



# Communicating Athlete Deselection

Alexander Cohen, Ph.D., CMPC

Senior Psychological Services Provider, USOPC

Chris Clements

Director of Coaching Education, USOPC



## Discussion questions:

What **process** as a staff do you currently have for discussions around selection and preparing for making these announcements - pre, during, after, and who is involved?

How have **conversations** with athletes typically gone when communicating selection/de-selection decisions?

How **confident** are you in having these conversations with athletes?

What have you **learned** and or modified for next time you have had to deselect an athlete? What went well or not so well?



## Clarify selection/deselection context:

Current **selection procedures** (e.g., performance + age criteria).

Team size, World Cup/Olympic & Paralympic **team spots available**.

Options for athletes to **continue competing** at a lower level for further development.

**Alignment** of coach philosophy and values with overall organizational philosophy.



## Previous experience:

Consider previous experiences of having these types of conversations: **how have you communicated to athletes that they're deselected from team?**

Is the athlete **aware** of where the conversation is likely to go? **NO SURPRISES**

**How do the athletes typically respond?** What are they likely to say in return?



## Communication:

**What are you looking to say**, and how can **scripting the conversation** ahead of time help keep the conversation on track?

Imagine the **athlete being deselected is your son/daughter**: how would you communicate this info if you knew you were going to continue being in a relationship with the athlete?

Inform with dignity and class (eye-to-eye/face-to-face; in person is best, videoconference is better than phone call). Have confidence in your voice and demeanor. **Own the difficult moment** and realize that strength and clarity, balanced by some compassion, will help the athlete to absorb and accept your message.



## Communication:

Be thoughtful of **why the person is being deselected** (talent, size, etc.) and be sensitive to those reasons. Take the athlete's feelings into account.

Be clear about reasons for making the deselection, but **don't twist the knife** (e.g., stating the athlete's age as a primary reason three times in a two-minute conversation).

**Write out what you want to say ahead of time.**



## Communication:

Don't hide behind criteria or use budget as primary reason for making deselection decision; connect back to **individual athlete progression plan** – did athlete not progress as well as hoped?

**Keep the reasoning on the actual athlete** and their results, technical shortfalls, and/or other discretionary factors (attitude, logistics, school, or whatever is used to help determine the selections).

Getting caught up in comparing to the other talent and athletes, budget, or HQ as a key decision maker or justification will possibly open up comparisons, arguments, and denial of the reality – the **deselection is about this athlete and not others.**



## Communication:

Have “**tactical patience**” and allow the athlete to finish their thoughts. Be careful not to cut the athlete off in your attempt to get the job done. If you have to listen to some venting, let it go until they are done, really listen to the issues being raised, and find out what is real and what needs to be simply put to rest so it doesn’t go any further.

Be prepared for rebuttal.

Answer questions. **If they ask, answer.**





## Communication:

If athletes are giving you impressions of their performance after you ask for it, make sure you **acknowledge the input by validating or correcting their perceptions.**

Try to keep this **focused on their performance** and the **issues relating to their deselection.**

Bring them back to these as quickly as possible when they try to compare to another athlete.



## Communication:

**Acknowledge the work and value the athlete gave to the program;** This is part of the compassion. It doesn't have to be over the top, but it helps to just say thank you in a way that is honest and real.

**Celebrate athlete's career and accomplishments** in conversation (as well as formal celebration if possible).



## Communication:

Ideally, the athlete leaves the meeting having all the information they need to **respect the decision (not necessarily like or agree with it)** and respect the position they and the team are both in, so they can hopefully deal with it like an adult and move on.

Most will come to terms with a decision, if it is properly laid out for them.

State that you'll **follow up with athlete in the next few days** to check in, answer any further questions, help with transition resources.

Follow up conversation (or concluding the initial conversation):

The **line has been drawn** with the athlete so try not to go back into deep discussion around the decision.



## Communication:

**Remind them about what you value about them.** This is important as right now they are not feeling that way. For example, “We value your dedication and commitment to progressing yourself and the sport. We know if you are up for it, you will take this opportunity and earn your way back into the team. Therefore, we have discussed what future engagements could look like. We have the following options for opportunities with you sitting outside of the selection.” (Insert x camps, x ability to gain access to resources etc.)

“Do you have any questions around these opportunities? Our expectations are that you are willing to take up these opportunities if you wish to stay connected. Beyond this, you will still receive insurance for the next x days and for any connections with support staff let us know and we will help with the initial transition period to help you get things going.”



## Process:

Publish team expectations and guidelines **BEFORE** the season starts. Include selection dates well in advance or at least estimated timeline.

Have a meeting ASAP once the decision to deselect someone has been made. **Don't string people along.**

**Don't meet the athlete alone.** Have another adult with you, for your protection and to help explain things that you might not be able to clarify.



## Process:

Have a **record of why the deselection was made**. Is there evidence to support your decision? Write it down BEFORE the meeting.

Offer or inform them of **alternatives**. What other activity can the athlete do? An athlete deselected from one sport might be exceptional at another. **Talent ID into another sport?**

Provide avenue if appropriate for **re-selection** and relevant criteria.



## Announcement strategy:

**Create a strategy/timeline for announcement** around process for transparency.

**Communicate this timeline to team.**

Example:

- Selection meetings will occur March 25
- Nomination meetings will occur March 26
-



## Announcement strategy:

### Example: Women's team announcements – **March 27**

- 12 athletes (all are called whether selected or not)
- Calls made 9-11am (ten minute calls)
- Email to new team sent at 11am
- Follow up conversations can be scheduled for deselected athletes 9-11am (thirty minute calls) on **March 29**
- Press release sent out **March 29**





## Announcement strategy

Special events? Announcing the team; Celebrating an individual's career, via banquet, fundraiser, public recognition - send off.

If athlete is retiring (forced or voluntary), **give athlete option to announce retirement rather than being deselected.**



## Big Picture Considerations:

How frequently are we **discussing athlete progress** towards or in line with selection criteria? What is appropriate? Can we facilitate activities to bring athletes closer to the selection process or understanding where they are in the process?

This can **help athletes articulate where they are in the selection process**. Could an athlete one day come into the selection meeting and acknowledge where this is going, thank the staff for the opportunity and move on?



## Big Picture Considerations:

Do athletes join the “**bitter athlete alumni**” club or the “**I had an amazing time as part of the NGB and my team**” club? How do we enhance this **feeling of being valued** on their last day on the job and post-career?

The **way in which selection/deselection is communicated** is an important aspect of the athlete’s experience.



## Selection Practical Activities/Exercises:

Create a typical **lifecycle/standard of historically best in the world in your discipline**. For example, by age 24, x WC starts, x Podiums, etc. to support the process. Where are current athletes in relation to that? What do they need to do to close the gap?

Have athletes (and staff) use the selection criteria, team values, and athlete agreement/code of conduct to **rank themselves and fellow athletes**, then submit to staff at certain times in the year.



## Criteria Selection Activity:

Have athletes use the selection criteria to go through the selection process and select the team for the next competition; Athletes submit their starting “team”.

Have discussions with athletes around what went through their mind in going through the process.

Were there any difficult decisions? If so, why? Positive or negative?

Did any athletes “deserve” to be on the team ahead of others? Why?

Use what athletes submitted to aid them with aligning perception of their position on the team with the selection criteria.

Have conversations with athletes individually to help them see where they need to make progress to potentially climb the selection ladder.



## Non-Criteria Selection Activity:

Have athletes use their own judgment with no specific selection criteria to select the team for the next competition.

Have athletes create their own criteria for selection and justify this and their selected athletes after they have submitted the names.

Use the criteria selection activity questions above to create further discussions.

The selections can be submitted anonymously or named. Named allows for easier follow up conversations with specific athletes.



## Practice selection conversations!!!

As a coaching staff, periodically **role play/rehearse these conversations** (coaches acting as athletes being deselected/nominated as well as coaches practicing deselection of athletes); Have other coaches and staff give feedback following role plays.



# ROLE PLAYS





## Resources:

One model/example for discussion: **“Firing Players” scene from Moneyball movie.** Know what to say and how to say it. In the baseball example it’s probably easier than the reality of National Team/Olympic/Paralympic deselections as there is not another pro team for athletes to join tomorrow.

Unhealthy and healthy ways to communicate athlete deselections: **“The Ultimate Guide to Making Athlete Cuts”** (Mike Davenport).



**THANK YOU!!!**