

# THE ATHLETE MENTAL HEALTH — PLAYBOOK —

REAL QUESTIONS. EXPERT ANSWERS. BUILT FOR THE MENTAL SIDE OF SPORT.

## HOW CAN **COACHES** CREATE A MENTALLY HEALTHY TEAM ENVIRONMENT?

The logo for 'Kicking the Stigma' is located in the bottom center. It features a white horseshoe symbol above the text 'KICKING THE STIGMA' in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The word 'THE' is smaller and positioned between 'KICKING' and 'STIGMA'. The entire logo is set against a dark blue rounded rectangular background.

**KICKING  
THE  
STIGMA**



# THE BEST PLACE TO START? REDUCE AMBIGUITY.

Creating a mentally healthy environment sounds simple, but it requires intentionality.

When athletes understand expectations and feel supported, coaches can build stronger team cultures.

Coaches can reduce ambiguity in two ways:

## 1. Build relational capital

Show athletes they matter as people, not only for what they contribute in sport.

## 2. Create simple, clear expectations

Define what team standards mean and what they look like in action.

# RELATIONAL CAPITAL

**Relational capital is the primary currency of effective coaching.**

Think of relational capital like a bank. Every time athletes see that you care about them as people, not just what they provide on the field, you make a deposit.

## Deposits

Show athletes they matter as people, not only for what they contribute in sport.

## Withdrawals

Define what team standards mean and what they look like in action.

## WHY RELATIONAL CAPITAL MATTERS.

When athletes know you care:

**BUY-IN**

increases

**TRUST**

grows

**FEEDBACK**

feels less hostile  
or attacking



When athletes know you care, you have more latitude to give corrective feedback that is less likely to be misperceived as negative, hostile, or attacking.

**The more athletes know you care, the harder you can coach them to move outside their comfort zone and continue growing.**

The goal is to help athletes be productive, develop transferable skills, and become the best versions of themselves.

# SIMPLICITY & CLARITY OF EXPECTATIONS

Distill team expectations into a few visible, accessible rules, guidelines, or program pillars.

**WHAT**

is expected?

**WHAT**

does it look like?

**WHICH**

behaviors align with  
the standard?

Even simple rules will have details and contingencies. The purpose of the rule is to create a memorable anchor that athletes can understand and apply.

**Clear expectations reduce ambiguity because athletes know both the standard and the behaviors that meet it.**

Have expectations stand as pillars that are visible and accessible. That way, athletes know the expectations and which behaviors comply with them.

# EXAMPLE:

## RULE #1:

# LISTEN TO COACH

Simple expectation: **Listen to Coach**

### What it means for athletes:

- Eyes on the coach
- No side conversations
- Stop other tasks and distractions
- Respond to the whistle immediately
- Give full attention while instructions are being delivered

### For coaches:

- Keep instructions efficient
- Get to the point
- Be concise and specific
- Make pep talks efficient

A simple rule works best when everyone knows exactly what it looks and sounds like.

# EXAMPLE:

## RULE #2:

# WORK HARD

Simple expectation: **Work Hard**

### What it means for athletes:

- Give full effort in practices and games
- Run from drill to drill
- Hustle to water and back
- Work hard and hustle during games

### For coaches:

- Model hard work and preparation
- Build efficiency into the practice plan
- Recognize hard work when it is displayed
- Verbally reward hard work when it is displayed

By articulating a simple rule, coaches can define what hard work means, what it looks like, and where it is expected.

# EXAMPLE:

## RULE #3:

# HAVE FUN

Simple expectation: **Have Fun**

Joy is both an outcome and an intentional part of the process.

The goal is joy. Sport is fun, but it can also be a grind that requires athletes to prepare and do things that are not inherently fun. Athletes and coaches sometimes have to work to find fun.

### Athletes can find fun in...

- 6 a.m. hill runs
- Lifts in the hot summer heat
- Team camaraderie
- Autonomy and ownership

### Coaches can help through...

- Music
- Popsicles
- Autonomy and ownership
- Camaraderie
- Having fun themselves and showing that they enjoy the process

Create an environment where athletes can make fun and sustain it on their own.

# REPETITION & REINFORCEMENT

You cannot say an expectation once and expect it to stick forever.

## REPEAT

State expectations often and in context.

## REINFORCE

Provide corrective feedback when standards are not met.

## REWARD

Recognize behaviors that align with team standards.

Consistency helps athletes connect the simple rule to the behaviors that demonstrate it. Corrective feedback explains what needs to change. Recognition shows athletes what success looks like.

**Provide corrective feedback when expectations are not met, and incentivize or reward behaviors that align with team standards.**

# CONSISTENCY BUILDS HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS

**THE STANDARD YOU WALK BY IS THE  
STANDARD YOU ACCEPT.**

Expectations only reduce ambiguity when they are enforced consistently.

Differential enforcement, such as better players not having to follow the same rules as everyone else, undermines expectations, increases ambiguity, and decreases the likelihood of a strong mentally healthy environment.

**When expectations are enforced consistently for everyone, ambiguity decreases and mentally healthy environments become more likely.**

# THE PLAYBOOK.

## Additional resources and tools to explore.

---

### [USOPC Coaching Education](#)

Coaching tools, athlete development resources, and educational content.

---

### [Project Play | Aspen Institute](#)

Research and best practices for creating quality youth sport experiences.

---

### [Positive Coaching Alliance](#)

Resources to help coaches develop better athletes and better people.

---

### **911 / Emergency Care**

For immediate danger or a life-threatening emergency, call 911. A hospital emergency department or local crisis service may also provide an urgent evaluation.

---

Explore additional mental health resources and learn more at [KickingTheStigma.org](https://KickingTheStigma.org).

## OUR EXPERTS.

Troy A. Moles  
Ph.D., CMPC, HSPP

Kelli A. Monedero  
LCSW, CMPC

Jesse A. Steinfeldt  
Ph.D., CMPC

### Key takeaways

- Reduce ambiguity.
- Build relational capital by letting athletes know you care about them beyond what they provide on the field.
- Keep expectations simple, visible, and accessible.
- Repeat, reinforce, and reward expectations.
- Enforce expectations consistently for everyone.

For additional Athlete Mental Health Playbook topics, visit  
[KickingTheStigma.org/Athletes.](https://KickingTheStigma.org/Athletes)