



# COACH to COACH

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## ENJOYMENT & IMPROVEMENT: SETTING UP AN OPTIMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Teaching includes all the principles and procedures a teacher applies to impart information and skill. Most coaches are comfortable when asked, "What do you know about teaching?"

However, when asked the question, "What do you know about learning?", many coaches draw a blank. Learning is the processes the student goes through in order to assimilate information or skill. Both teaching and learning are important for athletes to maximize skill development. It stands to reason that learning is of greater importance since, no matter how great the coach's teaching, if it does not get into the student, no true transaction occurred. It would be good for coaches to spend less time coaching and more time helping players to learn.

### A New Emphasis

That is why modern coaching emphasizes being, "**Learner Centred**". Coaches must ask the question, "*What do athletes need to learn, and how can I accentuate the experience?*", rather than just asking, "*What do I need to do to teach?*"

Being learner centred is not just theoretical. In the world of sport business, where participants pay for lessons and training, the coach with the best service will often reap the most financial rewards. In my experience, the two keys that get athletes to enter your programs, sell your programs to others, and return again and again are: **enjoyment & improvement**.

If training is just fun, the athlete may like it but parents, or the committed athlete, will want a return on the investment. Fun is not enough. If, during the training, only improvement occurs, the athlete may lack the motivation to build commitment because the experience is not enjoyable. Contrary to popular belief, enjoyment is also a key *high performance* psychological quality for long term success. The classic tennis example would be Jimmy Connors who was ranked in the top ten in the world for over 10 years. When asked about his longevity and how long he intended to continue playing, his response was, "*Until it's not fun any more.*" It is a common response for most top competitors in any sport.

One of the critical issues for learner centred training is setting up an optimal learning environment where the two foundations of enjoyment & improvement are maximized. Many components are required to accomplish this consistently in every training session. In order to remember these components, the acronym **M.O.T.I.V.A.T.E.** can be used. This memory tool can be used as a guide to judge if a session has a learner centred environment. Each letter is part of a checklist to evaluate training session environments. Enjoyment & improvement will occur proportionately to how many of these components are present.

The best environments include a **sense of success**, **organization** for systematic skill development, and a **passionate coach** to drive the process.

M	<p><b>MEASURABLE GOALS:</b> Goal setting promotes success. Count successful attempts, set up targets, and define techniques to perform. Every skill must have a way of measuring success. In this way both coach and athlete know the rate of improvement.</p>
O	<p><b>OPTIMAL CHALLENGE:</b> If a task is too easy athletes will lose motivation, focus, and look unskilled when in reality they are bored. Too difficult will also cause loss of interest and focus. Use the <b>70% rule</b>. A task should be challenging enough to produce a 30% failure to 70% success ratio. In groups, each individual can be given different goals to create the right challenge level.</p>
T	<p><b>TANGIBLE GOALS:</b> "Imagine this target" is not as good as putting a hula-hoop in place. Any time a goal is seen, heard, or felt, it is easier to measure and achieve. Fun learning environments are creative and colorful.</p>
I	<p><b>IN SAFETY:</b> Injuries are de-motivating. A safe and secure environment for both player and coach aids learning. This is why player attention, spacing, movement, and equipment, is controlled in every session.</p>
V	<p><b>VARIETY:</b> Repetition is important in the learning process. Repetition alone can become boring. To encourage repetition, play a variety of games and drills using the <b>same skill</b>. For variety, each session can cycle skills through Learning the skill, then Movement with the skill, then Competition with the skill.</p>
A	<p><b>ACTIVITY:</b> Waiting in a line is no way to learn. The goal is for every participant to have an activity. Athletes like to feel they've had a workout, not participated in an on court lecture. With groups the most experienced and successful coaches create, "organized pandemonium".</p>
T	<p><b>TARGETTED POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT:</b> Positive reinforcement is a tool that allows a coach to reward an athlete for <b>correct performance</b>. This will encourage the athlete to repeat the correct skill over and over. If a coach makes the most noise when errors occur, the athlete gets focused on mistakes to avoid, rather than on the goal of correct performance. We need to be "success seekers" rather than "Fault Finders."</p>
E	<p><b>ENTHUSIASM:</b> Positive attitude and passion for athletes learning the sport is contagious. A coach who projects an enthusiastic image will draw uncommitted and bored players into motivated learning. Like it or not, the coach <i>is</i> a role model, choose to be a good one.</p>

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