

# The Armour Paradox

## What Serial-Winning Coaches Know About Self-Compassion

Episode 4 | Season 1 | *Coaching Research to Results Podcast*

### EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	Wearing a Self-Compassion Suit May Offer a Performance Edge: A Qualitative Study of Serial-Winning High-Performance Coaches
Author	Hagglund et al.
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Episode Length	Under 13 minutes
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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.

#### The Armour Paradox

Elite sport carries an unwritten contract; be tough, show no weakness, be unshakeable. Self-compassion sounds like the opposite. But these nine serial-winning coaches showed zero fear of self-compassion and they could see clearly that the armour they had built was not just protecting them. It was also limiting them. The thing built to protect performance may be the thing holding it back.

#### The Rumination Tax

Self-criticism is not “free.” Every hour the brain spends replaying the post-game film on your worst decisions is an hour not spent on what to do better next time. One coach described it as walking a long road with stones in your shoes: you can keep going, you just arrive slower and more worn out. Self-compassion is the act of stopping to take the stones out.

#### The Early Seed Effect

Every coach in this study arrived at the same reflection: ‘I wish someone had given me this information earlier.’ The coaches who most need self-compassion are exactly the coaches least likely to walk through the door of a workshop on it. But if the seed is planted early, the

whole coaching career changes – because the skills needed during a first real crisis take time to build.

### TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

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

#### Action 1 (Just-in-Time Coach Learning)

Spend one week keeping a brief log of your inner voice. After each practice or session, write down one word that describes how you talked to yourself when something didn't go as planned. Not a full journal entry. One word. Brutal? Fair? Clinical? Patient? Dismissive? At the end of the week, you will have a map of your own Rumination Tax. That is not just self-awareness. That is data you can actually use.

#### Action 2 (Just-in-Case Coach Learning)

Think of a younger coach in your orbit who seems armoured up – someone who reminds you a little of your earlier self. You do not have to hand them a research paper. You just need to be one person who says out loud: 'I used to think self-compassion was soft. Here is what I actually think now.' That is the seed the research is talking about. The coaches in this study believe that encountering this idea early can change an entire career trajectory. You might be exactly the right person to plant it.

### RESEARCH REFERENCE

**Primary Source:** Hagglund, K., et al. (2025). Wearing a self-compassion suit may offer a performance edge: A qualitative study of serial-winning high-performance coaches. *The Sport Psychologist*.

**Counterpoint Sources:** Ferguson, L. J., Kowalski, K. C., Mack, D. E., & Sabiston, C. M. (2014). Exploring self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being in young women athletes. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 36(2), 203–216.

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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 know that voice in your head after a bad game? The one that replays every decision you got wrong, every substitution that didn't land, every moment you could have handled differently? Most coaches treat that voice like it's the price of caring. Like being hard on yourself is just what serious coaching looks like. Well, nine of the world's most decorated coaches sat down with researchers recently and told them something that might change how you think about that voice. Stay with me on this one.

#### 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 fifteen 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 "Wearing a Self-Compassion Suit May Offer a Performance Edge: A Qualitative Study of Serial-Winning High-Performance Coaches." It was published in *The Sport Psychologist* in 2025, led by Karin Hagglund and colleagues. It's worth knowing upfront that this study was built around a very specific kind of coach. Not just successful coaches. Serial-winning coaches. Multiple medals, multiple championships, across individual and team sports, Paralympic and able-bodied. None of them had ever formally practiced self-compassion before. The researchers walked them through a two-hour education session on the topic, then gave them a week of daily self-compassion practice. After that, they sat down with each coach individually for a deep interview.

#### Big Idea #1

The big idea from this paper could be called the Armour Paradox. Here is the setup. In elite sport, there is an unwritten contract that every coach carries: be tough, show no weakness, be the unshakeable version of yourself. And self-compassion sounds like the exact opposite of that. Research with athletes has consistently found something called fear of self-compassion – the genuine worry that being kind to yourself will make you soft and cost you your competitive edge. But these nine serial-winning coaches showed none of that. Zero. One coach said it flat out: 'Fear of self-compassion? No. I don't believe it makes me weak. Quite the opposite.'

The coaches could see clearly, from the vantage point of decades in the game, that the armour they had built was not just protecting them. It was also limiting them. That's the paradox: the thing you built to protect your performance might actually be the thing that is holding it back.

#### Ideas #2 and #3

Idea two is what I would call the Rumination Tax. These coaches were remarkably honest about how expensive self-criticism actually is. And not morally expensive. Energy expensive. When

things went wrong, the inner critic got brutal, and several coaches described spiralling into what they called ‘a black hole’ – replaying losses, losing sleep, wrestling with whether they were actually good enough.

One of them described it like this: self-criticism is like walking a long road with stones in your shoes. You can keep going. You just arrive slower and more worn out. Self-compassion, the way these coaches described it, was the act of stopping to take the stones out. Not quitting the walk. Not changing the destination. Just removing what was causing unnecessary pain and slowing the progress.

And here is the part that matters for performance: every hour your brain spends running the post-game film on your worst decisions is an hour it is not spending on what to do better next time. That’s the tax. Self-compassion might just be the refund.

Idea three is about timing, and it’s one that I think is worth sitting with. These coaches all arrived at the same reflection: ‘I wish someone had given me this information earlier.’ When they were younger, they were harder on themselves, more defensive, more armoured. They now see those exact patterns in the younger coaches that they mentor.

And they were honest about the difficulty: the coach who most needs self-compassion is exactly the coach least likely to walk through the door of a workshop on it. Like, the 30-something who believes they can handle anything and is quietly burning through their own reserves.

But every participant in this study believed that if you can plant the seed early, the whole coaching career changes. Because the skills you need during your first real crisis – managing failure without turning it entirely on yourself – those are skills that take time to build. Call it the Early Seed Effect. Don’t spiral into the black hole before you start working on your exit.

### The Counterpoint

Let’s complicate the picture a little, because that’s what we do here.

The coaches in this study were serial winners who have already navigated decades in elite sport. So it is fair to ask: are they open to self-compassion because it works, or because they have already survived the part that would have stopped many others? In other words, is the openness to self-compassion part of the finding, or is it a characteristic of the sample?

Research with athletes – particularly by Ferguson and colleagues, published in 2014 – has consistently found that fear of self-compassion is real and active in competitive sport, rooted in genuine concerns that self-kindness reduces drive and motivation. The coaches in this study actually confirmed that this fear exists in the younger coaches around them. They have just moved past it themselves.

So the counterpoint is this: the study may be showing us where experienced coaches can arrive, more than where most coaches are currently starting. That is not a criticism of the research. It is an honest acknowledgment that this is a roadmap that needs some redesign, not a universal starting point.

### The Anecdote

We were in our second league final and taking on the defending champs who had decimated us 54-5 two years prior and the year before in semis 50-0. We had grown significantly as a team in some integral areas of the game – particularly the scrum – and felt confident about our chances;

we had even played a fairly evenly matched exhibition game with our opponents earlier that year.

Fast forward to this final game and there were at least three different plays that didn't go our way; for brevity and my own sanity, I'll share only one. We were down 10-6 and were in a dominant position to score, and both teams knew it. The forwards started their engine and marched over the line...and as they did, the ball popped and a player touched it back in with their hand. We thought we had scored and taken the lead, but the call went against us due to the player touching the ball. It was illegal to touch the ball and put it back into the scrum; but we hadn't made that clear to our backrow players, and they didn't know any better. A total coaching fail on my part.

I replayed that play (and a few others) on a continuous loop until I could even see it with my eyes open...and I still can now, more than a decade later. I finally had to tell myself, forcefully and then gently, to replace those images with the ones that meant much more. Some of those were successes from that game, some of those were memories made after the game with athletes, their parents, our coaching staff and my own kids who still loved me even though we lost a big game. It took some work, and yet I finally was able to replace the haunting images with those that filled my cup instead of emptying it.

### Two Actions

Action one, if you want to go a little deeper: spend one week keeping a brief log of your inner voice. After each practice or session, write down one word that describes how you talked to yourself when something didn't go as planned. Not a full journal entry. One word. Brutal? Fair? Clinical? Patient? Dismissive? At the end of the week, you will have a map of your own Rumination Tax. That is not just self-awareness. That is data you can actually use. And if you have an assistant coach or a trusted athlete leader that you can loop in, even better — sometimes seeing your own patterns is harder than it sounds, and an outside observer can help.

Action two is not just for you; it's for the coaches around you. Think of a younger coach in your orbit who seems armoured up — someone who reminds you a little of your earlier self. You do not have to hand them a research paper. You just need to be one person who says out loud: 'I used to think self-compassion was soft. Here is what I actually think now.' That is the seed the research is talking about. The coaches in this study believe that encountering this idea early can change an entire career trajectory. You might be exactly the right person to plant it.

### Close and Invite

Here is what I want to leave you with today. Between these nine coaches, they attended over thirty-five Olympic and Paralympic Games. Every one of them said, in one form or another: I wish I had learned to take the stones out of my shoes sooner. That is not a soft idea. That is a performance idea. And the research is telling us that the word self-compassion does not need to be swapped out for something tougher. The coaches in this study used it, owned it, and found it useful. Maybe it's time to try it.

I'm Beth Barz, The Coach Developer. You'll find show notes and the full library of episodes at [www.thecoachdeveloper.com](http://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!

SHOW NOTES

