



# The 3 Jobs of a Youth Sports Coach

**Keep Them Safe —**

**Give Them Fun —**

**Help Them Grow**

Peter C. Scales, Ph.D., USPTA  
Search Institute

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# Introduction

Here's what I've learned in more than 45 years as a developmental psychologist in positive youth development and 27 seasons (14 years) as a boys' and girls' high school tennis coach: There are just 3 things a youth sports coach needs to do with and for their students...

- 1. Keep them safe**
- 2. Give them fun**
- 3. Help them grow.**

Every practice, every lesson, every match or game, every interaction, those are the 3 priorities for being a good coach, in a moral sense, and a successful one, in a personal and athletic improvement sense. Former NFL star Joe Ehrmann nailed it when he called his book, *InsideOut Coaching*. All those things happen because of what the coach has inside them that they bring out, and that their players have inside them, that the coach teaches and helps bring out. Good coaching is nurturing good values on everyone's inside, and helping them then become good habits outside, in action.

Here's how coaches can do that: Build a *Developmental Relationships* culture and a *Compete-Learn-Honor* culture and you can promote safety, fun, and growth simultaneously.

Developmental Relationships (DR) focus on five key ways researchers at Search Institute ([www.searchinstitute.org](http://www.searchinstitute.org)) identified that coaches and other adults can deepen their interactions with student-athletes so adults can become even more influential role models and mentors, on and off the playing field: Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power, and Expand Possibilities. And the Compete-Learn-Honor Approach (CLH, [www.competelearnhonor.com](http://www.competelearnhonor.com)), which I created as a tennis coach, helps coaches in all sports build new mental and emotional habits in their players so young people can play their sport with greater purpose and less focus on winning and losing, while giving 100% effort, being an open, curious, humble learner, and loving and honoring the game.

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## Developmental Relationships

Using the DR framework, coaches can assess how much their program is creating sustained relationships with their players that are built around these elements of interaction: Appropriately and safely Expressing Care for their players, Challenging their players' Growth, Providing Support for their players, Sharing Power with their players, and Expanding Opportunities for their players. Within these 5 elements, 20 more specific actions (e.g., listen, guide, inspire, navigate) further help coaches build developmental relationships. DR scores have been linked to a variety of Positive Youth Development outcomes, ranging from academic success to social-emotional strengths, to civic engagement. For example, we found that students with strong DRs in schools and youth programs have better social-emotional competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills. The DR framework is being used in thousands of schools and youth programs across the country, such as in National 4-H, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Camp Fire, and Communities in Schools.

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## Compete-Learn-Honor

Using the CLH approach, coaches can assess how much their program defines success, not in terms of wins and losses, but by whether players are Competing (giving 100% effort), Learning (being an open, curious, and humble learner), and Honoring the Game (respecting all, making no excuses, and showing high character under stress and adversity), with Honor held up as the foundation for all Learning and Competitive development. Within those pillars of Compete-Learn-Honor, coaches can teach two-dozen specific mental-emotional principles that reflect habits we want coaches to help student-athletes develop (e.g., love the game more than how you perform, lose your "self"—humility allows you to learn, mistakes are necessary to improve, love the battle-solve the puzzle). The CLH approach has been highlighted as a recommended approach for both recreational level and elite performance athletes by organizations such as the Positive Coaching Alliance, National Alliance for Youth Sports, Way of Champions, Changing the Game Project, and the United States Tennis Association. A study of middle and high school student-athletes across the country found that those with a strong CLH team climate had better social-emotional skills, more confidence in their coach, derived more purpose from playing their sport, and had greater intention to keep playing their sport.

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## How A DR + CLH Culture Leads to Safety, Fun, and Growth

So how does building a *Developmental Relationships* culture and a *Compete-Learn-Honor* culture promote all 3 youth sports goals of safety, fun, and growth? Because each of those goals of safety, fun, and growth rests on a foundation of **respect for self and other, empowerment, and purpose that is larger than self**, and it is those three foundations that DR and CLH promote.

When those three foundations get put into action, when respect, empowerment, and larger purpose are not just words but how coaches and ultimately players act and do things in the sport setting, then the culture of the team or program itself makes safety, fun, and growth far more likely. And the safety, fun, and growth then reinforce respect, empowerment, and larger purpose, which create more safety, fun, and growth, etc., in a looping cascade of positive relationships and experiences.

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**How A DR & CLH Youth Sports Culture**



**Safety, Fun, and Growth**



*If coaches are building DR and CLH culture then they're focusing on what their players need more than on what the coach needs.*

That mitigates—doesn't eliminate, but greatly lessens—the odds of taking advantage of anyone, misusing coach power, which is always greater than the students' power, in order to satisfy the coach's own psychological, social, and emotional needs.

All coaches these days, regardless of their years of experience or level of sport credentials, go through, or certainly should go through, prevention training about physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Most of what gets taught in those video trainings are pretty obvious instances of crossing the line, but nevertheless worth watching simply to reinforce the safety message.

But even good coach training usually doesn't emphasize enough that there is a grey area between what is obviously bad and even criminal behavior—think Larry Nassar—behavior that is clearly imbalanced to satisfy a coach's needs—and coach behavior that is seemingly good for the student-athlete but can be problematic, where taking care of players' needs can slip into coaches wanting players to take care of the coach's needs.

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## Coaching Is A Giving Relationship From Coach To Student

So, to lessen the possibility of problematic coach-student relationships and increase safety, fun, and growth, the very first step for coaches to take, in order to build a Developmental Relationships and Compete-Learn-Honor culture, is to understand and commit to this premise: *Coaches can have no expectation of anything personal in return from the student-athlete.*

Expect them to pay attention, try new skills, give 100% effort, be a great teammate—yes. Those all are good performance and character expectations to have. But coaches get nothing extra. Whether paid or volunteer.

*Coaching is a giving relationship from coach to student, even if they're paying you. You don't expect thanks or favors, you don't ask for thanks or favors. You give what you have—it's a gift. They don't have to thank you. But if they do, or if they ask for your help in making the next transition of their lives or a big decision, or later, if they get in touch just to say hi out of the blue, a coach is just grateful. Students doing well without you, on and off the court, really is how you know you did well by them as a coach!*

The challenge is that even right-thinking and acting coaches need to be vigilant about the line between caring about their players and caring *for*

their players. You can be happy if your players end up liking you. But you can't be emotionally bothered if they're not particularly close to you. You're their coach, not their parent, even though your most important responsibility, just like a parent, is to keep them safe. Your responsibility is to return them whole to their parents after every practice, lesson, game or match. You are not their friend either, even though you should of course be friendly with them all, and hopefully, you've had some great fun memories on the playing field with a lot of them.

You're the grown-up. You're the boss, no matter how much you share power with them and encourage their voices, no matter how much you provide care for them, enlarge their worlds, and give them the supports they need. You are able to do that, to help them grow, because you have all the power. You as a coach occupy a strange place of privilege with them that is kind of like parent, kind of like friend, but, when it's most healthy, is really more about being an implicit and sometimes explicit character guide and mentor than anything else, helping them understand themselves and their larger purpose in relation to others. Even if you're just a few years older than your student-athletes, your role is as wise elder!

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## Why A DR and CLH Culture Can Be Transformational

All of us, as human beings, have needs for what psychologists call the ABCs of self-determination: Autonomy (freedom of choice, a sense of control), Belonging (being positively connected with others we care about), and Competence (being good at things we value and that the people we care about value and that society values).

We all have these needs, whether we are coaches, players, or parents. But just like bad things can happen when parents start to live their lives through what their kids do with sports, bad things can happen when coaches start living their lives through their student-athletes.

This can occur when coaches cross the line from giving and doing *for* their students (the servant leadership that legendary college tennis coach Steve Wilkinson so beautifully embodied and wrote about in his book, *Let Love Serve*), to caring how much they receive from their students, and caring how much their students care about them. Of course coaches would like their student-athletes to like them—who doesn't want to be liked? The boundary is not in wanting your athletes to like you at some level. Wanting that is fine. The boundary is in caring too much about whether they do or don't.

Some coaches abuse their power, clearly, and in ways that may run the gamut from obvious (e.g., hitting a student, yelling harshly at a student) to subtle (e.g., the grooming behaviors of a sexual abuser that can seem, in context, simply kind). Creating a Developmental Relationships and Compete-Learn-Honor culture should make abuse and neglect of student-athletes less likely.

### **Why?**

Because, if you're a DR and CLH coach, you're constantly trying to build up your players' sense of agency and autonomy, you're constantly messaging to them that their growth, their choices, are their responsibility, that they have power. You're constantly trying to empower them. You can guide and give ideas, but they have to make choices, with no excuses, because winners are those who take responsibility for their actions. And in warmly demanding players take responsibility for choices, coaches over time make themselves less relevant, as those players learn how to become their own coaches.

*The more coaches empower their students like this, through DR and CLH, then the stronger students get mentally, socially, emotionally, and then the less dependent those students are likely to be on the coach for their sense of esteem or efficacy, and by extension, the less susceptible to manipulation by the coach or others.*

The foundation of both DR and CLH is respect and honor, toward self and other. The power differential between coach and student-athlete is always there. If you're a DR and CLH coach, you're looking for ways to share power with your students—building students' agency, asking for, listening to, and acting on at least some of their ideas. Not just favored athletes but everyone on the team.

But this is not an exercise of shared power among equals. The coach always has more power, always is the one determining how and with whom to share it, always has the responsibility to use their power wisely for the best interests of their students. A coach models respect and fair treatment of all by their actions—for example, by the inclusion of the least skilled in decision making, and meting out the same consequences to stars as benchwarmers when character and conduct rules are violated.

A safe environment is never simply established by decree—it is always being reinforced and negotiated in every interaction between coach and players, between players and teammates, and between competing teams. There will be violations—no team is spared that. A coach tries

to prevent that, but knowing it still can happen, a coach also knows that how they react to safety violations that do occur is probably more important to their players than what the policy is.

The coach has to model the policy in what a coach does when tested around issues of respect, empowerment, and larger purpose. Every incident that happens that threatens safety, fun, and growth, a coach needs to quickly if not instantly understand what has happened and how everyone feels, and make the right call about how to deal with it, right now, and in the follow-up that can be even more important. Those moments occur all the time, no matter how good you are at creating DR and CLH culture. So, in that sense, as a DR and CLH coach you're never done creating a safe, fun, and growth-oriented space—it's a dynamic re-creation within the recreation we engage in every day.

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## Some Sample Activities

In my own tennis coaching, here are some ways I try to shape a DR and CLH culture, every day, some days for sure not as well done as others. All these activities are usable in any sport.

### **“We Build People Up” Poster**

A central message about honor that we try to model as well as talk about within the CLH approach is our 2nd motto, after Compete-Learn-Honor. It is, “We build people up—We don't tear them down.” That motto was created by a senior on one of our girls' tennis teams. The laminated poster with the motto on it hangs on the tennis court fence most days, and credits her by name, which by itself is a reminder that students have voice and real influence on this team.

So just having that poster up there and talking about it is a way to emphasize that our culture is about elevating people, respecting them, building them up, not belittling them, being mean to them, or making fun of them. We build each other up to help each other become the best people we can be. That's every teammates' responsibility.

And if we do that—take responsibility for ourselves doing the right things and always looking for ways we can support each other and build each other up—well then, we have a much safer space for everyone.

## The Excuse Box

I also introduce the Excuse Box early, in the first few days of practice. I created this Excuse Box a decade ago, when I got tired of one of my boys' teams whining too much about their less-than-stellar play, shifting blame to the sun, the wind, new shoes, dead racquet strings, unfair line calls, etc. instead of accepting responsibility for what they could control, accepting what happened that was out of their control, and analyzing all that in order to learn more and improve.

The Excuse Box reinforces taking responsibility, and respect for self and other. Whatever else is going on in your life outside the courts, its message is when you step onto the tennis court, this is an excuse-free zone. A mistake-friendly zone, and an excuse-free one. I put a big box on the court that I labeled "Excuse Box." I invite players to write their excuses down, crumple them up, and throw them into the Excuse Box, or do it in their minds. If they're feeling particularly down, players often just stand or sit in the box for a bit! They laugh, feel better, and come out more ready to take responsibility, be a little more relaxed, and ok with having fun instead of all wrapped up in their issues, however genuine and strong those issues are.

## The Name Circle

Another activity we use to reinforce DR, CLH, and the foundations of respect for all, empowerment, and larger purpose is The Name Circle. A couple of weeks or so into the season, by the time players have gotten to know each other a bit, we lay out a big poster with a large circle on it, with Compete-Learn-Honor written around it. Players come up and write their names around the circle.

And we hang it on the fence and we talk about what The Name Circle symbolizes. One college team I worked with hung their Name Circle in their locker room, so the team could see it every day. Doing the Name Circle is really a kind of commitment ceremony. It symbolizes three things. One, the circle symbolizes the ongoingness of the game, in our case, tennis—the game was here before you, the game will be here after you, the game is bigger than you. You're just this little dot on the circle that is the history of tennis and the future of tennis and tennis right now. So the game is bigger than you.

The other thing the circle symbolizes is that when everybody's name is up there around the circle, nobody's more important or more valuable than anybody else. So it's good for the team concept and it also reinforces humility, which allows students to learn. Everybody's

the same around the circle—there's no number one, there's no number 10, there's no number 22. Everybody's wins count the same, everybody hurts the same when they lose, whether they're number one or number 10 or number 22. It doesn't matter. So we're equal in our humanity.

And the last thing is that the circle symbolizes unbroken commitment to be supportive, to be there for each other, to have each other's backs. Coaches can put their names up here too, I have. But the team is really the players, so this is something the students need to own. The exercise makes for a good bonding experience and something that really underscores for the players that you're there for each other to have each other's backs at least for this season, and for some of you there might even be lifelong friendships that come out of this experience. All this helps lessen behavior that belittles or demeans others and helps bring out behavior that respects and empowers others.

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## De-Emphasizing Winning: Don't Misunderstand

A final point: De-emphasizing winning as the definition of success is key to creating and maintaining a DR and CLH culture and to promoting safety, fun, and growth. Please do not misunderstand that statement:

We want to win! We train to win. Winning usually is more fun than losing, yes. But winning isn't the goal—the goal is improving as players and as people. We don't have to win. We do have to learn.

Two of the most important concepts that I emphasize most in coaching to reinforce this message are: love the game more than how you perform, and lose your "self"—humility allows you to learn. They're both very connected to each other.

### ► *Love the Game More Than How You Perform*

There is a larger purpose here than winning—the larger purpose is improving as players and as people of good character. Loving the game more than how you perform doesn't mean that we don't care about winning; we do—that's why we get nervous, that's why we choke. We care about it and that's okay, that's good, that gives us energy. But most of us are going to lose a lot—if you're only having fun, enjoying yourself, enjoying the game only when you're winning, then you're bound to have a lousy time a lot of the time you're on the court or playing field. This principle is the same in any sport. So why be out there if not for the love of the game?

### ► Lose Your “Self”—Humility Allows You to Learn

Loving the game more than how you perform is also important for learning, it's part of losing your “self.” The game is bigger than you. If you're humble, if you always feel like you have more to learn, then you are indeed going to learn more, overall and on the fly in a match or game where you're going to be better able to see objectively what's going on, so you can adapt and adjust in the moment. If you're focused on you instead of the game, if you're focused on winning more than simply solving the puzzle that the game is, you won't see objectively what's going on and the adjustments you have to make, and how you can support your teammates in the game. You won't improve as much, your teammates won't, as you would have had you been humble and grateful. So helping players lose their focus on “self” is a big part of honor, learning, and competing, that helps promote respect, empowerment, and larger purpose, and ultimately, safety, fun, and growth.

All these messages, actions, exercises, and activities coaches can do to build a DR and CLH culture reinforce the three foundations of respect, empowerment, and larger purpose. By building DR and CLH culture, coaches can promote respect, empowerment, and larger purpose, and end up with a culture that keeps everyone safe, gives them fun, and helps them grow!

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*Peter C. Scales, Ph.D., is the Senior Fellow for Search Institute, and an internationally-recognized developmental psychologist who has conducted positive youth development research in more than 30 countries worldwide and published widely in scholarly, practitioner, and popular media. Coach Pete is a U.S. Professional Tennis Association-certified tennis teaching professional, long-time high school tennis coach of boys and girls teams, mental strength consultant to college tennis teams, regular mental game columnist for Racquet Sports Industry Magazine, and author of the award-winning book *Mental and Emotional Training for Tennis: Compete-Learn-Honor* (Coaches Choice, 2019) and the forthcoming *The Compete-Learn-Honor Playbook: Simple Steps to Take Your Mental & Emotional Tennis & Pickleball Game to a New Level* (Coaches Choice, 2023).*