

Start With Me

What Championship Coaches Did After Their Worst Season

Episode 3 | Season 2 | *Coaching Research to Results Podcast*

EPIISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	From distress to success: Serial winning coaches' strategies to reestablish adaptive culture and successful performance
Author	Fraser, M. M., Bloom, G. A., & Mallett, C. J.
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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.

Start With Me

The big idea from this paper is what I'd call "Start With Me." When things fell apart the coach started by taking a deep, introspective look at themselves.

Winning Hides the Cracks

Difficult seasons often are initially obscured by winning; culture problems build for a while but the winning makes the problems hard to see.

Culture Before Trophies

Idea three: "Culture Before Trophies." Once the coaches had done the hard work starting with themselves, the strategies they developed to rebuild were not performance strategies. Strategies that are built around trust and communication become fundamental habits and processes build culture.

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TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

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

Action 1: Reflect on Your Season

Before your next training session, spend ten minutes honestly answering three reflective questions: whether you're ignoring a culture issue because results are masking it, whether you've drifted from the process that made you successful, and whether something in your own behaviour might be contributing to a problem you've been blaming on your athletes.

Action 2: Schedule a Culture Conversation

Before planning next season, have one genuine conversation with your athlete leaders where you ask what they need the culture to look like, and you actually listen. Co-building culture with athletes is one of the most powerful things a coach can do.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Primary Source: Fraser, M. M., Bloom, G. A., & Mallett, C. J. (2025). From distress to success: Serial winning coaches' strategies to reestablish adaptive culture and successful performance. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2025.2543751>

Counterpoint Sources: Fraser, M. M., Bloom, G. A., & Mallett, C. J. (2024). University serial winning coaches' experiences with low performance and maladaptive team culture. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 74, 102677

LINKS AND RESOURCES

- Full episode library: thecoachdeveloper.com
- Show notes: 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.

FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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

Cold Open

You've probably had one. A season where, on paper, everything should have worked. The athletes were good. The program was established. You knew what you were doing. And then, somehow, what you expected to happen didn't. The results weren't there, the culture felt off, and you couldn't figure out why.

Now imagine that happening when you and your fellow coaches had, between you, won thirty-seven national championships. That is the situation the coaches in this week's research found

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themselves in. And here is the part that might stop you in your tracks: the very first thing each of them did to turn it around wasn't to look at the athletes. It wasn't to change the system. It WAS to look inside their own processes.

Hold up, this part's good...

Intro and Show ID

Welcome to Coaching Research Made Useful, where we look at one paper, three ideas, and two actions for tomorrow in under twelve minutes. This is the podcast where research for coaches gets off the shelf, out of your notes, and into your practice. I'm Beth Barz, The Coach Developer. Let's go!

The Paper

The paper is called, "From Distress to Success: Serial Winning Coaches' Strategies to Reestablish Adaptive Culture and Successful Performance," published in the Journal of Applied Sport Psychology in 2025. The lead author is Madison Fraser, along with Gordon Bloom and Cliff Mallett, from McGill University and the University of Queensland.

This is actually the second paper in a two-part research project. The first, published in 2024, looked at what these coaches experienced during their difficult seasons, and the short answer is: it was ROUGH. Self-doubt, distress, feeling completely unprepared. This paper picks up where that one left off.

Seven coaches in rugby, soccer, volleyball, hockey, and basketball. Average coaching experience: twenty-three years. Combined national championships: thirty-seven. One bad season each. And all of them back to winning within two years.

Big Idea #1

The big idea from this paper is what I'd call "Start With Me." When things fell apart, these coaches didn't start by looking outward. They didn't begin with a tactical or technical review or a list of athletes who weren't holding up their end. They started with themselves.

One coach said it plainly: "I had to start with myself because I'm steering the ship." That phrase became the title of the first major theme in the research. And this was not a comfortable process. Coaches with decades of winning records had to sit with the question of how their own behavior, their own assumptions, and their own complacency had contributed to a bad season. Ugh. It's even hard to hear that, let alone relive it.

One coach admitted he had kept a player with a toxic attitude on the roster because the athlete was talented. He knew it was a mistake while it was happening, but talent distracted him from the obvious downsides. Another realized she had stopped actively building culture because the winning results had made it feel unnecessary.

The researchers name this "Start With Me" concept as courage. And in the coaching literature, courage is rarely discussed. And, looking hard at the rewind video of your own worst season, after over twenty years of winning, takes real courage.

Ideas #2 and #3

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Idea two: "Winning Hides the Cracks." In every case in this study, the difficult season revealed culture problems that had been building quietly for a while. One coach described it this way: "When it comes to culture, winning hides a lot of things. When a team is winning, those little things don't make a difference. But when teams are losing, those little things become a big deal, and that's what happened with us."

Think about that for a moment. The complacency was already there. The drift from high standards was already happening. But because the results were good, it was invisible. And then the results dipped, and all of those hidden cracks appeared at once. Athletes had grown comfortable expecting to win. One coach described getting so focused on the goal of winning that she lost sight of the culture process entirely, and that process, it turned out, was what had been holding everything together.

Idea three: "Culture Before Trophies." Once the coaches had done the hard work starting with themselves, the strategies they developed to rebuild were not performance strategies. They were culture strategies. They didn't recruit better athletes. They didn't run a different system. The strategies were about communication, about giving athletes a real voice in shaping the team's values and expectations. It was about setting a clear tone early in the new season and about returning to the fundamental habits and processes (not outcomes!) that had made the program great in the first place.

Effective communication was the foundation for everything else. Coaches started meeting regularly with athlete leadership groups, not just informing them of the culture but actively building it with them. One coach gave his leaders the space to run meetings themselves, to work out what the team needed. He said he came out of those conversations feeling like he actually knew his team again. Another coach moved from abstract values to concrete, visible actions: "Show me excellence. Show me effort. And when you don't, that is when we get mad. Not about the result."

Culture first. Every time.

The Counterpoint

Here is a complication worth sitting with. The companion paper, covered in Episode 2, is from the same research team and looked at what coaches experienced during their difficult seasons, not in the aftermath. And the picture there is, well...less tidy. These coaches described significant self-doubt, distress, and a feeling of being completely unprepared. They were not managing their bad seasons gracefully at all. They were on the struggle bus.

So, the thoughtful and uneasy post-season reflection described in this paper was built on the back of a very difficult season. This matters because it is easy to read the research as a clean roadmap for bouncing back, but it is really about what happens after the storm. The tools for managing a crisis while it is still unfolding are a different conversation entirely. This is all about the after action review that requires the coach to thoughtfully examine the errors that were made.

It is also worth noting that all seven coaches in this study had strong job security. They had been at their universities for years, they were not worried about losing their positions, and they could afford a reflective off-season. That kind of security is not universal. The findings here may look quite different for coaches working in more precarious situations.

The Anecdote

Here's a story where I was asked to do some culture work with a national team who wanted to do a deep dive into their culture to prepare for their next quad for an international event. The team as a whole, and the leadership within the team, realized that the past culture was not a high-performance culture, even though they often attended competitions and had success.

The first thing we did was start with values. What were the team's values? What standards did they support? How could they become the basis of success for the team? After some individual and small group work, the team was able to agree on four team values. And maybe there was some thinking that the culture work was done. Agreed upon team values, check.

In order to have a great culture, athletes and staff must know HOW to translate values to action. A list of values is only a starting point. Then, every individual must know how to LIVE those values in their everyday actions. So, although determining the four team values was hard work to accomplish together, then we went deeper.

The task was this: determine a list of 10 behaviours that demonstrate each value in action. An example of this was the value of Professionalism. That translated into the concept of Respecting Time Efficiency. We operationalized it by challenging everyone to be 15 minutes early for training or when a task takes 30 seconds or less to complete, to do it right away.

These small actions took the big, aspirational idea out of the value and stated the plain ol' ways to live them every day.

Two Actions

Let's translate these ideas into your practice: Before your next training session this week, take ten minutes and write (or use speech to text!) honest answers to three questions. One: is there a culture issue on my team right now that I have been explaining away because the results are okay? Two: have I drifted from the process that made us successful, and if so, when did that start? Three: is there something I'm doing or not doing that is contributing to a problem I have been attributing to the athletes? You don't have to share these answers with anyone. But write them down. The "Start With Me" only works if you're willing to look past your own ego to decipher the rest of the puzzle.

Action two: At the end of this season, before you finalize next season's plan, schedule one structured conversation with your athlete leadership group. Not a debrief where you tell them what happened. A genuine conversation where you ask what they need the culture to look like next year, and you listen. You don't have to implement everything they say. But co-building the culture with athletes is, according to this research, one of the most powerful things a coach can do, for both the culture and for the leaders themselves.

Close and Invite

Here is the thread that runs through all of this. Thirty-seven national championships, and when things went wrong, the review started with the coaches themselves, not the athletes. The sequence the research reveals is: reflection first, culture second, performance third. Not in any other order.

If one idea from today sticks with you, I would suggest this one: "Start with Me." Take a clear look at how you influence the culture on your team and don't hold back. The coach can be one of the reasons why a team is successful, and they can also be the reason why they're not.

SHOW NOTES

