

# The Sideline Curriculum

## Why Game Day Behaviour Is Learned, and How Coaches Can Change the Lesson

Episode 1 | Season 4 | *Coaching Research To Results Podcast*

### EPISODE AT A GLANCE

|                |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Paper          | Understanding the culture of adult sideline behaviour in youth rugby league from a Social Learning Theory perspective                                                                                 |
| Author         | Hardwick, A. E., Elliott, S., Seddon, A., Ryrie, A., Lewis, C., Cronin, C., Cullinane, D., Fitton-Davies, K., Vaughan, S., Boyd, V., & Whitehead, A. E. (2026).                                       |
| Published      | Managing Sport and Leisure, 2026 (published online 4 August 2026)                                                                                                                                     |
| Episode Length | Under 10 minutes                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Tags           | youth sport, sport parents, sideline behaviour, sideline culture, social learning theory, coach behaviour, imitation, rugby league, coach-parent relationships, parent education, youth sport culture |

### 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 Sideline Curriculum

Negative sideline behaviour in youth rugby league was treated by parents as an expected part of the game, not an exception. Social Learning Theory explains this: people learn what is acceptable by watching others and noticing what follows, so the loudest voice on a sideline may simply reflect the group norm.

#### The Lead Teacher

Coaches are often the strongest model adults imitate, and parents, players and observers all linked coach conduct to what spread across the team and sideline. The authors conclude that any effort to change sideline behaviour has to include coaches themselves.

#### Nobody Blew the Whistle

Negative behaviour persists because it rarely meets any consequence, which the theory calls differential reinforcement. Aggression and swearing became more common from around Under 12s, which the authors attribute to changing views of competition and what gets tolerated rather than to age itself.

## TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

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

### To strengthen the coach-athlete relationship before confronting a parent

Give the athlete with the loudest sideline one moment of full attention this week, and ask what they would like to hear from you during games. Building that relationship in advance gives the athlete a steady voice to trust when the sideline gets loud.

### To audit your own touchline (or sideline) voice

Tally or record ten minutes of your own sideline comments and sort them into instruction, encouragement, and frustration, then end games with high-fives from every adult. Seeing your ratio shows the lesson you model, and small positive routines give the sideline something constructive to copy.

## RESEARCH REFERENCE

**Primary Source:** Hardwick, A. E., Elliott, S., Seddon, A., Ryrie, A., Lewis, C., Cronin, C., Cullinane, D., Fitton-Davies, K., Vaughan, S., Boyd, V., & Whitehead, A. E. (2026). Understanding the culture of adult sideline behaviour in youth rugby league from a Social Learning Theory perspective. *Managing Sport and Leisure*. Advance online publication.

**Counterpoint Sources:** Mirshak, N., Spracklen, K., Spracklen, C., & Spracklen, L. (2026). 'Reimagining rugby league' and performative masculinities: The politics of rugby league fan spaces in Northern England. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 23(1), 21–39.

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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

Every coach has thought it, and plenty of us have said it out loud in the parking lot: “It’s just one loud parent. Every team has one.” It’s a comforting story, isn’t it? It’s one person, one problem, and if we could just have a quiet word with them, then everything goes back to normal. Well, this episode’s research spent a whole season on the sidelines and asked the parents...and they found something uncomfortable. That loud parent might not be the problem at all. They might be the symptom. And the catalyst? It could be closer than you think.

### Intro and Show ID

Welcome to Coaching Research To Results. I’m Beth Barz, the Coach Developer. This is 1 paper, 3 ideas, and 2 actions for tomorrow in under 15 minutes. This is the podcast where coaching research gets off the shelf, out of your notes, and into your practice. Let’s go.

### The Paper

The paper is called, “Understanding the culture of adult sideline behaviour in youth rugby league from a Social Learning Theory perspective,” published in *Managing Sport and Leisure* in 2026. The lead author is Amy Hardwick of Liverpool John Moores University in England, working with a team of colleagues that includes Sam Elliott from Flinders University in Australia. What prompted it? The Rugby Football League kept seeing poor sideline behaviour turn up in its safeguarding and disciplinary logs, and funded independent research to find out why. So, the team went to two junior clubs, watched fourteen games across a season, interviewed fourteen parents, and ran drawing-based focus groups with kids from Under 9s to Under 16s. Here’s what they found.

### Big Idea #1

Call this one “The Sideline Curriculum.” Hardwick and colleagues found that aggression, swearing, and negative sideline behaviour was rarely described as exceptional or shocking. Parents talked about it as an expected feature of the game...a bit like the weather. So where does that come from? IT IS LEARNED. The researchers used Social Learning Theory to explain. SLT says we learn behaviour by hanging around other people; we learn what is acceptable by absorbing what they say, by noticing what happens after they say it, and copying what we observe.

Nobody is born a sideline screamer. They are simply learning, one game day at a time.

Every weekend, everyone within earshot is taking a course in what’s normal. So the loud voice on your sideline may not be a rogue parent. It may just be equal to the class average. Here’s a question to sit with: if a brand new parent stood on your touchline this weekend and only watched, what would they learn is normal sideline behaviour for your team?

### Ideas #2 and #3

Idea two builds on that, and it is where all the coaches should sit up and pay attention. Call this one “The Lead Teacher.” The study found that when adults imitate one another, coaches are often the best model. One parent, speaking about the Under 15s, put it bluntly, “I think that coaches have a lot to answer for how their teams conduct themselves on the pitch. If you’ve got an aggressive coach who might swear... that’s gonna be replicated in the players.” The researchers saw it. In one Under 16 warm-up, a coach swore at a player and urged the team to smash the opposition, and other coaches did the same to an extent. The volume, and the lack of reaction from spectators, told the observer it was routine behaviour. And the influence ran the other way too: one parent described a sideline full of questioning the ref and spurring the coach to do the same. The authors say any effort to change sideline behaviour needs to include coaches. So, quick check: when a call goes against you, what is your reaction teaching others?

Idea three explains why the lesson sticks. Call this one “Nobody Blew the Whistle.” In the theory, this is “differential reinforcement,” which is a fancy way of asking: what happens after the behaviour? In these clubs, mostly nothing. Spectators called a referee “a tool” and shouted “this is pathetic” with no sanction at all. One player noticed that parents get away with what players would get in trouble for. And across the whole data set, the only example of a coach being punished was one red card.

If nobody blows the whistle, everyone hears a green light.

Here is where age shows up. Younger teams looked like a family day out: clapping, praise, adults high-fiving the kids from both teams. From around Under 12s upward, swearing, aggressive coaching, and spectators urging physical aggression became more common. The authors are careful, though. They do not think age itself is the cause; they think what changes is how competition is understood and what gets tolerated. So what...EXACTLY... happens on your sideline after a line gets crossed?

### The Counterpoint

Let’s check the other side of the research here. This is one sport in one part of England, and the authors say so. They observed two clubs in the north, and point to the wider culture of rugby league, a sport with a long reputation for hard, masculine identity. They cite Mirshak and colleagues (2026), who documented offensive chanting and hypermasculine behaviour among rugby league supporters. So, if you coach basketball, swimming, or gymnastics, your sideline may run on different unwritten rules, and some of these patterns may not travel. And not every sideline story here was bleak. Parents described sociable, family-like match days, and one spectator was recorded calling out “walk away” during a push and shove on the pitch. Culture goes both ways.

#### COUNTERPOINT SOURCE

Mirshak, N., Spracklen, K., Spracklen, C., & Spracklen, L. (2026). ‘Reimagining rugby league’ and performative masculinities: The politics of rugby league fan spaces in Northern England. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 23(1), 21–39.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2025.2476301>

### The Anecdote

A basketball example: Dad had played college ball himself, a centre, and he was embedded in the culture of basketball with a deep understanding and commitment to the game. After a few games got out of hand at a tournament, his behaviour did, too, and the coach noticed his daughter

starting to shrink in the game and then eventually even on the bench. Back at the hotel, the coach found Dad in the lobby and said his piece: the officials didn't deserve it, his daughter didn't deserve it, and her teammates didn't deserve it. Dad heard him out and he apologized.

The next day, he moved himself to the farthest end of the bleachers, as far from the court as the gym allowed.

But, the coach had fixed just one person. The room was still broken since the parent behaviours were already solidified and other parents picked up where the Dad had left off. Even though Dad's behaviour had changed the other parents had seen it as the model to follow.

## Two Actions

Action one is to strengthen the coach-athlete relationship before confronting a parent. Here is a recommendation from Van Mullem and Cole (2015) for a fix of a verbally controlling, or even abusive parent that doesn't start with confronting the parent. It starts with the athlete: strengthen the coach-athlete relationship directly, so the child has a steadier voice than the sideline noise. Try this as an experiment. Choose the athlete whose sideline is loudest and give them one moment of your full attention this week, about them rather than their result. Ask, "What is one thing you'd like to hear from me during games?" Agree on it. This is just-in-case learning: build the relationship before you need it, so when the sideline gets loud, the athlete already knows whose voice to trust. Ask yourself: does every athlete on my team know my voice as the steadiest one?

Action two is to audit your own touchline (or sideline) voice. Hardwick and colleagues (2026) found that spectators and players copy coaches, so start with the model you control. At your next game, ask an assistant to tally, or record ten minutes of audio with permission where required, and sort your comments into three piles: instruction, encouragement, and frustration at officials or athletes. Notice the ratio. What does your ratio say about the lesson you teach? This works in any venue, from the bench to the boards to the sideline, and the tally sheet fits on the back of a lineup card. Then borrow a routine from the study's younger teams: end the game with every adult offering high-fives to the team. Bonus if you can get both teams through the high five line, too. Or, think about installing other constructive gestures that are small, visible, and repeatable.

## Close and Invite

Let's pull it together. The big idea: sideline behaviour is a curriculum, and everyone within earshot is in the course. Idea two: you are often the lead teacher, because adults copy the coach. Idea three: when nobody blows the whistle, the lesson sticks, and it tends to tip negative around Under 12s. If a culture is learned, it can be taught differently, and earlier is easier than later. The authors suggest setting positive norms early in the junior pathway, before teams reach the age groups where aggression is most normalized. Next time, we get specific about the four problem patterns coaches actually see from parents, and why a single preseason meeting will not fix them. Until then, model the behaviour you want to see on your sideline.