

# Championship Habits

What six elite coaches reveal about building lasting excellence

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

## EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Excellence: Insights From Accomplished University Team-Sport Coaches
Author	Donoso-Morales, D., Bloom, G. A., & Caron, J. G.
Published	Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 88(4), 503-512. (2017)
Episode Length	10 minutes
Tags	team culture, emotional regulation, introspection, practice design, athlete leadership, high-performance coaching, championship mindset

## 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.

### Championship Habits

These coaches built excellence into every practice from Day 1. When athletes start enforcing the standard themselves, without being told, the culture is real.

### Be the Thermostat, Not the Thermometer

A thermometer reads the room. A thermostat sets it. Your emotional state is your team's forecast. Once these coaches figured this out, they stopped reacting and started setting the climate deliberately.

### Introspection

These coaches never stopped looking inward, even when winning. They kept notes, sought mentors, and asked the hardest question of all: in what ways am I the limiting factor to my team's success?

## SHOW NOTES

### TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

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

#### The Championship Habits Audit

Look back at your last three practices and ask: how was the standard being enforced, and by whom? Were your athletes holding each other to expectations without being prompted? If the standard lives only in you, the culture is fragile.

#### Introspection

After your next significant coaching event, write down three things: what you did well as a coach (not your team, but you personally), what you would do differently, and the one thing this event made you realise you don't yet know enough about.

## RESEARCH REFERENCE

**Primary Source:** Donoso-Morales, D., Bloom, G. A., & Caron, J. G. (2017). Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Excellence: Insights From Accomplished University Team-Sport Coaches. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 88(4), 503-512.

**Counterpoint Sources:** Tamminen, K. A., & Crocker, P. R. E. (2013). 'I control my own emotions for the sake of the team': Emotional self-regulation and interpersonal emotion regulation among female high-performance curlers. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 14, 737-747.

## LINKS AND RESOURCES

- Full episode library: [thecoachdeveloper.com](https://thecoachdeveloper.com)
- Show notes: [thecoachdeveloper.com/coaching-research-to-results-podcast-notes](https://thecoachdeveloper.com/coaching-research-to-results-podcast-notes)
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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

Think about the last time you had a big game. A playoff, a final, a moment that really mattered. What did you do to prepare? Change the warm-up? Give a big speech? Pull your captain aside the night before for a quiet word?

Here is what research on some of Canada's most accomplished university coaches found. Coaches who, between them, have won more than 30 national championships. The groundwork for those big moments is not laid the week before. It is laid every single day, in every single practice, from the very first session of the season. And, the coaches who focussed on building from the beginning stopped doing the one thing that most coaches think is their most important job.

Check this out...

#### Intro and Show ID

Welcome to Coaching Research to Results, where we look at one paper, three ideas, and two actions for tomorrow in under 12 minutes. This is the podcast where research for coaches gets off the shelf, out of your notes, and into your practice. Let's go!

#### The Paper

The paper is called, "Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Excellence: Insights From Accomplished University Team-Sport Coaches," published in the Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport in 2017. The lead author, Daniela Donoso-Morales, along with Gordon Bloom and Jeffrey Caron from McGill University, interviewed six of Canada's most decorated university team-sport coaches. Together, these coaches had won more than 30 national titles and 15 coach-of-the-year awards.

The central question was: how did you build a program that kept winning...year after year? Three big themes came out of that work. And, I think at least one of them is going to inform how you look at your next practice.

#### Big Idea #1

The big idea here could be called Championship Habits.

Every one of these six coaches described building excellence into the daily life of their program. They were not saving the intensity for the playoffs. From Day 1 of training camp, every practice was designed to feel like a high-stakes game. Every activity was competitive. And here's the part worth paying attention to: the athletes themselves started enforcing the intensity standard.

One coach described it this way: "I have heard it so many times in training camp when someone is being lazy; the other players say, 'That is not the way we do things here.'" That is the moment. That is the sign that the culture is real. The coach no longer has to say it because the athletes are saying it for them.

Edgar Schein, the original expert on organizational culture, said, culture is “the way we do things around here.” So, who exactly is enforcing that standard on your team right now? If the answer is only YOU, then you should start thinking about these Championship Habits.

### Ideas #2 and #3

Idea two. It’s about emotional management, and what these coaches learned, mostly from getting it wrong.

All six coaches described a difficult first national championship experience. In most cases, the issue was not their athletes. It was themselves. One coach admitted she went quite out of character; started yelling, became aggressive, tried to control everything, and believes she cost her team the championship. Another said they were nervous and scared and did not handle their own actions well, and it showed in the outcome.

The label for this idea is Be the Thermostat, Not the Thermometer. A thermometer reads the room. A thermostat sets it. Once these coaches figured this out, they stopped reacting to the emotional climate of the national championship and started setting their own thermostat deliberately. One made jokes even when her team was losing in the national final, because that consistency from the regular season was what her athletes needed most. And another said, “your body talks to your mind.” One coach even called it theatre, herself the maestro of a show she had begun: “This is my show; look what we have created!”

Your emotional state is your team’s forecast. They are reading you whether you know it or not.

Idea three builds directly on the first two. I’m calling it Introspection. These coaches never stopped looking inward, even when it hurt to do so. All six reflected carefully on every championship experience. They kept notes on what to do differently the next time. They read leadership and business books. They went to conferences and asked questions other coaches in their context were too proud to ask. And four of the six had mentors, not tactical advisors, but someone who helped them understand themselves as coaches and as people.

One coach said it plainly: “I was the limiting factor to my team’s success.”

Now THAT’s hard to admit. And, it’s even harder to actually believe it when you’re winning. But that’s what these coaches discovered. And that willingness to take a good look inside themselves is partly why these coaches kept winning.

### The Counterpoint

So, there’s a counterpoint to these big ideas.

The coaches in this study are remarkable, but there are only six of them, and they all work in the Canadian university setting. There is no comparison group of coaches who tried these same things and did not sustain success. So, we cannot say with certainty that Championship Habits or being the Thermostat or trying Introspection results in excellence. We only know that coaches who sustain excellence say these things matter.

There are also no athlete voices in this research. That matters. Separate research by Tamminen and Crocker in 2013 found that athletes in high-performance settings are actively managing their own emotions for the sake of their teammates, often without the coach even knowing it. So, emotional management in a team is not just top-down. The coach is not the only thermostat in the room.

## The Anecdote

I've been privileged to have worked with some really fantastic athlete leaders. I vividly remember a recent team captain who cared deeply about his team. Our team was in the middle of a game where we were significantly outclassed by our opponent on the day, and had also had a very tough match-up the previous week.

In the week prior, our team captain had struggled with how to lead when the points were piling up and our team seemed distracted and more and more unfocused after each score against us. During that game, our captain lost the team by not knowing what to say or how to say it in order to lead the team effectively...and by doing so, set an example for the rest of the team. Post game, the discussion revolved around what a captain needed to do in a pressure situation, and we settled on the idea that the captain needed to have the team do a short reset, and then agree on an execution plan for the very next action in the game. The captain also needed to understand and set aside his personal disappointment at the state of the score, in order to confidently lead the others into the next play.

The following week, the captain executed this plan flawlessly. After a score, he took a deep breath to reset, then gathered the guys in the in-goal area, had them take a breath together, and looked every single one of them in the eye. Then, he shared the plan for the next play and asked the guys to repeat it back to him. And then they went out and executed the plan. And that was the day the culture became clearly focused on the team and the future.

## Two Actions

So how do we incorporate this info into your context? Action one is an idea that you can use this week: The Championship Habits Audit. Look back at your last three practices and ask yourself one honest question: how was the standard being enforced, and by whom? Were your athletes holding each other to expectations without being prompted, or does the standard disappear when you stop watching? This is an exercise in clarity for you as a coach. If the standard lives only in you, the culture is fragile. What might you need to do to encourage others, so that they encourage the team to support their Championship Habits? That is awfully useful information to have right now.

Action two, and this is your longer-game idea: Introspection. After your next significant coaching event, take a moment and write down three things: what you did well as a coach - not your team, but you personally - what you would do differently; and the one thing this event made you realise that you don't yet know enough about. If you don't have a mentor right now, that third question is probably your starting point for finding the type of person you need to challenge and support you personally.

## Close and Invite

The coaches in this study did not stumble into sustained excellence. They built it, practice by practice and reflection by reflection, with the help of others who pushed them to see themselves more clearly. Championship Habits. Be the Thermostat. Introspection. Three ideas from six coaches who, between them, know what it takes to keep winning year after year.

If one of those ideas landed today, write them down. Better yet, share it with another coach.