

The Face Scorecard

How Your Emotional Expressions Shape Team Performance Before You Speak

Episode 1 | Season 1 | *Coaching Research To Results Podcast*

EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	Emotional Games: How Coaches' Emotional Expressions Shape Players' Emotions, Inferences, and Team Performance
Author	van Kleef et al.
Published	Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 2019
Episode Length	Under 11 mins
Tags	Emotional Contagion; Coach Emotions; Team Performance; Sport Psychology; Coaching Communication; Emotional Intelligence; Coach Development; Leadership

THE THREE STICKY IDEAS

These are the labels to remember from this episode. They are designed to stick with you long after the research fades.

The Mood Mirror

Coaches' emotions are not private. When a coach expresses happiness, players experience more happiness. When a coach expresses anger, players experience more anger. Emotional contagion travels especially fast through authority figures, and the coach is the most powerful emotional source in the room.

The Face Scorecard

Athletes use the coach's expression as information about how the team is performing. A happy coach signals 'we are doing okay.' An angry coach signals 'something is wrong here.' That signal happens before a single word of feedback is spoken, and it shapes effort, risk-taking, and communication.

The Happiness Advantage

Coaches who expressed happiness before the game had teams that performed significantly better in the first half. Anger showed no performance benefit and in the baseball study was negatively associated with results. Genuine positivity functions as performance fuel for the group.

SHOW NOTES

TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

Take one or more of these actions into your next coaching session.

Action 1 (Just-in-Time Coach Learning)

Before your athletes arrive at your next session or competition, pause for thirty seconds and ask yourself: what is my face actually expressing right now? Not what you feel inside, but what does your expression communicate? If it is not what you want to transmit, think of one thing that genuinely excites you about this group today. Let that land on your face before you walk in. Notice what happens in the first ten minutes of practice.

Action 2 (Just-in-Case Coach Learning)

Share the Face Scorecard idea with one other coach and ask them to give you honest feedback after your next session: what did my face communicate today? What might the players have inferred from my early emotional expressions? This is hard to see from the inside and much easier from the outside. Sometimes the most powerful coaching development tool is another coach who tells you the truth.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Primary Source: van Kleef, G. A., Cheshin, A., Koning, L. F., & Wolf, S. A. (2019). Emotional games: How coaches' emotional expressions shape players' emotions, inferences, and team performance. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 41, 1–11.

Counterpoint Sources: Kaloerinos, E. K., Greenaway, K. H., Pedder, D. J., & Margetts, E. A. (2014). Don't grin when you win: The social costs of positive emotion expression in performance situations. *Emotion*, 14, 180–186.

LINKS AND RESOURCES

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Share this episode with one coach this week, since that's how research actually travels.

SHOW NOTES

FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

The following is the complete script for this episode of *Coaching Research To Results*.

Cold Open

You've just had a rough week. A loss, maybe two. A training session where nothing went right. And now you're standing at the whiteboard before the game, trying to look composed. But here's what nobody told you in your coaching course: the second your players walked in the room, they already started reading you. Not your tactics board. You. Your face. Your posture. The way you said hello. And before you've said a single word about formation or game plan, your team has already caught a feeling from you. The question is – was it the one you wanted to give them? This week's research has the answer. And it's a little uncomfortable...in a really useful way.

Intro and Show ID

Welcome to Coaching Research To Results. I'm Beth Barz, the Coach Developer. This is 1 paper, 3 ideas, and 2 actions for tomorrow in under 15 minutes. This is the podcast where coaching research gets off the shelf, out of your notes, and into your practice. Let's go.

The Paper

The paper is called "Emotional Games: How Coaches' Emotional Expressions Shape Players' Emotions, Inferences, and Team Performance." It was published in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* in 2019. The lead author is Gerben van Kleef, who has spent years building a body of work on how emotions work between people – not just inside an individual, but across a room, across a team, and across a relationship.

Most of the emotion science in sport had focused on athletes' own emotions – their anxiety, their confidence, their mood states before competition. But van Kleef and colleagues noticed a gap: almost nobody had looked at what happens when the coach's emotions impact the athletes. So they ran two field studies: one with Dutch baseball and softball teams, one with Dutch soccer teams. Here's what they found.

Big Idea #1

Here is the big idea, and let's give it a name: The Mood Mirror.

What the research shows is that coaches' emotions are not private. When a coach expresses happiness – enthusiasm, warmth, genuine positivity – players literally experience more happiness themselves. When a coach expresses anger – frustration, irritation, contempt – players experience more anger. The coach's emotional expression is essentially a mirror that reflects across the whole group.

The mechanism here is something called emotional contagion. This is the process by which people unconsciously absorb the emotional states of those around them through micro-expressions, body language, tone of voice, and even the rhythms of movement. And this process is particularly powerful when there is an authority or status difference between people. Coaches carry power in the room. That means their emotions travel faster and land harder than the emotions of almost anyone else in the group.

So, the next time you walk into training feeling the weight of last week's bad result — your players are not just watching your tactics board. They are downloading your emotional state.

Ideas #2 and #3

Okay, idea two; and this might be the most practical finding in the whole paper. The researchers found that players are not just catching the coach's feelings; they are using those feelings as information.

Specifically, when the coach expressed happiness, players inferred that the team was performing well. When the coach expressed anger, players inferred that the team was performing badly. The researchers call this the inferential pathway. I'd call it the Face Scorecard. Your athletes are looking at your expression and reading it like a score. A happy coach means "we're doing okay." An angry coach means "something is going wrong here."

Think about what that means in practice. If you express frustration during a drill — not because the performance is poor, but because you're tired, or distracted, or someone parked in your regular spot — your athletes may read that as a signal that their performance is not good enough. You haven't said a word about performance. But your face already has. And once a player believes they are underperforming, everything that follows — their effort, their risk-taking, their communication with teammates — is filtered through that lens. That is a lot of power for a facial expression you might not even know you are sharing.

And lastly, the researchers went one step further and looked at what all of this means for actual team performance. With the soccer teams, coaches who expressed happiness before the game had teams that performed significantly better in the first half. Coaches who expressed anger before the game? No performance benefit. In fact, with the baseball teams, anger was negatively associated with team performance.

Call this the Happiness Advantage. Emotions are not just internal reactions; they are messages. A message of happiness from the coach says "things are moving in the right direction." That message, received by a room full of athletes, creates alignment, energy, and readiness to compete.

The Counterpoint

Now let's complicate the picture, because that is what good research literacy demands.

The effects in this study were not universal. At half-time, coaches' expressions of happiness did not significantly predict second-half performance. The effects showed up most clearly before the game, when athletes had close access to their coach and fewer competing dynamics. By half-time, the game itself — the score, individual errors, tactical shifts — had introduced enough noise to reduce the coach's emotional impact.

There is also a limitation that the authors are honest about: reverse causality. It is possible that coaches expressed happiness because their teams were already performing well — not the other way around.

And beyond this paper, research by Kalokerinos and colleagues in 2014 found that expressing positive emotions in performance contexts can sometimes carry social costs — it can read as inappropriate or tone-deaf in high-stakes moments. So the message is not "be relentlessly cheerful regardless of context." Your emotional expressions are information. And the information needs to fit the situation.

The Anecdote

Let me take you back a few years in my coaching career. Our team qualified for nationals for the first time after building together for seven years...it was a validation of the athlete's dedication to a demanding program and what we as a coaching group had done to support our athletes. We were slated to play the three-time defending national champions in the first round...a towering program with many junior national athletes and several who would make international waves in the future. Imagine my joy as a coach seeing our athletes perform so well as to take the game into overtime - winning was something that I fully felt we could do!

We lost on a penalty in overtime...our team fully believed we were capable of being David to their Goliath. It was crushing, it wasn't meant to be and I was perplexed about how I would address the team after the game. There were so many tears...how would I possibly tell them how proud I was when they were totally despondent, and I was, too?! had to put on a brave face that honoured their feelings while also mirroring the gravity of the situation. We needed to play again and bounce back in consolation, so I tried to honour their discouragement while letting them see only a bit of my own...even when my heart was in my feet and felt like it would never recover.

I was honest in my emotions, and yet I was upbeat and focused on the next game. We didn't wallow in our despair, and instead, we refocused and won the consolation match. Managing my emotions helped the athletes manage theirs.

Two Actions

Let's put this research into action.

Before your athletes arrive – whether that's in the parking lot, the corridor outside the locker room, or at the edge of the pitch – pause for thirty seconds and ask yourself: what am I actually expressing right now? Not what do I feel on the inside, but what does my face say? If it is not what you want to transmit, give yourself a moment to shift it. Think about one thing that genuinely excites you about this group today. Let that land on your face first. Then walk in. You are not performing. You are preparing. Notice what happens in the first ten minutes.

Share the Face Scorecard idea with one other coach – an assistant, a colleague, a mentor – and ask them to give you honest feedback after your next session: what did my face communicate today? What might the players have inferred from my early emotional expressions? This is hard to see from the inside. It is much easier from the outside. And sometimes the most powerful coaching development tool in the room is not a reflective journal. It is another coach who tells you the truth.

Close and Invite

Here is the one thing I want you to take away: your emotional expressions are not background noise. They are signals. Players are reading your face the way they listen to your voice – maybe even more. The research from van Kleef and colleagues is some of the first quantitative evidence of this measured in real games, and the message is clear enough to act on.

Hold on to the three labels: The Mood Mirror – your emotions travel. The Face Scorecard – your expression is a performance signal whether you mean it to be or not. And the Happiness Advantage – expressing genuine positivity before competition is linked to actual results.



SHOW NOTES

I'm Beth Barz, The Coach Developer. You'll find the show notes and the full library of episodes at www.thecoachdeveloper.com. If any idea from today lands for you, like, subscribe, and share it with another coach this week. That is how research actually travels. See you next time!