



# What makes a great coach?

**Author:** Paul Stimpson

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*As part of Coaching Week, former England senior international and 11x National Champion, Dr Emma Vickers discusses the top 10 things that makes a great coach.*

Coaching is often a thankless, frustrating, challenging, and selfless job. At the elite level, coaches will often face scrutiny from the general public around how well they are doing in their job, regularly facing backlash around the decisions that they make. Coaches will often work day and night with their athletes and spend extensive time on the road, accumulating to lengthy periods away their loved ones. What is it, however, that separates a good coach from a great one

## **1. Regularly seek to improve their coaching skills (learning does not have a limit).**

Whilst a good coach will likely know a great deal about their sport, a great coach will go the extra mile to continue learning and developing their skills. Great coaches consistently learn new training techniques, stay up to date with new academic research, read books, watch videos, and seek advice from elite coaches and those within other fields. Learning about all aspects of the sporting environment is key for a successful coach, including sport psychology, performance lifestyle, nutrition, and physiology. Such fields are readily accessible for any coach who wants to grow and improve.

## **2. Take a holistic perspective (know the person, not just the athlete).**

The very best coaches will take the time to get to know their athlete away from the field, training hall, track or course. They will take a holistic approach to athletic development, understanding the demands that athletes will face external to their sport (e.g., education, changes in family dynamics), and the many transitions that athletes often face throughout their athletic careers, and how these transitions may influence their sporting performance. A great coach will not perceive personal, academic or social problems as a distraction to the coaching job. Coaches who take a holistic approach and care about the personal development of their athletes will in turn have athletes with a higher level of life satisfaction, wellbeing, and stronger worth ethic comparative to coaches who restrict athletes from other life activities and take no interest in their lives. Great coaches will

also understand individual differences between their athletes, including differences in attitude, personality, sensitivity, and how they handle criticism and adversity. Understanding individual differences and styles will enable these coaches to tailor their interactions and strategies with their athletes accordingly.

### **3. Keep the game in perspective.**

The best coaches do not get distracted by how big a game or event is in relation to their job as a teacher. They should understand that sport is just a game and merely a vehicle to teach more important life lessons. Great coaches understand that what they teach and how they teach it will have an impact on their athlete that goes far beyond sport.

### **4. High-level communication skills.**

The best coaches will understand that communication is a two-way street and involves a back and forth channel between coach and athlete. The effective coach is a coach who communicates well and exudes credibility, competence, respect and authority. A great coach should be able to explain ideas clearly and implement defined, agreed upon goals, giving direct feedback and reinforcing the key messages. Acknowledging success is also essential for good communication.

### **5. Get their athletes to believe in themselves.**

Great coaches will inspire their athletes to do more than they perceive that they are capable of by entertaining possibilities that stretch the limits of their beliefs. In order to inspire athletes to believe in themselves, great coaches must continually put them in situations which challenge their limiting beliefs. This can be done by pushing their athletes outside of their comfort zone, physically, mentally, and emotionally. This is often referred to as the "get comfortable being uncomfortable principle," which states that the only way to grow physically and emotionally is to consistently challenge yourself to do things that are not easily achieved.

### **6. Are flexible in their approaches.**

The best coaches are flexible in their approach to teaching by continuously looking for a better way to reach each athlete. If one approach doesn't work for a particular athlete, they will persist in trying new approaches until they figure out the best way to reach that individual. Coaches who are rigid, who continually adopt the attitude that "it's my way or the highway" are far less effective than those coaches who have mastered the fine art of being flexible.

### **7. Take the time to listen and educate the athlete's parents.**

Great coaches will regularly take the time to communicate and educate parents about the role that they need to play in your coaching team, success as a coach often involves getting parents to work with you, not against you. Great coaches will take the time to listen to parents' concerns and questions regarding their child's sporting development and will help them to understand that their job is not to motivate or coach their child, but to provide support within other areas, such as emotional support. Overly-supportive parents can cripple an athlete's sporting development.

### **8. Use their athletes' mistakes and failures as valuable teaching opportunities.**

Poor coaches will create an ego-orientated environment, whereby winning is deemed to be the only acceptable option. It is important for coaches to give their athletes permission to fail and make mistakes, and avoid getting angry or impatient when they do so. Creating a task-focused environment and focusing on individual improvement will cause the athlete to feel less anxious about making mistakes whilst performing.

### **9. Continually challenge themselves (challenge is not just for the athlete).**

Great coaches should continually strive to model the attitudes and behaviours that they would like their players to adopt. Regardless of how much success the coach has had in the past, they should acknowledge that they can always learn new and better skills and techniques. As these coaches demand from their athletes exactly what they demand from themselves (e.g., persistence and hard work), their athletes are far motivated to meet the coach's higher expectations.

## 10. Demonstrate genuine passion for coaching.

The final aspect to highlight about what makes a great coach is possibly one of the most important points, and this is that a great coach should love and feel passionate about what they do. Having a genuine passion and enthusiasm for coaching will power you to overcome obstacles, setbacks and frustration, until you achieve success. A coach's passion is often infectious, motivational, and inspiring. A great coach is not easy to find and requires a very unique set of talents, skills, and desire. The qualities and traits mentioned may help coaches to identify the strengths and weakness of typical coaching programs, and although it is unlikely that any one person will excel in all areas, a great coach will possess many of these qualities. Most importantly, a great coach will love and want to develop their sport.

*Dr Emma Vickers recently gained a PhD from Liverpool John Moores University on the topic of the experiences of UK student-athletes as they move through university. She is also a Project Co-ordinator for the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) – a Sport England funded partnership between talented athletes, education institutions and national governing bodies of sport, a Performance Lifestyle Advisor at Loughborough University, and Table Tennis Coach.*

*What is Coaching Week? Taking place from 4th to 10th June, the week-long celebration created by UK Coaching, the lead agency for coaching in the UK, aims to highlight great coaching and the benefits coaching can bring.*

**If you're interested in starting a career in coaching, find out about our revamped [Level 1 Session Coach course](#) – launched this week.**

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