

# When Winning Hides the Cracks

Serial winning coaches discovered success masking

Episode 2 | Season 2 | *Coaching Research to Results Podcast*

## EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	University Serial Winning Coaches' Experiences with Low Performance and Maladaptive Team Culture
Author	Madison Fraser, Gordon Bloom, and Cliff Mallett
Published	Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 2024
Episode Length	10 minutes
Tags	team culture, performance masking, serial winning, relationships, resilience, self-doubt

## 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.

### Performance Masking

Performance Masking: winning can hide the cracks in your culture. Do not let the scoreboard tell you everything is fine.

### The Relationship Register

The Relationship Register: for the coaches in this study, the hardest part of a difficult season was not the losing. It was the fractured relationships. Keep your own relationships front and centre.

### Surviving Before Thriving

Surviving Before Thriving: the hard season, approached with reflective intention and a willingness to see hard things, becomes the foundation for what comes next.

## SHOW NOTES

### TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

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

#### Action 1: The Culture Check

After training, once or twice a week, ask your athletes one question: “how is the group feeling?” Not “how did practice go?” to the whole group. If you think that there might be too much groupthink, asking a leadership group or even some of the newest players in the team about how they feel can give you a greater understanding of the current culture.

#### Action 2: The Relationship Register

Pick one relationship in your coaching network that you have been neglecting: an assistant coach, a mentor, someone who gives you an honest perspective. Build the connection now, not when you’re already in a difficult season. Coach developers can be great supports!

## RESEARCH REFERENCE

**Counterpoint Sources:** Mallett, C. J., & Lara-Bercial, S. (2023). Learning from serial winning coaches. Routledge.

## 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

Every coach knows the feeling when a team “just clicks.” Training hums along. Athletes show up and do the work. You barely have to coach because the culture is doing the work. Now here is the question nobody asks when things are going well: what if the culture is already cracking, and winning is hiding it?

Seven coaches with a combined 37 national championships found out the hard way. And what they discovered might change what you look for, even in your best seasons.

#### The Paper

The paper is called, 'University Serial Winning Coaches' Experiences with Low Performance and Maladaptive Team Culture,' published in 2024 in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*. The lead author is Madison Fraser, alongside Gordon Bloom at McGill University, and Cliff Mallett at the University of Queensland.

What prompted this research was a gap that is almost embarrassing when you say it out loud: almost everything we know about elite coaching is about what coaches do right. Fraser and colleagues asked what happens when they go wrong. They interviewed seven coaches who had each won at least two national championships, about their worst seasons. Here's what surfaced in the research.

#### Big Idea #1

The big idea could be called Performance Masking.

These coaches reported that their team culture had been quietly deteriorating during their winning seasons. They just couldn't see it. Why? It was masked because they were too busy winning! And when results are good, cultural problems go underground. However, the problems are still there... they're just invisible until reflected by the losing score.

One coach said that complacency and poor work ethic had been growing quietly, driven by the team's own leaders, and the coach had not stayed close enough to the athletes to know. Another described players showing up expecting results without doing the work as a kind of “entitlement hangover” from years of success.

The prevailing view said, “fine”. But the underlying culture said otherwise. And by the time the coaches could unmask it, the season was already unravelling.

#### Ideas #2 and #3

Idea #2: The Relationship Register

Idea two, and this one might surprise you. For all seven of these coaches, the biggest source of stress during the difficult season was not the losing. It was the fractured relationships. One coach said directly: 'That was a hard season, and it wasn't because we didn't win. It was because the players were unhappy.' Another said that even if the team had produced results, that still wouldn't have been okay, because the culture wasn't right.

You can call this the Relationship Register. For coaches who have already won at the highest levels, the win column is almost beside the point. What mattered most was whether the people in their care were okay. And when they were not, the coaches felt incredibly frustrated at the missing depth in relationships. They questioned themselves. Some began to wonder whether they should still be coaching at all. The result was not a performance crisis. Instead, it was a well-being crisis. And that distinction matters enormously for how we should support coaches.

### Idea #3: Surviving Before Thriving

Idea three. Here is the good news. All seven coaches came through it. Definitely not unscathed, yet genuinely better. After the season ended, they took a hard backward look: trying to distinguish performance from result, rebuilding their approach to culture, and watching for the signs that they had missed.

One coach said it simply: 'The strategies from the low season were 100% necessary in setting up our success the next season. It was the foundation.'

Researchers call this the move from Surviving to Thriving. The hard season isn't just something to "get through". Approached with intention, it becomes the groundwork for what comes next. And here is the uncomfortable flip side: the coaches who struggled most were those whose run of success had been so unbroken they had never needed to develop strategies for adversity. As it turns out, sustained winning can leave you underprepared for more winning.

### The Counterpoint

Let's sit with a slightly more complicated version of this... The self-doubt these coaches experienced is real, but Mallett and Lara-Bercial, in their 2023 book *Learning from Serial Winning Coaches*, describe something they call "serial insecurity": the productive balance between grounded self-belief and reasonable self-doubt that is characteristic of elite coaches at their best. Their argument is that healthy self-doubt is not a weakness. It is instead, a feature.

What this study shows is what happens when the balance tips too far in one direction between surviving and thriving. The adversity didn't change these coaches' fundamental character. It temporarily overwhelmed a balance that was usually well-maintained. So, the goal isn't to eliminate self-doubt that fluctuates when a coach moves between surviving and thriving. It's to keep the coaches' self in balance. It's worth keeping this in mind the next time a difficult season starts to eat at your confidence.

### The Anecdote

I want to share with you what a client went through that's connected to the Relationship Register. The year Mark (not his real name) nearly quit coaching, was the year he learned what coaching was actually about. He had built his programme on results with packed schedules, extremely high standards, and non-existent margins for error. When three of his senior players left mid-season, citing a culture they described as "relentless yet joyless," he didn't see it as feedback. He saw it as betrayal. He pushed harder, demanded more, and by Christmas he was sleeping badly, snapping at people he cared about, and dreading the walk to training.

The programme was still winning. Mark was not.

I initiated a conversation with him in January that changed his direction. I didn't tell him to ease off or lower his expectations. I asked him a single question: "Who are you being when you coach?" He struggled to answer. That struggle cost him weeks of uncomfortable honesty, a

formal apology to two other players he had dismissed too quickly, and the humbling experience of admitting to his staff and athletes that he had confused intensity with connection. It cost him the illusion that he had it all figured out. What it gave him, though slowly, was something more durable: a way of coaching that he could sustain, and where others could grow.

Mark still holds high standards. But now he checks in before he challenges. He names, and even shares the load of the difficulty of a hard week rather than demanding people rise above it unacknowledged. He has a Monday ritual where he asks each player one question that has nothing to do with performance. These things look small but they are not small. They came from a season he would never choose to repeat and would never trade away, because they are the things he could only have learned by nearly losing everything he was coaching for.

### Two Actions

This time, for your first action, build a simple culture check into your regular practice rhythm. After training, once or twice a week, ask your athletes one question: “how is the group feeling?” Not “how did practice go?” The group. Give it 30 seconds. If you think that there might be too much groupthink, asking a leadership group or even some of the newest players in the team about how they feel can give you a greater understanding of the current culture. This type of exercise gives you data that even the scoreboard can’t give you. If you are winning and everyone is fine, great. If you are winning and something feels off, you have caught it before performance masking does its nasty thing. You’re set up to listen for what’s underneath the result.

A second action is about developing that Relationship Register. Pick one relationship in your coaching network that you have been neglecting: an assistant coach, a mentor, someone who gives you an honest perspective. Reach out. Not because something is going wrong, but because the research shows that support networks that exist BEFORE the hard times begin, are the ones that actually help when the hard times occur. Build the connection now, not when you’re already in a difficult season. And while you’re at it, ask yourself honestly: is there anyone in my network right now who is more likely to drain my confidence than build it? That is useful information to determine who to include in your bubble.

### Close and Invite

Let me leave you with the three ideas from today.

Performance Masking: winning can hide the cracks in your culture. Do not let the scoreboard tell you everything is fine.

The Relationship Register: for the coaches in this study, the hardest part of a difficult season was not the losing. It was the fractured relationships. Keep your own relationships front and centre.

And finally, Surviving Before Thriving: the hard season, approached with reflective intention and a willingness to see hard things, becomes the foundation for what comes next.