encourage coaches to use the Good Sports Spine as a reflective map to help think through the environment you support for participants, and how this environment enables or inhibits a participant's psychological needs. +

7. Understand that learning is non-linear and messy

Learning (and thus development) is a complex and often messy process and it doesn't happen overnight. Great coaches view mistakes as a key part of participants exploring and finding solutions to various problems (including during the competition). Great coaches know they don't need to step in to correct every time, to transmit knowledge, and give the answer! By having a good understanding of modern methods of skill development, coaches ensure they are providing rich learning environments for their participants.

Want to learn more about learning?

For an introduction to the research about skill acquisition, read William A. Harper's article about [Ecological Dynamics Approach to Skill Acquisition](#).



For a great discussion on coaching based on principles and context, read Dan Wright's article, [Coaching in the Grey](#).



For an introduction to game-based design for supporting decision-making and skill acquisition, read [Shaping the Game](#) by Sporticus.



8. Ensure sport is Fun and Safe

Young people want to have fun and they want to participate in a safe and trusting environment. Fun can mean a lot of different things; therefore, great coaches communicate with their participants to find out what fun means to them. To learn, young people need positive relationships and enjoyable and caring climates that allow them to thrive and that keeps them coming back.



Want to know more on fun?

Learn about [Amanda Visek's Fun Integration Theory](#). An introduction to this work can be found in this article which encourages parents to [explore why their child plays sport](#) (though has a lot of relevance for coaches too).

Want to know more about good safety and welfare practices?

[Watch this interview with Dr Suzanne Brown about understanding athlete identity.](#)

Get information and resources on warm up, concussion and injury management at ACCsportSmart.co.nz.

Get information and resources on safeguarding and protecting young people's welfare at [See Sport NZ's Community Guidance Portal](#).

9. Value competition and know how to use it in a developmentally appropriate way

There is nothing wrong with competition. Great coaches ensure the format and the atmosphere of competition is built around the developmental stage of young people and is appropriate for their needs. Great coaches facilitate quality competition experiences to support growth and development. At the same time, great coaches know where the line lies between quality competition and competition experiences that can be prohibitive or detrimental to supporting the development of the young people they work with.

So, what do coaches need to know?

Do you understand your own biases as a coach?

Coaching is informed by a series of decisions that will impact a participant's experience (Who is selected? Who starts? How much game time does someone get? What position does someone play? How do you want your team to play? What feedback do you provide?).



All of these decisions are underpinned by assumptions that we have formed as coaches (most often implicitly).

⊕ These assumptions are biases. How aware are you of your unconscious biases?

⊕ **Do you account for relative age effect or early maturer effect?**

In the face of competition, these phenomena speak to youth coaches' unconscious bias towards favouring participants who they believe are more competent because of the physical advantages these participants have by being born earlier in the year for a given age group or entering into maturation earlier. We assume that all young people develop at the same rate – when that is blatantly not true. Notably, the physical prowess seen in one young person versus another will often even out by early adult-hood. So why do some coaches favour the bigger, quicker, stronger athletes in young age group sport? Is it because of our tendency to want to win now? And are we guilty of writing some kids off too early?

When push comes to shove will you pick winning or development?

⊕ As Dan Wright comments in his article The Process,

"Coaches can be guilty of building and fostering a great environment in training, one that encourages risks and bravery but then ditching this support and patience in tough games. When we revert to direct, win at all costs, physical football dominated by early matured players we lose the mavericks and technicians"





10. Keep the big picture in mind – Part 1

Great coaches know that a very small proportion of young people will become elite athletes, yet all of them have the potential to become healthy active adults. Great coaches focus on creating a legacy through sport by ensuring all young people receive the benefits sport has to offer. Great coaches take participants on a developmental journey. In order to do this, coaches have to have a good idea of the destination point and develop short-, mid- and long-term goals and plans that will help individuals fulfil their potential – whatever that may be.

Learn more about taking a long term perspective:

John O’Sullivan shares how certain moments can have lasting effects on a person’s relationship with sport, in the [Power of Moments in youth sport](#).

Watch Dan Wright and Dave Wright discuss how coaches can approach [developing individual learning plans for participants](#).



11. Keep the big picture in mind – Part 2

Great coaches understand that sport is just a part of young people's lives, it is not their life and should never define them. This means being encouraging and supportive of young people playing multiple sports, as well as promoting free play. If a young person does choose to invest more time in a sport as they get older, a great coach ensures they prompt this young person to also develop other facets of their life.

How can coaches prompt athletes to develop other facets of their life?

A great example of this is legendary basketball coach, Gregg Popovich. Coach Pop is renowned for asking his players random questions, such as: "Who were the explorers pushing west in early America? What is the fourth holy city of Islam? And where is one in danger of being attacked by wombats?". There is a reason for this, as Coach Pop explains.

He wants his players to be engaged citizens. It makes for a fuller life. He believes there are basketball advantages, too. He thinks it makes them want to play with and for

each other. "I think it's sad if a person's whole self-image and self-worth is based in their job," he said. "Whether you're a basketball player, a plumber, a doctor, a mailman, or whatever you might be, why not try your best to live a more interesting life that includes other people, other cultures, and different worlds?"



12. Engage with parents positively

Great coaches view parents as part of the team. As oppose to being a hindrance, great coaches know how to turn parents into the biggest resource at their disposal. Great coaches know that parents want the best for their kids. They know how to partner effectively with parents to support young people.

How can coaches partner effectively with parents?

Do a pre-season meeting with all parents – outline your coaching philosophy, approach, and vision for the season. This could be in the 30 minutes before or after a training or game.

Connect with your parents – try to make a goal to send a text or email to each parent at least once during the season providing an authentic update about their child – what are they excelling at, what have they developed or progressed in?





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