

6 Coaching Sins and How to Avoid Them

Even coaches who are up on the latest techniques are often reluctant to drop 'old school' methods. Former University of California, Los Angeles sports psychologist Richard Barthol said that some of the traditions of coaching work against logic and common sense. His short list includes these six coaching sins:

1) **Overcoaching:** Tennis and golf pros are notorious offenders. They go out of their way to correct everything. "Keep your elbow straight...Bring the club straight back...Concentrate on your hip turn...Keep your eye on the ball..." and so on. The poor athletes have so much to think about that they can't let their bodies learn.

Barthol talks about another related error, pointing out mistakes unnecessarily. "Damn it, Steve, you missed that tackle." Steve already suspects that, since he's on the ground and the runner isn't. Such friendly admonitions are hard on morale and interfere with learning.

2) **The Punishment Trap:** Most people learn better through reward than punishment according to the majority of psychology and management studies. Yet coaches consistently get angry when players mess up and punish them with words ("You stupid !@#*%") and orders ("Take five laps"). Why? Mainly because the coaches' coaches acted that way. Too many coaches mistake harshness for firmness and confuse outside discipline with the self-discipline that leads to learning. (See page 7 on reward incentives for motivation).

3) **Playing Not to Lose:** Many coaches see this and playing to win as the same thing. But they aren't, because the different emphasis affects how the athletes act. "We see this regularly in NCAA basketball tournaments," Barthol says, "where top ranked teams start to play cautiously against much lower-ranked teams and end up losing." Unless players stay aggressive and keep trying to win, not just hold on, they're asking for trouble.

4) **Tensing Up:** Relaxation gets the same short shrift from coaches as reward. There's a lot of talk but not much teaching. "Relax," they say, advice that's about as helpful as "Hit a home run." Like any other skill, relaxation must be taught right to be done right.

There are a number of good techniques, but here is one popular method: "Tense a specific muscle group for a few seconds, release the tension and enjoy the feeling of relaxation; then repeat the sequence for other muscle groups throughout the body," Barthol said. After a bit of practice, athletes can bring down tension in seconds.

5) **Failure to Stretch Properly:** Stretching muscles and tendons for 15 or 20 minutes before practice or games is one of the best ways we know to cut down on pulls and strains. It's also one of the most ignored except in track, where it has been practiced faithfully for years. Sometimes team sport individuals ignore or aimlessly drift through what

they consider a boring ritual.

"Many coaches know better," Barthol says. "The trouble is that since stretching isn't part of their major priority so it gets neglected." It's important not to ignore this critical warm up procedure.

6) **Wrong Breathing Techniques:** Unless you're a trained singer or horn player, you probably don't know how to breathe right. And neither do most athletes. We think we know how to take a deep breath: Just suck in the stomach and push out the chest. That's wrong, Barthol says. "The whole midsection, front, sides and back must expand, so you should pull the diaphragm down and open up the lungs. Using the chest alone is a big mistake."

Changing a lifetime of wrong breathing does take time and motivation. So unless coaches really push it, most athletes never get the edge proper breathing provides.