

The Culture IS the Training Plan

The human is more important than the winning

Episode 4 | Season 2 | *Coaching Research to Results Podcast*

EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	The Role of Leadership and Team Culture in Enhancing Sport Performance Outcomes
Author	Jennifer Walinga, Patricia Obee, & Danielle Cyr
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Episode Length	12.5 minutes
Tags	team culture, coach values, leadership development, non-hierarchical coaching, athlete development, performance outcomes, psychological safety, resilience, self-efficacy, Olympic performance

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 Current Effect

The research showed that this team's success wasn't driven primarily by a training model or selection process, but by the coach's values. The coach is the current. Whatever flows through YOU as a coach is what your athletes feel.

Structure IS Culture

The research showed that the coach's values were embedded in the team's structures through orderly collaborative work. For coaches, the message is clear: how you organize practice, invite input, and communicate information tells athletes what you truly believe about them.

Performance Beyond the Podium

The team's culture developed more than championship performances - it built long-term athletes. The research suggests that the strongest coaching cultures don't just produce results in the moment; they shape who people become for decades afterward.

SHOW NOTES

TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

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

Map Your Current

Identify three values you truly coach by right now, then examine your most recent practice for concrete evidence of those values in your behaviours, decisions, and structures. If you can't point to specific examples, that gap matters, because values that aren't visible in practice are aspirations, not culture.

Whole-Person Audit

Think through each athlete on your team. For each person, can you name three things about them beyond their sport or team connection? One interest, one challenge, one aspiration outside of training? Use your next one-on-one conversation to close the relationship gap that is also a performance gap.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Primary Source: Walinga, J., Obee, P., & Cyr, D. (2021). The Role of Leadership and Team Culture in Enhancing Sport Performance Outcomes. *International Journal of Sport and Society*.

Counterpoint Sources: Chelladurai, P. (1990). Leadership in sports: A review. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 21(4), 328-354.

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.

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 felt genuinely uncomfortable spending practice time on something that wasn't directly about physical performance. Maybe you ran a team values conversation instead of a physical session. Or maybe you spent ten minutes at the end of practice checking in with your athletes as people, not just performers. Did a small voice in your head whisper that you should have been doing something that looked a lot more like your sport?

Well, today's research is going to reframe what real coaching actually looks like. And it comes courtesy of a group of women who won four Olympic gold medals in 1992, while their rivals

were cheating with performance-enhancing drugs. The edge they had wasn't in their training plan. It was in their culture.

The Paper

Today's paper is called "The Role of Leadership and Team Culture in Enhancing Sport Performance Outcomes." It was published in the International Journal of Sport and Society in 2021. The lead author, Jennifer Walinga, and her colleagues at Royal Roads University and the University of Victoria, went back to one of the most remarkable chapters in Canadian sporting history and asked a question most researchers hadn't thought to ask: why did this team win?

The team was the 1992 Canadian Women's Olympic Rowing Team, and the context matters enormously. This was the tail end of the Eastern Bloc doping era. State-sponsored programmes were chemically engineering athletic performance across the former Soviet sphere. Canada's women rowers had no such shortcut. They had fewer athletes, tighter resources, and one extraordinary thing the researchers spent years trying to name. A culture.

Big Idea #1

Here's the big idea, and you can call this one "The Current Effect." Pretty decent for a rowing paper, right?

The research found that the most significant factor in this team's success wasn't a training system or a selection method. It was the coach's values.

Coach Al Morrow held one foundational belief that sport exists for human and social development. He believed that it was not purely about winning or for medals. It was for people. That belief wasn't just a poster on the locker room wall. It showed up in every structural decision he made; like who got to speak in team meetings, how failure was treated, and whether the lowest-ranked athlete's opinion counted in a discussion. (It did.)

One athlete described the effect like this: "I had the opportunity to do the right thing every day. It was empowering and inspiring." Another said, "the environment was controlled, but I never felt controlled."

The coach is the current. Whatever flows through YOU as a coach is what your athletes feel. That's the finding. And it starts before any part of the sport is completed.

Ideas #2 and #3

Idea two, and you can call this one, "Structure IS Culture."

The coach's values had to travel somewhere. In this case, they travelled through how the team was organised. The research identified five specific practices that created this non-hierarchical environment. Collaboration: everyone spoke in meetings, including the lowest-ranked athlete. Curiosity: a genuine growth mindset baked into daily life. Transparency: athletes always knew why they were doing what they were doing. Communicated vision: at the start of the four-year Olympic cycle (or quad), the whole plan was laid out, and athletes were asked directly, "are you in?" And finally, Community Support: even athletes who didn't make the final roster were treated with genuine dignity and respect.

SHOW NOTES



One athlete described the feeling: "There was a purpose to everything we did. We knew what the objective was. We knew what we were striving to do in the workout, more than just what the workout was. We knew what we were trying to achieve."

Here is what that means for us as coaches: the way you organise practice, who you ask for input, and how you share information is itself a cultural statement. Every structure you create tells your athletes what you believe about their capabilities.

Idea three, and this one centred on the long game. Call it "Performance Beyond the Podium."

This non-hierarchical environment didn't just build a winning team. It built whole people prepared for the future. Through the experience, the athletes developed three key competencies: self-efficacy, the belief that they could do hard things; resilience, not the absence of failure but the habit of getting back up; and self-awareness, knowing themselves well enough to manage their own performance and emotions.

And here is the part that should stop you for a moment. Twenty-six years after Barcelona, these same eleven women won a competitive rowing event together at the Head of the Charles regatta in Boston. All eleven are still engaged in sport in some professional or voluntary capacity. They didn't just win gold. They thrived and built an enduring team culture.

The best team culture doesn't just shape one result. It shapes everything that comes after. And that might be the most important thing a coach can build.

The Counterpoint

Now, let's be fair to the full picture.

This study has limitations, and the authors are honest about them. This was a single case study of one team, in one sport, in one era. The model they propose is genuinely compelling, but it hasn't yet been tested across multiple sports or performance levels. We don't know through this research alone, how a non-hierarchical approach functions when the coach is new, the roster is entirely in flux, or the existing sport culture pulls strongly in the opposite direction.

It's also worth noting that other research suggests coaching leadership style is not one-size-fits-all. Chelladurai's Multidimensional Model of Leadership argues that effective leadership style depends significantly on athlete characteristics, the demands of the sport, and what athletes actually prefer at a given stage of development. This is a different approach from the pieces we're examining today.

So the message is to "examine your values and ask whether your structures are actually reflecting them."

[Citation: Chelladurai, P. (1990). Leadership in sports: A review. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 21(4), 328-354.]

The Anecdote

This story comes with my coach developer hat on as I was supporting Ariel (not her real name). Ariel had just finished a phone call with a parent twenty minutes before training. It was the kind of call that leaves a residue, the sort where no amount of nodding along actually resolves anything, and the coach arrived at the session carrying it like a backpack weighing them down. Coaches carry themselves professionally, after all, and there is a long-practiced habit of walking into the training environment and switching on - we've all done it! But energy doesn't lie, and

athletes — particularly the ones who have spent years reading adult faces for cues — felt “The Current Effect” pushing them off-course mere moments after the first activity started. The warm-up dragged. The session technically happened. The drills ran. But something was muted, and the coach felt it too, even if it couldn't be named in the moment.

What the coach did was push through on structure alone — sharper instructions, tighter transitions, keeping everything moving so there was no space for the flatness to settle. It was an understandable instinct. But structure without warmth is just management, and these athletes needed more than management that day.

What might have been done differently, and what came up in the weeks that followed, was simply to name it. A brief, honest moment at the start: "I'm not quite at my best today, but we are going to make this good together." What the athletes needed was reassurance that the coach was still present, still with them, even if running a little low. That kind of transparency tells athletes that self-awareness is something worth practicing, and that even the person leading the session is still learning to lead themselves.

What struck me most, reflecting with Coach Ariel on this, was the speed at which the insight arrived once there was permission to look honestly. The coach already knew what had happened and knew what the session had needed. The question was never about capability; it was about whether the athletes could hold a moment of honesty from their coach without it costing something. They could. They can. And the next time your current runs too fast or threatens to veer the athletes off course, remember that the most powerful thing a coach can do is let the people in their care see them navigate it with grace.

Two Actions

Here's how we can apply this. Action one, and this one is for right now. This week, map your current. Before your next session, write down three values you hold as a coach. Not aspirational values. The ones you actually hold right now. Then ask yourself honestly: in the last practice, what could an athlete on your team have seen as concrete evidence of each of those values? In how you opened the session? In who got to speak? In how you responded to a mistake?

If you can name specific examples, great. If you can't, that's the information. Values that don't show up in your structures are wishes, not culture.

Action two, and this is your just-in-case idea for the longer game. Run a whole-person audit of your roster. Think through each athlete on your team. For each person, can you name three things about them beyond their sport or team connection? One interest, one challenge, one aspiration outside of training? If you can't, you have a relationship gap that is also a performance gap. Use your next one-on-one conversation to close it.

The 1992 rowers described it clearly: the coach saw them as people first and rowers second, and that influenced everything. That's not soft coaching, it's the foundation.

Action three, yes. Three today! Try the "are you in?" conversation with your team. Take one aspect of the season ahead, a training block, a competition cycle, a performance goal, and present the plan to your athletes transparently, including the demands it will make of them. Then ask them directly: “What do you think? What would make this work better?” You don't need to take every suggestion. But the act of asking is itself a cultural statement about who has a voice on this team.

Close and Invite

Here's the thing to hold from today. The culture you build IS the training plan. The values you carry as a coach, the way you structure your sessions, the questions you ask and who you ask them to, these are not the soft parts of coaching. They are EVERYTHING. A group of eleven women proved it in Barcelona in 1992, against teams with pharmaceutical advantages and far greater resources. They won with a culture.