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What motivational climate do you create for young athletes?

Working in various youth sport environments and with several young athletes on an individual basis brings about numerous challenges in relation to athlete motivation and the motivational climate that is created by those supporting young athletes. The topics of this article are aimed at helping parents and coaches understand some of the theory and ideas behind motivation and motivational climates.

Firstly, Motivational climate is the psychological environment that the coach creates by designing sessions which provide instructions and feedback that will help to motivate the athletes in training / competition (Amnes, 1992). Secondly, motivation impacts on how we think, feel and interact with others. This is an essential prerequisite in sport for getting athletes to enjoy the process of fulfilling their potential.

Win at all costs (Ego) or learning (Mastery) environment?

There are two contrasting climates that have been discussed in previous literature. If a Mastery climate is being developed then the environment revolves around supporting effort, cooperation and emphasis on individual/team development, learning and mastery of the tasks that are being undertaken (Roberts et al, 2007).

An ego climate is one in which the main goal is winning, and success is defined as being better than other players or other athletes. These environments often rely on comparisons between athletes, and coaches punishing mistakes and errors (Roberts et al, 2007).

Understanding an athlete's motivational orientation:

An individual athlete's motivation in sport can also be linked to 2 contrasting approaches. An ego-oriented athlete is constantly monitoring their performance related to others and is interested in winning with the smallest of efforts. Such dispositions mean that these athletes are also more prone



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to withdrawing from challenging situations when their ability seems shortcoming (Nicholls, 1989; Roberts et al., 2007).

A task-oriented individual will be more focused on mastering the task at hand and giving enough effort in to this process. Task-oriented athletes` are more likely to persist in the face of setbacks, put in more effort, select more challenging tasks and stay motivated in the process of development (Roberts et al., 2007).

How do you motivate young athletes?

One of the main discussions I have with young athletes, coaches and parents is the fact that it is unrealistic to shift completely from the motivation to win as that is an inherent part of sport and an important goal. However, it is not the only or most important objective in youth sport.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- How much do you reinforce the importance of training and effort?
- How do you address situations where athletes win but their performance was not as good as it has been previously?
- How much are the athletes enjoying the experience of being involved in sport even if they are not winning?
- How often do you make direct comparisons on young athlete's abilities?
- How do you talk about referee, umpire or judge decisions?

Going in to detail on all these questions and how you can effectively approach the challenges that come about through each of them far exceeds the scope of this article. However, they do provide some food for thought the next you are supporting your child or the children you coach in a sport environment especially around competitions.



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'Children first, athletes second'

Although throughout this article we have used the term 'young athletes' one final point to remember is that they are 'children first, athletes second'. There are so many great, physical, social and psychological benefits to children being involved in sport. Try not to lose these by focusing too much on winning (which can increase unsportsmanlike behaviours and lower levels of moral reasoning).



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