



Dealing with Differences

A Coach's Perspective

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To cite this article: Dennis M. Docheff (2011) Dealing with Differences, Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 82:8, 33-39, DOI: [10.1080/07303084.2011.10598674](https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2011.10598674)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2011.10598674>



Published online: 26 Jan 2013.



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Dealing with Differences: A Coach's Perspective

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Coaches must be culturally responsive in order to deal effectively with differences on their team.

Scenario 1970: Assistant Coach Smith steps up to Head Football Coach Johnson and says, "Hey, Coach! We're getting a new player—a black kid who just moved to town." Coach Johnson responds, "Great! Maybe he has some speed. Do you expect any problems with him fitting in? We better make sure he is accepted by the team."

Scenario 1995: Assistant Coach Jones steps up to Head Volleyball Coach Payton and says, "Hey, Coach! We're getting a new player. Because the football team took on those two girls last year, we now have a boy who wants to play volleyball." Coach Payton responds, "We better schedule a meeting with the athletic director to see how she wants us to handle this. How do you think the community might react?"

Scenario 2020: Assistant Coach Dodge steps up to Head Cross-Country Coach Nelsen and says, "Hey, Coach! We're getting a new runner on the team. Be prepared because it is a transgender athlete who identifies himself as a female." Coach Nelson responds, "Well, we better check the new state policy on eligibility. We may need our principal to make a decision on the status of this athlete."

Coaches have always needed to respond to differences in sport. The preceding scenarios display how the specifics of those differences have changed for coaches. Clearly, coaches have always been concerned with finding hard-working kids who mesh well. While coaches still try to build team cohesiveness, today's coaches respond to issues that are more complex. Generally, coaches want to do the right thing, but difference or diversity can be a scary subject because people do not want to offend others. In today's sporting world, coaches are expected to be politically correct, like the rest of society. The purpose of this article is to discuss dealing with differences in sport settings.

Basic coaching—let's start simply. What is "difference?" *Difference* means "the state or relation of being dissimilar; a significant change in or effect on a situation" (Dictionary.com, 2011a). What about "diversity?" *Diversity* is "the state or fact of being diverse; difference; unlikeness" (Dictionary.com, 2011b).

Yet defining these terms does not disclose much about sport. Remember when coaches "just" coached and did not have to consider issues such as diversity? Coaches in previous eras focused on blending individual players into a team and felt little pressure to deal with some of the issues seen in today's society. Coaches still try to blend athletes into one team with one goal. Yet they face challenges in trying to "celebrate" the differences in their players. Although it is difficult, that is the expectation for today's coach.

In an ideal world, everyone treats everybody else appropriately. However, we do not live in an ideal world. People are often offended, sometimes not purposefully. For some veteran coaches, there was a time when the color of one's skin, one's religious beliefs, or one's sexual orientation was not even a thought.

As coaches try to be consistent with the mission and vision of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), a look at the national coaching standards is valuable (NASPE, 2006). Domain one of these standards deals with philosophy and ethics, with four standards directly related to treating people in an appropriate manner. Standard one focuses on an athlete-centered coaching philosophy. Standard two deals with positive values learned through sport participation. Standard three calls for the reinforcement of responsible social and ethical behavior, while standard four requires ethical conduct in all facets of sport programs. Clearly coaches must carefully consider the differences between athletes if the standards are to be met in a meaningful fashion.

The issues demanding the attention of athletic coaches span more than the field, court, or locker room. A coach's responsibilities encompass challenges brought on by changes in culture. Lund and Tannehill (2010) refer to "culturally responsive teaching." Culturally responsive coaches have a frame of mind and actual practice that is responsive to the culture, needs, interests, learning preferences, and abilities of each athlete. Culturally responsive coaches exist, but more are needed. For example, a head football coach in Michigan modified the team practice times during Ramadan, in order for the Muslim players to practice both their football and their faith (McCabe, 2010). When coaches engage as "culturally responsive" professionals, they are better able to deal effectively with differences across the profession.

In athletics, differences occur in many areas. While there is not enough space in this article to address each of these at length, a few will be considered: religious beliefs, weight and obesity, race and ethnicity, mental and physical challenges, and gender.

Does Religion Affect Sport?

I hope that it does not. In the United States, people have the right to practice religion as they see fit. Yet athletes are sometimes forced to make choices: does religion come first or sport? In a country that claims to provide freedom of speech, an athlete may be penalized for pointing to the sky after a touchdown. Is it inappropriate for athletes to express themselves? In some cases, prayer is allowed before contests, as long as the coach does not lead it. The coach must also consider the possibility of an athlete being offended by the very act of prayer.

Religion's impact on sport is not limited to prayer. McPherson (2011) reported that a 12-year-old girl was denied the opportunity to play basketball because she wore traditional Muslim clothing as part of her uniform. We must realize that an athlete's religion is far more important than the ability to perform a sport. Should practice be held on Sunday? What about Saturday? Rabbi Barry Dov Lerner (2011) suggests that compromises should be established between cultural norms, traditions, and team rules. Coaches may need to be creative, because these compromises will vary based on the specific issue being addressed.

Do Weight Issues Affect Sport?

Obesity and body image are critical issues in our world today. Obesity rates continue to increase, and body images are easily distorted. Many kids today watch about 4.5 hours of television per day (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) and may develop an unrealistic view of "the perfect body" from viewing Hollywood performers who seem to have no physical flaws. If a coach starts taking body measurements, identifying students with high BMIs, or making comments about an athlete needing to lose more weight to perform well, problems may arise. Fitness and sport should be about individual improvement regardless of where one begins. Fitness centers, weight rooms, and sport teams are not only for those who are fit, they are also for those who want to become more fit.

Although credible information is available about sport-related weight loss or weight gain practices, some coaches promote unhealthy methods for weight management. The concept of "get big" encourages some athletes to turn to unnatural (and unhealthy) means to an end. Moreover, because some sports require a close watch on weight, eating disorders and health issues can arise. Zeigler (2010) stated, "One comment from a coach that an athlete needs to lose weight can start an athlete on a dangerous path." Even if the coach does not push an athlete to lose weight, some sports inherently pressure athletes to be overly concerned with weight.

Do Race and Ethnicity Matter in Sport?

It should not. Yet people sometimes talk about race and ethnicity so much that they seem to want to make it an issue. The only color some coaches see is the color of their uniforms. Is that a good thing, or should we recognize differences without making generalized decisions based on those differences?

It is interesting that the concept of *racial stacking*, where minorities are considered only for certain positions and excluded from others, has been explored over the years. Eitzen and Furst (1989) described it as "one of the most widely documented phenomena in sport" (p. 46). Although stacking was once a common practice in sport (Eitzen & Sage, 1986; Lewis, 1995; Woodward, 2004), it is this author's hope that this is becoming a dead issue. Quality coaches do not place athletes in certain positions based on their race.

Sport is multicultural and multiracial, and it "encourages a united front between people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds" (Jowett & Frost, 2007, p. 255). More specifically, the impact of race on relationships between coaches and athletes depends on the people involved, and respect between coaches and athletes allows for the acknowledgment of differences between them.

Do Mental and Physical Disabilities Affect Sport?

All professional teachers are familiar with the phrase "least restrictive environment." Should this apply to coaching? This author recalls coaching athletes who seemed to have no business being on a football field. They did not help the

team, but we helped them. Yet, in the grand scheme of things, maybe those “special kids” did help us. Maybe they made us more sensitive to the needs of others. On a personal note, it was satisfying to see one of our better seventh-grade players helping a special needs teammate get his football pants (with pads) on correctly.

What about physical disabilities? One cannot ignore the accomplishments of Anthony Robles (who won a 2011 NCAA wrestling championship with one leg), Melissa Stockwell (Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient and Paralympic swimmer), or Bethany Hamilton (who overcame a shark attack and the loss of an arm to become a national champion surfer). While some see difference and automatically “disqualify” people from participation, coaches must look at the larger picture. It is hoped that coaches will be innovative when they consider avenues for sport participation for children with disabilities.

What About Gender in Sport?

With the passage of Title IX, society has made strides relative to gender equity in sport. However, we have a long way to go. According to the United Nations (2007), “Resources, responsibilities and power are not equitably allocated between women and girls and men and boys,” so it is no wonder that gender gaps still exist in sport. Females in interscholastic and intercollegiate sport continue to receive less than half of the resources that males do (Flanagan, 2008). Flanagan argued that women’s sports cannot be proclaimed as equal to men’s if funding and support is so drastically different. In addition to allocating equitable funds toward women’s sport, gender equity in decision-making is needed. Sport still has many obstacles to overcome to reach the goal of gender equity.

Gender in sport is controversial, sensitive, and (for some) embarrassing to talk about in our schools. Aside from the inequity seen in women’s sport, other issues create a need for sensitivity. For example, consider a girl’s team with a male team member who identifies with females, or vice versa. The Washington Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA) policy regarding transgender athletes emphasizes participation free of discrimination regardless of gender identity or expression (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2008). An athlete’s gender identity should not be prejudicial for coaches. The reality is, coaches may not want to talk openly about gender identity, because they may fear creating trouble. However, coaches must ensure a safe environment for all athletes, and proactive policies such as that of the WIAA pave the way for this to occur.

Tips for Coaches

Here are a few general tips to make the issue of *difference* not a difference at all. They may seem simplistic, yet they are reasonable:

Tip 1: Know Your Students and Athletes—Be Perceptive. Communication is an important part of teaching and coaching. If you cannot communicate, you probably do not belong in that role. However, communication is a two-way street.



Good coaches strive to blend their players into a team where differences such as race, ethnicity, and religion do not matter.

Coaches must be able to listen, even if that means they have to stop talking. That is difficult for some coaches. Hear your athletes, even when they are not speaking to you. Know them, know their friends, know their families, and know the community.

Tip 2: Know Yourself—Be Real. Be who you are, yet be sensitive to others. That is what coaching is about in today’s world. Coaches must care about all their athletes! Are you satisfied with how you treat all athletes? Would your athletes say they are satisfied with your treatment? Do not be fearful of diversity; manage it with calm, consistent, appropriate practice.

Tip 3: Provide a Safe Environment for Athletes. Be proactive to ensure that all athletes are treated in a fair and respectful manner. This includes providing open communication between coaches and athletes, so that athletes feel supported. Athletes must have a person they can go to if they feel offended in any manner.

Tip 4: Set a Good Example. Establish a “zero tolerance” policy for harassment of any kind. Policies relative to race, gender, religion, gender identity, and other issues must be communicated and enforced. The coach must be a champion for all athletes and provide expectations for all athletes to abide by.

Tip 5: Remain Current on Issues. Staff education on sport-related diversity issues is encouraged. This may require frequent inservice opportunities for all coaches. Bringing a “lifelong learner” approach to current diversity issues is paramount. Lists of tips for dealing with a variety of current issues are easily found on the Internet (e.g., for ten strategies for dealing with diversity, see www.co-intelligence.org/diversity_strategies.html).

Conclusion

The scenarios provided at the beginning of this article demonstrate that coaches have always dealt with sociocultural issues. The difficulty for today’s coaches is that they are not formally trained in *difference* or *diversity*. The purpose of this article was to share thoughts relative to coaches dealing with

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diversity, and five tips were provided as a foundation for dealing with differences in the athletic arena. Coaches must keep the individual needs of athletes in focus while trying to blend individuals into a team. It is hoped that if an athlete approaches a coach with an issue related to *difference*, that coach will act as a professional who sees the inner needs of the athlete, and when appropriate, teaches the other athletes on the team to take heed and care for one another.

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