

The Whole Coach

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Episode 7 | Season 2 | *Coaching Research To Results Podcast*

EPIISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	An In-Depth Analysis of Youth Sport Coaches' Perceptions of Sport Culture, Safety, and Injury Prevention
Author	Ingram, B.M., Kossman, M.K., Vander Vegt, C. B., McGill, C.A. & Register-Mihalik, J.K.
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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 Whole Coach

Across all five focus groups in this study, youth sport coaches consistently described their role as developing people, not just sport skills. This view emerged from coaches across eight different sports, all working at the community level. The research confirms what many coaches already feel: the technical and the human dimensions of coaching are not separate jobs.

Trickle-Down Culture

Coaches in this study identified a clear trickle-down effect, where the behaviours, attitudes, and equipment choices of professional and elite athletes flow rapidly into youth sport culture. This is not something coaches can prevent, but it is something they can recognise and work with deliberately. When professional athletes model safe techniques or smart decision-making around injury, that influence reaches the youngest athletes in community leagues...and the reverse is equally true.

The Safety Gap

The study found that youth sport coaches care deeply about athlete safety and feel a strong sense of personal responsibility for it. However, they consistently reported being under-resourced and structurally unsupported when it comes to actual tools, training, and formal guidance. The gap is not one of motivation or awareness – it is a systemic gap between what coaches are expected to manage and what organisations provide to help them do it.

TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

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

ALL the things

Write a list of everything you did in your last coaching session that had nothing to do with the sport itself – the conversations, the welfare checks, the parental interactions. Coaches who can see their full role clearly are better positioned to seek targeted professional development and identify where they need more support.

Emergency Action Plan or Safety System

Create an Emergency Action Plan for both your regular training venues and your competition venues. Answer four questions: who do I call, in what order, what do I say, and where is the nearest access point for emergency services? If you want a quick, 15-minute course to guide you through creating an Emergency Action Plan, try here: <https://coach.ca/module/nccp-emergency-action-plan>

Take a minute to notice

Start noticing and naming the cultural inputs that reach your athletes from professional sport – what players they are imitating, what attitudes are trickling in, and what messaging around injury or toughness they are absorbing. Naming these moments opens a conversation and gives you leverage to shape culture rather than simply respond to it.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Counterpoint Source: Whatman, C., Walters, S., & Schluter, P. (2018). Coach and player attitudes to injury in youth sport. *Physical Therapy in Sport*, 32, 1-6.

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.

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FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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

Cold Open

Think about the last time someone handed you a job description for coaching. Take a moment. Did it mention that you would be the one calling an ambulance? That you would be managing a fourteen-year-old's anxiety attack in the parking lot while simultaneously texting a parent about why their child didn't start? That you'd be the first person to spot a concussion, the last person to leave the building, and the only adult in the room who actually knows everyone's name?

Because here is the thing: nobody wrote that in the job description. Yet, every coach listening right now knows that's the job. This week's research asked thirty coaches exactly what they think about sport culture and safety; and what they found might just be the most validating thing you'll hear today.

The Paper

The paper is called "An In-Depth Analysis of Youth Sport Coaches' Perceptions of Sport Culture, Safety, and Injury Prevention," published in the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* in 2024. The lead author is Brittany Ingram, now at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and her co-authors include Melissa Kossman, Christina Vander Vegt, Catherine McGill, and Johna Register-Mihalik; a team with deep expertise in sport safety and concussion research.

What they did was gather thirty community-based youth sport coaches in North Carolina and put them in focus groups, asking them questions about sport culture and safety. And what prompted this study was a pretty glaring gap: despite the fact that youth sport participation has been climbing for years, and despite coaches being the most consistently present adult in any young athlete's life, almost no one had actually asked coaches what they think the culture is and what role they see themselves playing in it.

Big Idea #1

The big idea is called The Whole Coach.

Here is what the research found: in general, youth sport coaches do not see their job solely as teaching sport skills. They see their job as developing people. Every coach in these focus groups described a role that went far beyond the technical - they talked about building life skills, fostering resilience, teaching how to handle pressure and failure, modelling character, and creating an environment where young people feel safe enough to take risks and grow.

One coach said it this way, "What we are teaching these kids today are things that hopefully will stay with them for their entire lives." And another talked about turning a gifted but difficult player around by helping him understand that lifting up his teammates would make him a better leader, and ultimately a better player.

What is striking here is that this is not a fringe view. It came up in all five focus groups, consistently, across coaches from eight different sports. Coaches at the community level are holding a remarkably expansive understanding of their own role.

So here is the question for you: when you think about your coaching, what percentage of your energy goes into developing the person versus developing the skill? And are those two things really as separate as we sometimes act like they are?

Ideas #2 and #3

Idea #2 -- Trickle-Down Culture

The second idea is Trickle-Down Culture or when culture in sport moves from the top down...AND coaches know it and use it.

The coaches in this study talked at length about how professional athletes shape what youth athletes do, wear, and value. One coach pointed out that when standout major league baseball player, Giancarlo Stanton, started wearing a face guard on his batting helmet, kids in T-ball started wanting face guards. Not because anyone told them to. Because that's how culture works.

And this flows both ways. Professional athletes modelling safe equipment, safe technique, and smart decision-making about injury can ripple all the way down to nine-year-olds in community leagues. But the reverse is also true: when professional athletes play through obvious injuries, downplay pain, or remove safety equipment the moment they reach the top, that message travels just as fast.

What professional athletes do on Saturday, your ten-year-olds will be doing by Tuesday. That is not a problem. That is leverage.

The practical point here for coaches is you are not coaching in a vacuum. You are coaching inside a culture. And that culture has inputs you do not control. Understanding those trickle-down inputs is the first step to working with them rather than against them.

Idea #3 -- The Safety Gap

The third idea is what I'm calling The Safety Gap, and it is the most structurally important finding in this paper.

Coaches in this study were clear: they want to keep their athletes safe. They feel responsible for it. They think about it. But when it comes to the actual tools, training, and support they need to do it well, they consistently reported falling short. Most of these American coaches had no formalised coaching education at all -- 57% of them did not, in fact. They reported that when a medical emergency happens, there is no athletic trainer on site, no clear protocol, and they become the accidental medic by default.

And here is what makes this finding matter: coaches are not apathetic about safety. They know it's an important component of culture, however, they are under-resourced and structurally unsupported. The gap between what is expected of them and what they are given to work with is real, and it's not being closed by handing them a pamphlet on First Aid at registration night.

The Counterpoint

However, the evidence base is more complex than it initially appears.

This study paints coaches as willing, committed, and safety-conscious actors who are constrained by system failures. And there is a lot of evidence to support that view. But a parallel strand of research suggests that coaches can also be part of the problem and that sport cultures,

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including coaches, can normalise risk-taking, downplay pain, and implicitly pressure athletes to play through injury.

Whatman, Walters, and Schluter published a study in *Physical Therapy in Sport* in 2018 looking specifically at coach and player attitudes to injury in youth sport. They found that while coaches generally held positive attitudes toward player safety, there was a meaningful gap between those stated attitudes and the decisions coaches made in the heat of competition. The drive to win and the pressure of a close game could shift coaches' decision-making in ways that didn't always prioritise player welfare.

So, the honest version of this picture holds both things at once: coaches are under-resourced and structurally unsupported, and they are also culturally embedded in systems that can make it hard to act on what they know. Fixing the Safety Gap is not just about more training. It is also about honestly examining the values we are transmitting about pain, toughness, and winning - and how they contribute to sport culture.

[Whatman, C., Walters, S., & Schluter, P. (2018). Coach and player attitudes to injury in youth sport. *Physical Therapy in Sport*, 32, 1-6.]

The Anecdote

In my coach developer role, I was supporting a coach who was convinced that the problem with their team was tactical. The one player who needed to make the most important and timely decisions wasn't doing their job well. The coach believed that the athlete's sport IQ was simply not high enough and that caused them to miss obvious cues resulting in costly errors during practices and games. The poor performances affected team culture several ways; the athlete was formerly respected for their execution levels and they were a team leader...who's leadership was deeply tied to their performance. When things went well, their leadership and impact on culture was fantastic. When things didn't go well, they appeared selfish and made others walk on eggshells for days.

As someone outside looking in, I had the benefit of being able to pay attention to that athlete and their behaviours before, during, and after practice. It became obvious to me that the athlete was dealing with disruptions in their home life that spilled into their sport experience. That ultimately affected the culture of the team poorly. The coach couldn't see the same connection since they were embedded in their coaching tasks and only knew that this athlete was underperforming.

As we dug in together, we examined the possibility that there could be another story that was impacting the athlete. It became clear that the real issue was home, and the coach didn't have a framework to notice or address the non-sport issues that were affecting the culture. Together, we were able to hash out a process to notice and name the needs of the athlete in order to better support them in the future.

Coaching the whole person is not a nice-to-have. It's what the job requires.

Three Actions

Here's how to put this research into practice. Action One This one is for right now, this week, wherever you are in your season.

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Sit down and write a list of everything you did before, during and after your last coaching session that was not technically about the sport. Like the conversation you had with a parent about their expectations or the time you Googled a symptom because you were not sure if it was serious.

That list is your actual job description. And the point of writing it is not to feel overwhelmed. Instead, it's to feel accurate. Because here is what the research says: coaches who understand the full scope of their role are better able to seek the support, training, and systems they need to do it well. You can't close the gap between expectation and resources if you haven't named the gap.

Once you have your list, pick one item on it where you feel the least prepared. That's a starting point for professional development or seeking a support resource. Just one thing. Today. This is about being a Whole Coach.

This second action is about culture, and it is a longer game.

The research showed that what professional and elite athletes do trickles down into youth sport culture fast. This is not something coaches can stop. But it is something they can name and work with. Here is the experiment: over the next few weeks, pay attention to where your athletes are drawing their behavioural cues from. What are they watching? Who are they imitating? What messages about playing through pain, about toughness, about safety equipment, are arriving in your training environment via the media they consume?

Once you can see it, start naming it. Not to criticise, but to open a conversation. When a professional athlete plays through an obvious injury and gets praised for it, that's a coaching moment. You might say: did you see that? What do you think about that? What would you want me to do if that were you? That conversation is culture-building. It is also The Whole Coach at work.

There is a third action to use before next season. Give yourself the gift of a safety system before you need one.

Work with your organisation or club to create a one-page emergency action plan for your training and competition venues. It doesn't need to be elaborate. It does need to answer six questions: who is in charge of managing the athletes in an emergency, who is in charge of calling emergency service, who do I call, in what order, what do I say, where is the nearest access point for emergency services, and where is the nearest hospital?

The research found that coaches felt the weight of safety responsibility. One of the most powerful things you can do is build it yourself, share it with your athletes and their families at the start of the season, and then advocate to your organisation to adopt it formally.

You are not overstepping your role. You are doing exactly what the research suggests great coaches do: building the environment proactively rather than reacting when it is too late.

Close and Invite

So here is what thirty community coaches in North Carolina told us: they see themselves as whole coaches, responsible for developing whole people, inside a whole culture that is deeply interconnected and sometimes very messy.

So what can we take away from this... remember the three big ideas: The Whole Coach, Trickle-Down Culture, and The Safety Gap.

Coaches don't just shape athletes. They shape culture. And culture shapes everything else.

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