

Two Smiles, Two Bodies

What Your Face Does to Your Athletes

Episode 2 | Season 1 | *Coaching Research To Results Podcast*

EPIISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	A Smile Can Go a Long Way: The Effects of Dominant and Rewarding Smiles of Coaches on Athletes in an Evaluative Performance Context
Author	Furley & Thrien
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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.

Two Smiles, Two Bodies

Athletes who received a dominant smile from the coach had measurably higher heart rates than athletes who received a rewarding smile after the same task, same performance context. The reward smile actually buffered against physiological stress. Same face. Very different body.

The Mood Thief

After physical tasks, athletes who received dominant smiles reported feeling significantly less happy than those who received rewarding smiles. A single facial expression from an authority figure was enough to pull the emotional floor out from under an athlete. The coach is always doing something to the athlete's emotional state, whether they intend it or not.

The Silent Signal

Athletes who received dominant smiles had higher heart rates and lower mood, but they did not report feeling more stressed. Their bodies were responding to something their conscious minds had not fully registered. The impact of the smile happened below the level of

SHOW NOTES



awareness, which means athletes cannot name what is affecting them and neither will they tell you.

TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

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

Action 1 (Just-in-Time Coach Learning)

At your next practice, before you respond to any performance moment, give yourself a deliberate one-second pause and ask: what is my face about to do? Pick three to five moments across the session where an athlete completes a task and consciously choose to deliver a warm, genuine, approving expression if the performance warrants it. The research shows the reward smile involves eyebrows up and a full symmetrical cheek lift; the kind of face you make when you are actually pleased. After practice, notice whether the athletes who got that signal came back with more energy on their next attempt.

Action 2 (Just-in-Case Coach Learning)

Ask someone who watches you coach to pay attention to your default face in the three to five seconds immediately after an athlete completes a task. Not to judge you, just to report back. Most coaches are genuinely surprised by what their feedback face looks like from the outside. If you discover a tendency toward the dominant expression, the knowing is already half of the fix. You cannot change a habit you have never seen.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Primary Source: Furley, P., & Thrien, F. (2024). A smile can go a long way: The effects of dominant and rewarding smiles of coaches on athletes in an evaluative performance context. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*.

Counterpoint Sources:

LINKS AND RESOURCES

- Full episode library: thecoachdeveloper.com
- Show notes: thecoachdeveloper.com/coaching-research-to-results-podcast-notes
- Subscribe and leave a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your preferred platform

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

Every coach has heard the advice: smile more, stay positive, and show warmth. It's coaching 101. But here's what nobody tells you. Not all smiles are equal. Two coaches could both be smiling at the exact same moment after the exact same performance, and one of them is raising their athlete's heart rate and pulling their mood south, while the other is literally calming them down physiologically. And the athletes can't tell the difference. This week's research is about what your face is doing to your athletes in the seconds after they perform, without a single word being spoken. And you might be surprised to find out which smile you're actually giving.

Intro and Show ID

Welcome to Coaching Research To Results. I'm Beth Barz, the Coach Developer. One paper, three ideas, and two 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 "A Smile Can Go a Long Way: The Effects of Dominant and Rewarding Smiles of Coaches on Athletes in an Evaluative Performance Context." It was published in 2024 in the International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching. The lead author is Philip Furley from the German Sport University Cologne, with co-author Fanny Thrien. Furley's research group specializes in non-verbal behaviour in sport, and this paper builds directly on a 2018 study showing that different smile types could alter the body's stress response system in a lab context. They wanted to know whether the same thing happens between coaches and athletes in sport. They put 60 athletes through stressful tasks while being evaluated by a high-performance coach over what they thought was a live video call. Here's what they found.

Big Idea #1

The big idea from this paper can be called 'Two Smiles, Two Bodies.' The core finding is this: athletes who received a dominant smile from the coach after their performance had measurably higher heart rates than athletes who received a rewarding smile. Same athletes. Same task. Same performance context. Just a different type of smile.

The dominant smile is slightly asymmetrical, a raised upper lip, a little bit of that 'I'll be the judge of that' energy. The rewarding smile is warm, eyebrows up, full, genuine approval. The researchers tracked heart rate across eight feedback moments, and the dominant smile group consistently showed more heart rate reactivity. The reward smile group? Their heart rate actually buffered against stress. The smile was physiologically calming. So right now, think about what your face does in the five seconds after an athlete finishes a task in front of you. Do you actually know?

Ideas #2 and #3

Idea two is called 'The Mood Thief.' After the physical tasks, athletes who received dominant smiles reported feeling significantly less happy than those who received rewarding smiles. And these athletes thought they were performing for a spot on a national or state team. The stakes felt real. A single facial expression from an authority figure was enough to pull the emotional floor out from under them. A reward smile, by contrast, protected and even slightly lifted mood after the same difficult task. The implication for coaching is direct: every time your face responds to a performance, you are doing something to the athlete's emotional state, whether you intend it or not. The question is not whether you are giving a signal. You always are. The question is whether you are choosing that signal.

Idea three is called 'The Silent Signal,' and this is the strangest finding in the whole study. The athletes who received dominant smiles had higher heart rates and lower mood, but they did not report feeling more stressed. Their self-reported stress levels were identical to the reward smile group. Let that sit for a second. Their bodies were responding to something their conscious minds had not fully registered. The impact of the smile was happening below the level of awareness. The athlete does not walk away thinking, 'that look stressed me out.' They just feel a bit flat, a little less energized, and they can't name why. This matters enormously for coaches, because an athlete who cannot name what is affecting them cannot tell you. So you don't find out. And in the next session, something has shifted, and nobody quite knows where it all started.

The Counterpoint

Let's complicate the picture a bit, as good research demands. This study was conducted in a laboratory, with a pre-recorded video of a coach the athletes had never met, delivered via a simulated video stream. That's a considerable distance from a real training environment with a coach the athletes know and have worked with for months or years. The authors acknowledge this clearly themselves. Real coaching involves physical proximity, emotional history, and a far richer non-verbal environment than a screen. It is plausible the effects would be amplified in person, but that has not yet been tested.

Here is something else worth noting: the automated facial coding software found almost no significant differences in the athletes' own facial expressions based on which smile they received. So whatever those smiles were doing to the athletes on the inside, it wasn't obviously registering on their faces. This is a finding-in-progress, not settled science. Replications in actual coaching environments are still needed.

The Anecdote

When I apply this to my own coaching, my temperament is pretty consistent, and I don't tend to experience large emotional fluctuations; I'm told that my facial expressions generally model this, too. However, I know instinctively that smiling helps me connect with other humans — along with a host of other non-verbal actions that I try to pay attention to — so this paper was quite interesting to me.

The brief story here is of an athlete who needed more regular and almost constant acknowledgement of their successes. They just felt supported with more regular connections and affirmations. Luckily, they were clever and hard-working and regularly performed consistently well in games and practices, so when I gave a smile to recognize success, it was justified. I think — but I don't know for sure — that I was giving a rewarding smile each time,

since that's what seemed to be a support factor for this athlete. I wish I could go back in time and see...which is an excellent transition into the follow-up actions for this research.

Two Actions

Action one, and this is a just-in-time learning opportunity for coaches. At your next practice, before you respond to any performance moment, give yourself a deliberate one-second pause and ask: what is my face about to do? Pick three to five moments across the session where an athlete completes a task and consciously choose to deliver a warm, genuine, approving expression if the performance warrants.

The research shows the reward smile involves eyebrows up and a full symmetrical cheek lift, the kind of face you make when you are actually pleased, not just attempting to seem positive. After practice, notice whether the athletes who got that signal came back with more energy on their next attempt. You are running a small experiment on your own sideline, and the data is right there in what happens next.

Action two: Ask someone who watches you coach – an assistant, a trusted parent in the stands, or just catch a short video clip from your phone propped up nearby – to pay attention to your default face in the three to five seconds immediately after an athlete completes a task. Not to judge you. Just to report back. Most coaches are genuinely surprised by what their feedback face looks like from the outside. If you discover a tendency toward the dominant expression, the knowing is already half of the fix. You can't change a habit you have never seen.

Close and Invite

The one thing I want you to leave with: athletes are reading your face as a performance review - constantly - and it could be changing their body and their mood below the emotional level where they can even name it. Two smiles that look similar from the outside can produce two measurably different athletes on the inside. That is not intuition. That is heart rate data. If you want to go further, Philip Furley has an extensive body of work on non-verbal behaviour in sport that is well worth your time.

I'm Beth Barz, The Coach Developer. You'll find 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's how research actually travels. See you next time!