



Coaching Competitiveness: A Five Phase Approach

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The ability to compete is one of the most desirable athletic qualities because that ability helps athletes give their team a chance to win no matter how difficult the situation or how good the opponent. It involves giving 100 percent effort in both training and competition, regardless of obstacles or adversity. Sometimes athletes have all the physical skills that are necessary for success, but do not have the competitive drive to push themselves to reach their potential and fight hard in every game. Based on Jeff Jansen's (2011) five phase approach to developing competitiveness in athletes, this article will give coaches specific strategies to help their athletes become more competitive.

Target audience: coaches

Have you ever heard the expressions 'hungry for success', 'they refuse to lose', or 'they have a never say die attitude'? They all refer to an athlete's level of competitiveness.

Competitiveness is an essential component to the success of any athlete or team. In every sport, coaches look for athletes who have that competitive drive, who have commitment and passion for the game, and who play like they have something at stake. They look for these qualities because athletes who possess them can find in themselves that extra energy to push through the last five minutes of an intense game, or who have the focus and motivation to recover in the moment in order to keep competing at their best. They are driven to work relentlessly in training to reach their athletic potential and fight to the end in every game.

So, is competitiveness something that can be taught to athletes? According to Jeff Jansen, author of *How to Develop Relentless Competitors* (2011), the answer is yes. The following framework

is based on his five phase approach to helping coaches develop a competitive drive in athletes.

Phase 1: Find Motivation

The first phase in developing competitiveness is to identify the reasons why an athlete is competing. What is at stake for the athlete and what do they need to defend? This will give that athlete a purpose and motivation for all the hard work necessary for success. The motivation may be different for each athlete. Some athletes are motivated by maintaining or gaining the respect of their coaches and teammates, while others are motivated by earning playing time. Other motivations include winning a championship or pride and self-respect. Five of the most powerful and common motivators for athletes fall into the following categories:

1. **Achievement:** Claiming new territory or achieving something new (ex: winning a championship)

2. **Protection:** Defending something they have already achieved (ex: keeping a starting position)
3. **Respect:** Gaining the respect they feel they deserve
4. **Pride:** Representing their school, family, self, or coach in a positive way
5. **Reputation:** Defining the legacy they would like to leave (ex: How would they like people to remember them?)

Suggested Strategies

Coaches can help athletes find what drives them by asking them questions like: What fuels you? Whose respect would you like to earn? What do you want to achieve this season? How would you like to represent yourself, your school, or your family? How do you want to be remembered? These types of questions will help athletes connect with their passion, which could motivate them to train hard day in and day out to reach their goals. Once coaches know what motivates their athletes, they can tailor their communication to help each athlete reach his/her potential.

Phase 2: Preparation

The second phase involves preparing for competition. Once athletes are motivated and passionate about competing, they are more willing to train hard. They will also benefit from having a specific plan for their preparation that emphasizes the skills needed to achieve success. Coaches can help them be prepared in four ways: emotionally, physically, strategically, and mentally.

The athletes' **emotional preparation** will be directly related to how clear they are about their purpose for competing. If they are sufficiently passionate about the competition, then their emotional energy should be sufficient for effective training. Coaches should remind athletes need to identify and keep their purpose in mind.

Physical preparation is crucial to competitive success and coaches have the ability to ensure that this happens. It involves conditioning and technical drills, as well as sleep, nutrition, and hydration. Athletes need to believe in their physical preparation in order to feel confident on game day. They need to know that they have done everything possible to be physically ready to compete. This is something coaches can encourage athletes to focus on going into competition to manage any pre-game nerves.

In addition to physical preparation, athletes also need **strategic preparation**. They need to gather as much information as possible about their opponents. What are their strengths and weaknesses? How do the opponents match up against their strengths and weaknesses? What tactics and plays will the team use to maximize their own strengths and offset the strengths of the opponents? Although some coaches may already do this, coaches should encourage athletes to do it as well so that they go into game day feeling more relaxed and confident in the game plan. Leading up to competition, coaches should share any information they have acquired about the opponent with your athletes and plan drills in training that help them prepare for specific opponents and

situations. Then, coaches can have clear discussions about the strategic game plan against particular teams before competition.

Finally, athletes need **mental preparation**. Once athletes have a clear purpose and have all the physical tools and knowledge to compete, they need believe in themselves and their abilities. If athletes do not have confidence in their abilities to carry out the game plan and achieve their goals, then all the preparation and motivation in the world will not make a difference. In fact, Jansen (2011) claims that confidence is one of the key components of being competitive. There are strategies coaches can use to increase the confidence of their athletes:

1. **Focus on their strengths:** Coaches should have athletes get in the habit of listing their strengths (both mental and physical) before going out to train or compete. This will help them feel confident to trust themselves on the field, which could lead to quicker recovery from mistakes and better decision making.
2. **Remind them of past successes:** Most athletes tend to focus on their mistakes after a competition or training. Coaches need to remind them of the times when they were successful to help them build confidence.
3. **Emphasize the quality of their training:** As stated previously, when athletes feel prepared they are much more likely to feel confident; quality training helps them be prepared.
4. **Praise them:** Coaches should praise them daily for their accomplishments in training.

Praise should be sincere and specific. The quality and frequency of feedback has a huge impact on how athletes feel about their ability to perform.

Phase 3: Focus

Once athletes know the game plan and are prepared both mentally and physically for competition, the third phase of coaching competitiveness is to help them focus to the task at hand in order to execute the plan. This means eliminating external distractions such as school, family, and social lives and honing in on what is necessary to focus on in competition.

Jansen (2011) identifies three aspects of proper focus for competition. They are called the 3P's:

1. **Present:** It is important for athletes to stay focused in the moment while they compete. Coaches must encourage them to let go of past mistakes and avoid worrying about the rest of the game. It could be helpful for them to use phrases that help them focus in the present moment such as, 'here and now'.
2. **Positive:** Coaches need to encourage athletes to focus on the positive things they are going to do to help the team execute the game plan. They might use phrases such as, 'move the ball forward' or 'look for the striker'.
3. **Process:** During competition, coaches should encourage athletes to stay focused on the process of playing and not on the outcome of the game. They could use focusing cues such as, 'stay in front of my man', or 'push him to his left'.

During phase three, the emphasis is on athletes staying present and process focused. This is very different from phase one, when the athlete is identifying his/her passion and purpose. Those are more long-term goals and are not helpful to think about during a game. If athletes can stay focused on process goals during competition, then they will be more likely to eventually feel that they achieved their longer-term goals.

Phase 4: Perform

In phase four, athletes get to put all their preparation and deliberate planning into action. They need to come out strong with intensity and adhere to the game plan that has been decided on and practiced.

To be most effective, it is important for coaches to continue to reinforce the concepts and skills they have built up to this point. Make sure your communication with your athletes is specific and challenging, and works to maintain their confidence. Continue to focus on the process of playing, rather than emphasizing the possible outcomes, by giving feedback that is specific and challenging. If a coach's communication is about the process of playing, then that is what they will focus on. The information a coach gives athletes during competition should convey his/her belief in their abilities as well as reinforce the game plan established in training.

Phase 5: Persevere

This final phase involves perseverance and persistence. True competitors are willing to keep fighting and executing the

game plan even in the face of injuries, bad calls by the referees, a lopsided score, and other adversities. They are able to bounce back from setbacks and not lose the belief that they can recover. Even in a losing situation, competitors take such pride in their effort and performance that they are compelled to give their best until the end.

In order to be resilient and bounce back from adversity, an athlete must have optimism. Psychologist Martin Seligman (2006) developed a framework for teaching optimistic thinking called "learned optimism". According to this framework, there are three ways to view problems or setbacks that contribute to optimism. First of all, an optimistic person views setbacks as **temporary**. Obstacles are short-term challenges that will not last long. Secondly, setbacks are viewed as **localized**. This means that the difficulty is limited to only one specific area, such as passing or communication, and therefore does not feel so overwhelming. Finally, optimists view adversity as **changeable**. They feel that with a change of tactic or more effort, the problem can be corrected.

Coaches can reinforce these concepts with their athletes. For example, to reinforce the idea of difficulties being localized, coaches can tell athletes that while they did not shoot well, they did pass and defend well. To reinforce the idea of setbacks being temporary, and to increase their confidence, coaches should remind them of times when they were able to overcome a problem. This would also help communicate the changeable nature of adversity. If coaches encourage them to view obstacles in these three ways, it will help them be more resilient and allow

them to compete more effectively under difficult circumstances.

This five phase approach gives coaches a manageable framework to help teach athletes to be more competitive. So, rather than feeling frustrated that an athlete or team did not compete well, coaches can pinpoint exactly where and why the competitive response did not occur. They can identify which phase is lacking and focus your efforts on the specific skills associated with that phase.

References

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Seligman, M. (2006). *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Life*. New York: Vintage Books.