

Decision-Making Playbook

Build Fair, Clear, and Consistent Team Processes

Coaches make dozens of decisions every season about playing time, roster spots, discipline, and more, and how those decisions get made shapes trust with athletes and families as much as the decisions themselves.

This playbook walks you through six steps for setting fair, clear, and consistent standards before the pressure is on. Use the table of contents below to jump straight to the step you need most.

Step	What it Covers
Step 1: Set Your Foundation	Define your team's purpose, values, and non-negotiables for the season.
Step 2: Evaluate and Improve	Plan how you'll assess your team and help it grow, not just operate.
Step 3: Map Common Decisions	Decide your criteria in advance for common decisions like playing time, roles, and conduct.
Step 4: Pause Before Making a Difficult Call	Run through a quick checklist before delivering a tough decision.
Step 5: Communicate Decisions Clearly	Plan how you'll explain decisions to athletes and caregivers, plus a sample script.
Step 6: Determine Your Support Team	Identify who to consult for injury, wellness, conflict, or policy questions.



Step 1: Set your Foundation

Complete the statements below to help define the standards that your coaching staff want to guide your team culture. Your criteria should reflect the culture you want to create—not personal preferences, outside pressure, or one high-stakes moment.

Our team's definition of success this season is:

The values we want athletes to aspire to are: *(Values are what athletes commit to and believe, not something that happens to them.)*

The behaviors we want to reward are:

The expectations we will apply to all athletes are:

The non-negotiables for attendance, effort, respect, safety, and rule-following are:

This season, I most want to improve: *(You'll build on this in Step 2.)*



Step 2: Evaluate and Improve

Your job is not only to keep the season running – it's to make the team better. Coaches manage logistics, run practices, and coach in games, but it's easy to lose sight of how the team, the staff, or their own coaching will improve. Improvement doesn't happen by accident, and it depends on honest assessment. Decide in advance what you'll look at, how you'll look at it, and how often, so that evaluation becomes a habit rather than a reaction to a bad game.

What I'm Evaluating	How I'll Assess It (tools, evidence, who is involved)	How Often
Athlete talent and development	(example: Skill checkpoints, notes of other coaches)	(example: 3x per season)
Results and performance trends		
Video or film review		
My coaching staff (feedback, roles, development)		
My own coaching		
Team culture and athlete well-being		

Evaluate against the standards you set in Step 1, not against personal preference or a single memorable performance. Share what you learn with athletes in language they can act on. Assessment feedback they never hear about can't help them improve.



Step 2: Evaluate and Improve, cont.

How I Will Make the Team Better

Now use what you learned through the evaluation process, and pick two or three areas of growth to focus on rather than all six. Meaningful change in a few places beats surface-level effort everywhere.

Area of growth	What "better" looks like by the end of the season	What I'll change or try to get there
Practice planning	Example: Practices have a clear focus and athletes know the purpose of each drill	Example: Write a one-line goal at the top of every practice plan
Skills and drills		
Feedback to athletes		
My game plan and strategy		
My own coaching development		
Team culture and leadership		

Plan for the future. What will this team need next season and what can you start building now – depth at a position, emerging leaders, a stronger onboarding process for new athletes and families? The evidence you gather here should be the same evidence you rely on when making difficult calls in the steps that follow.



Step 3: Map Common Decisions

Before the pressure is on, decide the criteria you will consider for common decisions that you might have to make throughout the season. Also decide who will be involved in making each decision and be ready to explain why you chose, that approach.

Five Ways to Make a Decision

Not every decision should be made the same way. Choose the approach that fits the situation, then be able to explain your reasoning.

Approach	What it looks like	When it fits
Decide (D1)	You make the decision on your own.	Urgent calls, safety concerns, or decisions involving confidential information.
Consult individually (D2)	You gather information one-on-one from coaches, captains, athletes, or caregivers, then decide.	You need facts or context you don't have.
Seek recommendations (D3)	You ask individuals not just for information, but what they would do in your position, then decide.	The call is genuinely difficult, and you want other perspectives.
Consult as a group (D4)	You bring people together, gather input as a group, then decide.	The decision affects the whole team and shared understanding matters.
Delegate (D5)	You hand the decision to a specific group – athletes, captains, or caregivers – and support what they choose.	Decisions the group is well positioned to own, like team traditions or service projects.

You remain accountable for the outcome in every approach, including delegation. Be careful not to invite input you don't intend to use.



Step 3: Map Common Decisions, cont.

Use the table below to map your decisions.

Common Decision	Criteria I will consider	How I'll decide (D1-D5)	Who needs to know? (athletes, coaches, parents, etc.)	How and when will I communicate it?
Team selection or tryouts				
Starting lineup				
Playing time				
Position or role change				
Team captains or leadership roles				
Attendance or tardiness consequences				
Conduct or team-rule violations				
Injury, illness, or other exceptions				



Step 4: Pause Before Making a Difficult Call

Work through these questions before making a difficult call. Not all 12 questions need to be answered before every decision is made. Use the first group as your minimum and include the other sections for significant decisions.

Before you decide, get grounded.

- **Pause.** Am I making this decision while frustrated, rushed, embarrassed, or under pressure?
- **Revisit your foundation.** Which stated team value, expectation, or criterion applies here?
- **Review the facts.** What do I know? What information might I still need?
- **Evaluate your approach.** Who should be involved in this decision, and can I explain why?

As you decide, test your thinking.

- **Check for bias.** Would I make the same decision for another athlete in the same situation?
- **Consider the athlete.** Does this decision support safety, development, dignity, and the needs of the athlete and the team?
- **Weigh any exception carefully.** Has new information emerged, such as illness, injury, family emergency, or a school-related obligation that reasonably changes the situation?
- **Look ahead.** Does this decision help the athlete, and the team, get better or only resolve today's problem?
- **Do a gut check.** Do I need to talk to an assistant coach, athletic trainer, administrator, or trusted colleague?

Before you deliver your decision, make it stick.

- **Reflect.** Would this decision still look fair to the athlete, their family, and my colleagues a year from now?
- **Communicate clearly.** Does the athlete understand the decision, the reasoning, and what they can do next?
- **Document the decision.** If this is a significant decision, have I made a short note about the relevant facts and reasoning?



Step 5: Communicate Decisions Clearly

Take time to reflect on how you will communicate your decisions.

Complete these statements:

1. I will share team expectations through:
2. I will explain how decisions about playing time, roles, attendance, and conduct are made:
3. Athletes can ask questions about decisions by the following means:
4. Caregivers should raise concerns through:
5. My response-time expectation is:
6. I will set boundaries around after-game conversations, texts, and direct messages:

When making a difficult decision, remember:

- Share the decision privately when appropriate.
- State the relevant criteria or expectation.
- Explain the decision in direct, respectful language.
- Avoid comparing an athlete to teammates.
- Give the athlete a specific next step, where appropriate.
- Allow time for questions and processing.
- Use a communication style that fits the individual athlete while keeping the decision standard consistent.

Sample Coach Script

"I know this may be disappointing. Based on the criteria we discussed at the beginning of the season—attendance, practice effort, current performance, and team needs—this is the decision I've made for this game. Let's talk about the specific areas you can focus on if you want to earn more opportunities moving forward."



Step 6: Determine Your Support Team

Before the season begins, determine who you can consult with when you are faced with a difficult decision.

When I need help with....	Person or role I can contact	Best way to reach them
A difficult team or playing time decision		
An injury, health, or return-to-play question		
An athlete's emotional or mental wellness concern		
A parent/ caregiver conflict		
A policy, discipline, or safety concern		
A confidential 'gut check'		

Protect athlete privacy when consulting others. Share only the information needed to receive appropriate guidance, and follow your organization's reporting, safeguarding, and confidentiality requirements.

