

# Positive Coaching Alliance The Positive Coach Mental Model Research Summary

## Introduction

The mission of Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) is to **transform youth sports so sports can transform youth**. Achieving this mission depends on providing coaches, parents and youth sports organization leaders with “Bite-size insights.” Because most youth coaches are volunteers for whom time to become an expert is scarce, it is critical to create a distribution mechanism to translate important insights from academic research into a user-friendly format that can easily be put into practice by volunteer coaches.

PCA has developed the **Positive Coach Mental Model** (PCMM) to change the very nature of what it means to be a youth sports coach. Peter Senge, in The Fifth Discipline (1990), noted that organizational change is dependent upon changing the “mental models” of the individuals within the organization. Senge defines a mental model as “deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting.”

The current “win-at-all-cost” model of coaching severely restricts the potential for young people to learn positive “life lessons” from their sports experiences. We believe that the win-at-all-cost model must be displaced or the positive possibilities of youth sports can never be realized.

We have said that a Positive Coach is a “Double-Goal Coach.” A win-at-all-cost coach has only one goal: to win. He or she is concerned primarily with teaching skills and developing strategy designed to win games. A Positive Coach also wants to win but has a second goal: to help players develop positive character traits, so they can be successful in life. Winning is important, but the second goal, helping players learn “life lessons,” is more important. A Positive Coach puts players first.

This paper summarizes the extensive academic research, from a variety of sources, that constitutes the foundation for the Positive Coach Mental Model. We will address each of the three elements of the PCMM:

- Redefining “Winner,”

- Filling the Emotional Tank, and
- Honoring the Game

We conclude with a statement about the importance of “conversations” in bringing about a change in the attitudes and behaviors of coaches, athletes and the entire culture of youth sports.

## Redefining “Winner”

**“A Positive Coach helps players redefine what it means to be a winner through a mastery, rather than a scoreboard, orientation. He sees victory as a by-product of the pursuit of excellence. He focuses on effort rather than outcome and on learning rather than comparison to others. He recognizes that mistakes are an important and inevitable part of learning and fosters an environment in which players don't fear making mistakes. While not ignoring the teaching opportunities that mistakes present, he teaches players that a key to success is how one responds to mistakes. He sets standards of continuous improvement for self and players. He encourages his players, whatever their level of ability, to strive to become the best players, and people, they can be. He teaches players that a winner is someone who makes maximum effort, continues to learn and improve, and doesn't let mistakes (or fear of mistakes) stop him or her.”**

The Positive Coach Mental Model emphasizes “Redefining ‘Winner’” away from a scoreboard to a mastery focus because it helps athletes better enjoy their sports experience, reduces anxiety, increases self-confidence (self-efficacy), keeps them playing longer and can improve their performance.

The notion that one might perform better by not focusing on the outcome of the competition is counter-intuitive to many coaches and parents, but there is much evidence that this idea is true. There is a large body of research on what is called “Mastery Orientation” beginning with John Nicholls’ work at Purdue University. In his work on cognitive development, Nicholls contrasted task, or mastery, orientation with what he called “ego orientation.” PCA calls ego orientation, with its external focus, a “scoreboard orientation.” Nicholls found several important differences between children with a mastery orientation versus those with an ego or scoreboard orientation:

- Children with ego-involved goals use comparison with others to measure their success (Nicholls, 1984b).
- When students perceive themselves as having low ability compared to others, they may lower their effort and further reduce their chances of learning (Nicholls, 1984c).

- Ego involvement can reduce a child's intrinsic interest in an activity (Nicholls, 1984a).
- Individuals feel more competent when they feel they have learned (Nicholls, 1984a).
- Children with task-involved goals are likely to feel competent and successful when their performance of specific tasks improves (Nicholls, 1984b).
- Task-involvement produces the most desirable educational outcomes (Nicholls, 1984b).
- In task-involved individuals with high perceived capacity, goals will look realistic and therefore performance will not be impaired by anxiety, self-protective effort-reduction, or a sense of hopelessness (Nicholls, 1984b).
- A mastery orientation will more often lead to the exhibition of maximum effort, contribute to the development of perceived ability, and encourage positive achievement behaviors (as cited in Duda, 1987).

Joan Duda and others have built on Nicholls' work extending his findings to the realm of children's sport. Duda (1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1986) and Ewing (1981) looked at the relationship between goal perspective and persistence in sport and concluded that:

- Junior high, high school, and college-age students who drop out of sports participation are more likely to emphasize ego-involved ability goals (as cited in Duda, 1987).
- Those who had dropped out of sport tended to define their sport success and failure in terms of comparison with others (as cited in Duda, 1987).
- Subjects who were involved in sport at the recreational or organizational level for long periods of time tended to be oriented to both task- and ego-involved sport goals (as cited in Duda, 1987).

Burton also tested Nicholls' developmental theory of achievement motivation in the realm of youth sports. He examined the behavioral consequences of task- and ego-involved goal orientations and found that:

- Male and female intercollegiate swimmers who received a mastery-based goal-setting training program demonstrated higher effort and greater performance improvements than a control group of athletes (Burton, 1985).
- The positive effect of mastery training on effort, task choice, and performance was especially influential for athletes with lower levels of initial perceived ability (as cited in Duda, 1987).

Recent work by Robert Roeser and Michael Wolf at Stanford University addressed the issue of anxiety and enjoyment:

- Ego orientation leads to a greater sense of pressure, tension, and worry (Roeser, 1996).
- As focus on mastery and improvement increases, self-efficacy increases and anxiety decreases (Wolf, 1998).
- A mastery goal focus is linked to lower levels of tension and worry about performance (Wolf, 1998).
- From Walling, Duda and Chi's study (as cited in Wolf, 1998), mastery orientation is strongly correlated with enjoyment and significantly correlated with efficacy among adolescents competing in sports.

Albert Bandura did pioneering work at Stanford University on self-efficacy, which can be thought of as a situation-specific form of self-confidence. He found that as self-efficacy increases, individuals tend to work harder and stick to tasks longer. He asserts that **self-efficacy is the single most important determiner of successful performance**. In his chapter on "Athletic Functioning" in Self-Efficacy: the Exercise of Control (1997), Bandura suggests that coaches can effectively influence the development and maintenance of self-efficacy through:

- Reducing discouragement over competitive difficulties by emphasizing self-improvement while underplaying victories and defeats.
- Focusing on what players can personally control, such as improvement, provides more positive guidance than focusing on uncontrollable outcomes, such as winning.
- Modeling confidence in players' eventual proficiency and by giving positive corrective feedback on how to improve rather than by criticism of mistakes.
- Remaining positive and maintaining high expectations without rewarding substandard performance.

Redefining "Winner" is consistent with National Association for Sport and Physical Education's (NASPE) National Standards for Athletic Coaches (1995). NASPE Standard 25 recommends that coaches "Demonstrate effective motivational skills and provide positive, appropriate feedback." The NASPE standard notes the importance to:

- Know the social and emotional motivations for youth participation in athletics (including enjoyment, improving skills and learning new ones, the excitement of competition, being with friends and making new friends and enjoying success and recognition).

- Know and use appropriate goal-setting strategies, alternative goals, individual support, arousal techniques, etc.; the positive approach to correcting errors and the questionable function of using inspirational speeches as ways of reducing the athlete's fear of failure or level of stress felt in practice and competitions.
- Recognize the importance of self-confidence and self-esteem to the athlete's development.

In addition, NASPE Standard 26 (1995) calls for coaches to "Conduct practices and competitions to enhance the physical, social and emotional growth of athletes". The NASPE standard specifically suggests that coaches:

- Emphasize the importance of enjoying practices and competitions.
- Provide opportunities for athletes to derive satisfaction from striving for personal and group goals.
- Structure practice and game experiences so that participants find them satisfying, positive experiences that provide an opportunity to develop the positive values associated with competition.

## Filling the Emotional Tank

**“A Positive Coach is a positive motivator who refuses to motivate through fear, intimidation, or shame. She recognizes that every player has an “Emotional Tank” like the gas tank of a car. Just as a car with an empty gas tank can’t go very far, players with an empty emotional tank don’t have the energy to do their best.**

**A Positive Coach understands that compliments, praise, and positive recognition fill Emotional Tanks. She understands the importance of giving truthful and specific feedback and resists the temptation to give praise that is not warranted. When correction is necessary, a Positive Coach communicates criticism to players in ways that don't undermine their sense of self-worth. A Positive Coach strives to achieve a 5:1 “Plus/Minus Ratio” of praise to correction, recognizing that this allows players to better hear criticisms.**

**A Positive Coach establishes order and maintains discipline in a positive manner. She listens to players and involves them in decisions that affect the team. She works to remain positive even when things aren't going well. She recognizes that it is often when things go wrong that a coach can have the most lasting impact and teach the most important lessons. Even in adversity, she refuses to demean herself, her players, or the environment. She always treats athletes with respect regardless of how well they perform.”**

The Positive Coach Mental Model emphasizes the construct of the “Emotional Tank” articulated by Ross Campbell in his book How to Really Love Your Child (1977). An athlete’s emotional tank, like the gas tank of a car, must be repeatedly filled for best results.

Many observers have asserted that coaches yelling at young athletes cannot be beneficial for their long-term development. However, apart from common sense, there is a large body of research that demonstrates the superiority of motivation through positive reinforcement compared to the “nasty-snarly” style of coaching that is too often associated with youth sports. Through direct and indirect communications coaches and parents provide feedback information that will influence a child’s self-esteem. For example, when looking at coaching behaviors and youth sport participation, Susan Hayashi (1999) found that:

- Gymnasts who perceived more support from family and friends were more likely to continue in gymnastics.
- Gymnasts who perceived that their coaches provided high amounts of punishment-oriented feedback, were more likely to discontinue their gymnastics participation.

There are many studies that show that children have better experiences and are more likely to stay involved in youth sports if coaches and parents balance positive feedback with constructive criticism. The effect of a coach's feedback on the development of a child's self-esteem was described in a number of studies by Smith, Smoll and others. Their research showed that:

- Male baseball players whose coaches used positive coaching techniques such as frequent encouragement, positive reinforcement and corrective feedback, had significantly higher self-esteem ratings over the course of the season than players whose coaches used these techniques less frequently (Smith, Smoll, and Curtis, 1979).
- Players who started with low self-esteem benefited the most from positive coaching techniques (Smith, Smoll, and Curtis, 1979).
- Players responded most favorably to coaches who engaged in higher proportions of supportive and instructional behaviors (Smith, Ronald E., & Smoll, Frank L., 1991).
- Players enjoyed their experiences more when they played for coaches who had been trained to give more reinforcement in response to good performance and effort, and responded to mistakes with fewer punitive response and more encouragement and technical instruction (Smith & Smoll, 1991).
- Players coached in a positive manner signed up for baseball again in a significantly higher percentage than those in a control group (Barnett, Smoll, & Smith, 1992).

PCA asserts that the ideal positive (compliment) to negative (criticism) ratio that coaches should aspire to is 5:1. Support for this ratio as optimal comes from research done in the 1970s looking at children in elementary classrooms and in the 1990s looking at relationships between married couples.

With their research on children in a classroom, Robert and Evelyn Kirkhart (1972) found that:

- Children in the classroom thrived when the plus/minus ratio was 5:1.
- As the plus/minus ratio sank to 2:1 and 1:1; their attitude was described as "despairing."

After researching relationships between married couples, Professor John Gottman from the University of Washington found what he calls the "Magic Ratio" of 5:1. Gottman (1994) claims that:

- Marriages were more stable if there were five times as many positive feelings and interactions between husband and wife as there were negative.

- In very unhappy couples there tended to be more negative than positive interaction.

PCA has developed tools and techniques that allow coaches to achieve the 5:1 ratio while instructing and providing constructive criticism to their players. These techniques are consistent with NASPE Standard 25 (1995) which includes competencies such as:

- Enhancing athletes' self-esteem by such methods as showing acceptance, reacting positively to mistakes and giving encouragement.
- Using a variety of positive instructional methods, such as specific feedback and specific encouragement and constructive criticism.

## Honoring the Game

**“A Positive Coach feels an obligation to his sport. He understands that Honoring the Game means getting to the ROOTT of the matter, where ROOTT stands for respect for:**

- Rules
- Opponents
- Officials
- Teammates, and
- Tradition of the game

**A Positive Coach teaches his players to Honor the Game. He loves his sport and upholds the spirit, as well as the letter, of its rules. He respects opponents, recognizing that a worthy opponent will push his athletes to do their best. He understands the important role that officials play and shows them respect, even when he disagrees with their calls. He encourages players to make a commitment to each other, and to encourage one another on and off the field. He values the rich tradition of his sport and feels privileged to participate. A Positive Coach demonstrates integrity and would rather lose than win by dishonoring the game.”**

The Positive Coach Mental Model emphasizes “Honoring the Game” because coaches can be powerful influences on their players, not only in terms of their on-field behavior, but also for the values they take away from their sports experience into every aspect of their lives. When talking about character development in youth sports, “good sportsmanship” is often held up as the ideal.

However, PCA believes that sportsmanship does not convey all that we want from coaches, athletes, parents, and fans. Positive Coaching Alliance uses “Honoring the Game” which embodies sportsmanship but represents a more comprehensive ideal for character building.

A study by Miller and Murk on “Moral Reasoning and self-predicted moral actions in youth soccer players” shows the need for adoption of a concept like “Honoring the Game” in youth sports. After assessing the moral reasoning patterns and self-predicted moral actions of youth soccer participants, Miller and Murk found that:

- The longer boys played soccer, the less moral they tested on moral values of honesty, justice, and responsibility.
- Findings suggest the need for youth soccer coaches, parents, and league organizers to actively promote the development of moral values through sport.

In their chapter on “Promoting Moral Character Through Physical Education and Sport,” Shields and Bredemeier (Character Development and Physical Activity, 1995) recommend several strategies for youth sport coaches to employ in promoting moral character development. Many of these recommendations are consistent with the Positive Coach Mental Model, and the following are specifically relevant to “Honoring the Game”:

- Coaches should expect players to treat opponents with respect, helping them understand that playing well does not require dehumanizing opponents.
- Coaches should facilitate moral reasoning development by providing opportunities for players to discuss sports as moral practices. For example, students should be encouraged to think about how game rules have been designed to give balanced opportunities to offense and defense, encourage safe play, and to ensure fairness.

A key aspect of “Honoring the Game” is the expectation that youth sport coaches will be positive role models in their interactions with players, officials, opponents, parents and other coaches. This concept of personal integrity is reflected in NASPE Standard 24 (1995) which asks coaches to “Identify and apply ethical conduct in sport by maintaining emotional control and demonstrating respect for athletes, officials and other coaches” which includes:

- Being positive, courteous and considerate when dealing with others (athletes, officials, opponents, concerned others and spectators) in stressful situations.
- Knowing the rules of the sport coached; understanding that knowledge of the rules on the part of coaches, athletes and spectators can minimize conflicts with officials and maximize performance.
- Knowing that competition requires respect and positive regard by opponents, coaching staffs, officials and spectators – that the conduct of all participants affects the quality of the experience for everyone.

The principle of “Honoring the Game” is also reflected in NASPE Standards 23 and 26 (1995) which recommend that coaches:

- Require athletes to display good sportsmanship at all times (Standard 23).
- Relate sportsmanship to complying with the intent of the rules, not just the letter of them (Standard 23).
- Use the sport experience to support positive social behaviors – such as “fair play,” sportsmanship, hard work towards group goals, working as a unit, accepting responsibility for success and failure and self (Standard 26).

- Develop positive social behaviors in athletes by acknowledging acts of sportsmanship, encouraging respect for teammates and opponents, respecting effort and improvement and stressing personal involvement and self-control (Standard 26).

## Conversations

People's values change by interacting with ideas and other people. Therefore, conversations are a major way that coaches can transmit the themes of the Mental Model. As Shields and Bredemeier recommend, physical education teachers and coaches need to engage youth sport participants in a dialog about moral values involved in physical activities and sport and encourage them to reflect upon the moral underpinnings of sport (1995).

Inspired by the idea of "social epidemics" discussed by Malcolm Gladwell in The Tipping Point (2000), PCA intends to stimulate a national conversation among all those who are concerned with the future of youth sports. We encourage coaches to talk with their players about the themes of the Mental Model at every opportunity. We suggest that coaches make time for team conversations during every practice and before and after every game.

## Conclusion

Positive Coaching Alliance intends to be part of a national movement to **transform youth sports so sports can transform youth**. A key element of that effort is the transformation of the "mental model" that youth coaches, parents of young athletes and leaders of youth sports organizations have about what it means to be a coach.

This paper is intended to document the academic research that supports the **Positive Coach Mental Model**. Your comments are solicited. In particular, we are interested in learning about other studies that apply to the **Positive Coach Mental Model**. Please communicate your comments and suggestions to:

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