

PREVENTING BURNOUT IN YOUTH ATHLETICS

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A COMMON THEME IN THE SPORT AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY LITERATURE for youth athletics is to stress keeping athletes interested, involved, and having fun. While it is important to understand the areas in which coaches need to excel, it is not useful unless coaches are given the tools to succeed. Dr. William Strean, professor of physical education and recreation at the University of Alberta, finds that athletes enjoyed physical learning when the instructors were caring, involved, present, fair, and capable of individual relationships with players. Coaches should have an enthusiasm that can be felt by their athletes. One very effective way to demonstrate a passion for coaching is for coaches, themselves, to get involved in drills. A coach's excitement can transfer to athletes, and be the basis for a young person's lifelong passion. Preventing burnout in athletes requires making games out of learning and offering a variety of drills and daily activities, thereby maintaining youth athlete enjoyment and prolonged interest.

Sports offer an opportunity for psychological development that can't be had in the classroom, but athletes can quickly become overworked in the pursuit of achievement. Coaches need to keep objectives manageable and improvement demands at an appropriate level. Research suggests that many athletes lose interest because coaches often make the mistake of assuming that their athletes

understand the complexities of the sport as well as the coach. Challenging, while not overwhelming, athletes requires coaches tailor training for each individual. Expectations should be significant but not unachievable as research has found that athletes who achieve small incremental successes are likely to express greater levels of enjoyment.

Dr. Strean stresses that the greatest challenge for sport psychologists is getting coaches to change their personal attitudes and behaviors. Many coaches place a large emphasis on winning, which often leads to overwork and burnout. Coaches may receive training and verbalize the promise to implement modern empirical work on coaching, but not all coaches deliver under pressure. Dr. Strean remembers a coach in a seven-year-old youth soccer league yelling, "Do you want to be losers," at the children. While the coach seemed intelligent, there was no rational explanation for his behavior. Dr. Strean stressed that a common folly is to assume that people act rationally. He furthermore stressed that coaches need to be "the voice of sanity" and focused more upon instilling good values and fun rather than competitive outcomes. Winning should be a byproduct of young athletes' growth and achievements. ●