



## *Ethical Role of Coaches in Preventing Injuries: Balancing Competitive Pressure and Athlete Safety*

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### Abstract

The ethical role of coaches in preventing injuries is a critical area of focus in the field of sports science, as it directly impacts both athlete well-being and performance. This research investigates the delicate balance coaches must strike between fostering competitive drive and ensuring athlete safety. While the pressure to win can often result in high expectations and intense training regimens, this can also increase the risk of physical and psychological injuries. Coaches have an ethical responsibility to prioritize the health and safety of athletes over competitive success and financial gain. This includes providing proper training, medical support, and equipment. "Coaches and trainers play a crucial role in ensuring the safety of athletes in sports". This research examines the ethical dilemmas coaches face in managing athlete training, recovery, and performance demands, and provides a framework for ethical decision-making that supports injury prevention. Through a review of current practices, case studies, and ethical theories, the research emphasizes the importance of education, open communication, and a culture of care in sports settings. Ultimately, the research calls for a more profound understanding of the coach's role in safeguarding athletes, where injury prevention is not only seen as a professional obligation but as an ethical imperative.

**Keywords:** Coach, Ethical roles, Psychological Injuries, Training, Medical equipment



## Introduction

Coaches are expected to conform to ethical standards in several areas; humanity, relationships, commitment, cooperation, integrity, advertising, confidentiality, abuse of privilege, safety and competence. They also play a pivotal role in preventing injuries of the athletes. The ethical responsibility of coaches extends beyond performance enhancement to include the prevention of injuries, which has become a growing concern as the intensity of youth sports continues to rise. "The right coach will be concerned primarily with the well-being, safety, protection and future of the individual performer" (Mackenzie, 2001, para. 1). Coaches attempt to balance competitive pressure and athlete safety. They are the guides who have to work for the safety, well being and protection from major and minor injuries of the athletes. They are responsible for creating discipline, atmosphere of peace and cooperation, mutual understanding and respect and team work. They function as mediators and facilitators. They play a crucial role not only in developing athletes' skills but also in safeguarding their well-being. Porter et al., (1980) maintain that athlete-athlete interactions, team management ties, physician relationships, and other personal relationships may all affect an athlete's performance in a sport; but, the coach-athlete relationship is special and essential.

There is no denying that trainers/Coaches and league are crucial to an athlete's growth. The tight link that develops between coaches and athletes as a result of their shared experiences places a tremendous deal of responsibility on the shoulders of the coach. As a result, the coach and the league must sustain this relationship based on trust and respect. (Ngatia, 2023, para.1)

According to Nack and Yaege (1999), coach controls the athlete's abilities, time, and attention. The motivation and degree of stress of the athlete are both significantly influenced by this connection. However, this is not where the relationship between the coach and the athlete ends. Additionally, they have contractual arrangements where the coach owes significant legal obligations to the athletes (Nack & Yaeger, 1999). While the drive for victory and personal success can create pressure to push athletes to their physical limits, coaches must balance these competitive ambitions with a commitment to athlete safety. This balance, however, is often complicated by factors such as limited resources, inadequate training in sports medicine, and external expectations from parents, schools, and sports organizations.

Athletes can raise their performance levels through training. Athletes' skills can be evaluated in part through competition. However, sports injuries brought on by inappropriate, overloaded practice or erroneous professional motions might disrupt regular workouts and enhance competition outcomes (Javed et al., 2022). The ethical dilemma faced by coaches is whether to prioritize the immediate goal of winning or to uphold their duty of care by ensuring the long-term health and safety of their athletes. Increasing attention has been drawn to the rising incidence of sports-related injuries among young athletes, with some incidents leading to severe, long-term consequences. Consequently, there is a growing call for coaches to adopt a more proactive role in injury prevention, including the integration of appropriate training methods, injury recognition protocols, and mental health support. "Within the limits of their control, coaches are responsible for ensuring the performers' safety with whom they work" (Mackenzie, 2001, para. 1).

This research examines the ethical responsibilities of coaches in preventing injuries,



examining the challenges they face in balancing the competitive pressures with the fundamental obligation to protect athletes' physical and mental health. Through a deeper understanding of this ethical role, the research aims to contribute to the development of strategies that empower coaches to act as advocates for athlete safety while maintaining a competitive edge. There has been growing recognition that factors such as coaches' knowledge and attitudes towards injury prevention may influence athletes' adherence to injury prevention programs. It is therefore essential to examine the role of coaches in both the implementation and compliance with these initiatives. Injuries can have significant psychological impacts, including anxiety and depression. Ethical considerations must address the psychological support offered to injured athletes. Broadening awareness about the risks of injury and recovery can help athletes make informed decisions about their participation in sports.

Sports are the leading source of injury among young people. Recovering from sports injuries is a highly specialized field in the present era, which naturally necessitates the collaboration of sports physiotherapists and physicians (Willwacher et al., 2023). Traditionally, injury prevention in sports has been framed through the sequence of prevention, a four-stage model primarily based on quantitative approaches. While this framework offers valuable insights, it does not adequately account for the complex, non-linear nature of sports-related injuries. Scholars argue that without a deeper understanding of additional factors, such as the attitudes and behaviors of key stakeholders, the effective implementation of injury prevention programs is likely to remain challenging and ineffective. In response, an alternative model, which builds upon the sequence of prevention, has underscored the importance of qualitative research to explore the perspectives of relevant stakeholders. Despite this call, research specifically focusing on coaches' views remains limited. By utilizing qualitative methodologies to explore coaches' attitudes toward injury and injury prevention, richer insights can be gained into the contextual factors that influence injury risk. Such insights could ultimately assist both practitioners and researchers in identifying and addressing key factors that enhance the successful implementation of injury prevention strategies. Navigating the ethical complexities of sports injuries requires a balanced approach that prioritizes athlete safety, informed decision-making, and transparent communication among all stakeholders. Policies and practices should be in place to protect athletes and foster environments that emphasize health and wellness over sheer performance outcomes.

Coaches and trainers have a vital role in ensuring the safety of athletes in sports. Through risk assessments, education, monitoring, providing immediate medical attention, and collaborating with healthcare professionals, they create a safe environment for athletes to thrive and enjoy their sport to the fullest. (Faster Capital, 2024, para, 8)

### Research Hypothesis

1. Coaches who prioritize ethical practices in training and injury prevention significantly lower the rate of sports-related injuries among athletes.
2. A high-pressure focus on competitive success compromises the ability of coaches to implement effective injury prevention measures.
3. Integrating ethical decision-making frameworks into coaching practices improves both athlete safety and overall performance outcomes.



### Research Objectives

1. To analyze the impact of ethical coaching practices on reducing the frequency and severity of injuries in sports.
2. To examine the competitive pressures influence coaches' adherence to safety protocols and ethical guidelines.
3. To enhance the framework that helps coaches balance competitive demands with their ethical responsibility to prevent injuries.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of education and training programs for coaches in promoting ethical decision-making and injury prevention strategies in sports.

### Review of Literature

Coaches play a pivotal role in balancing competitive pressure and athlete safety, particularly in preventing injuries. Their ethical responsibility extends beyond mere performance enhancement to ensuring the well-being of athletes. This involves a complex interplay of legal, moral, and practical considerations. Coaches must navigate these challenges by adopting comprehensive injury prevention strategies, fostering a culture of safety, and maintaining ethical standards in their coaching practices. The following sections delve into these aspects in detail.

Coaches are not legally responsible for injuries inherent to sports but can be held liable if their actions or negligence increase the risk of harm to athletes. They have a legal duty to ensure the safety of athletes, particularly minors, by providing proper training, supervision, and equipment (Mitten, 2018). Breaching this duty may result in legal accountability. Ethical coaching requires recognizing the moral consequences of decisions and prioritizing athlete well-being alongside competitive success. Coaches must balance achieving performance goals with maintaining fairness, respect, and the physical and mental health of their athletes (Jenkins, 2014). Specialized training programs emphasizing muscle strengthening, proprioception, and flexibility are essential for effective injury prevention. Coaches must work closely with health professionals to design and implement structured injury prevention programs. Such collaborations have proven highly effective in reducing injury rates among athletes (Iafrate, 2024).

While many coaches understand the importance of injury prevention, they often lack the confidence and expertise to apply these strategies effectively. Interventions should aim to boost coaches' self-efficacy by enhancing their knowledge and skills in injury prevention practices. Coaches' motivational beliefs, such as risk perceptions and outcome expectancies, influence their adoption of injury prevention practices (McGlashan & Twomey, 2021). Ethical coaching prioritizes virtues like trust and objectivity, focusing on nurturing athletes as well-rounded individuals rather than solely valuing their performance. This approach promotes holistic development and long-term well-being. Coaches must navigate moral ambiguities, especially when coaching youth, ensuring that ethical considerations guide their practices (Hardman & Jones, 2011).

While existing research highlights the ethical responsibilities of coaches and the importance of injury prevention strategies, limited attention has been given to the nuanced conflict between maintaining competitive performance and ensuring athlete safety. Most studies focus on physical training protocols, neglecting the role of coaches' ethical decision-making in high-pressure environments. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive frameworks addressing how coaches can balance competitive demands with the long-term well-being of athletes. This gap underscores the need for





interdisciplinary studies combining ethics, sports science, and coaching practices.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology with an interpretative approach to explore the ethical role of coaches in preventing injuries while balancing competitive pressures. Data collection methods include a comprehensive review of scholarly literature, case studies of documented ethical dilemmas in sports, and semi-structured interviews with coaches, athletes, and sports scientists to gather diverse perspectives and insights. Participants are selected using purposive sampling to ensure their relevance and expertise in the field of sports ethics, coaching practices, and injury prevention. Thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to ethical decision-making and injury prevention strategies. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, are rigorously adhered to throughout the research process. While the study focuses on the ethical dimensions within competitive sports, it acknowledges variations across disciplines and cultural contexts as potential limitations. Quantitative validation of the findings lies beyond the scope of this investigation.

### **Ethical Role of Coaches in Preventing Injuries**

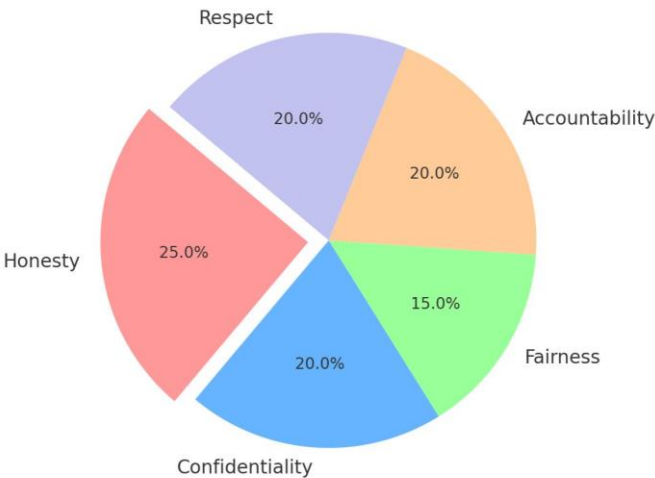
Regardless of the level of athletic competition, coaches are not inherently responsible for ensuring athletes' safety and are not automatically held liable for injuries sustained during sports activities. Simply put, a coach is not legally accountable for an athlete's injury merely because it occurs. By choosing to participate in a sport, athletes voluntarily accept the inherent risks associated with training, conditioning, practices, and competitions. These inherent risks are those naturally associated with the activity and are well-known or obvious, forming part of the normal course of playing the sport. For instance, an eye injury from an accidental elbow during a basketball rebound, a knee injury from a kick while playing soccer, or a broken arm from a football tackle are all examples of risks inherent to these sports. While injuries that are considered inherent risks are generally not the legal responsibility of coaches, liability can arise if a coach's actions or inaction increase these risks. For an athlete to claim damages for an injury, they must demonstrate that the coach acted wrongfully or negligently, leading to the injury. Negligence, in this context, refers to the failure to exercise reasonable care to prevent foreseeable harm. Under this standard, coaches are expected to take appropriate precautions to reduce the likelihood of injuries, particularly severe or life-threatening ones. Coaches have an ethical responsibility to avoid creating unsafe conditions that amplify the inherent risks of a sport and to actively implement measures to safeguard their athletes against serious injuries or fatalities (Mitten, 2018).

### **Distribution of Ethical Practices in Coaching**

Ethical practices serve as the backbone of effective and impactful coaching, ensuring trust, transparency, and professionalism between coaches and their clients. Among the various ethical areas, honesty holds significant importance, comprising approximately 25% of ethical adherence. Coaches must communicate truthfully, avoiding exaggeration or misrepresentation, which ensures clients receive clear guidance and realistic expectations.



Distribution of Ethical Practices in Coaching



Confidentiality, accounting for 20%, is another crucial pillar in coaching ethics. Protecting client information fosters a safe and secure environment where individuals feel free to express their concerns and vulnerabilities without fear of breach. This practice builds trust and strengthens the coaching relationship. Fairness, which makes up 15%, emphasizes the need for equal treatment and impartiality. Coaches are expected to provide unbiased guidance, avoiding favoritism or discrimination based on any personal or professional factors. This ethical approach ensures that every client receives equitable opportunities to grow and succeed. Equally significant, accountability, also comprising 20%, requires coaches to take responsibility for their actions and decisions. Ethical accountability not only ensures integrity but also creates a culture of mutual respect where clients feel supported. Coaches must consistently evaluate their practices to uphold high professional standards. Lastly, respect, which constitutes another 20%, underscores the importance of acknowledging clients’ autonomy, individuality, and unique perspectives. By honoring their values and decisions, coaches empower clients to take ownership of their growth journey. This balanced distribution of ethical principles demonstrates the interconnectedness of these practices in maintaining professionalism and fostering growth. Coaches who adhere to these principles effectively guide clients while setting a strong ethical example. Together, these elements create a comprehensive ethical framework that drives meaningful and lasting development in the coaching process.

Impact of Ethics on Coaching Success



Ethics play a transformative role in determining the success of coaching by fostering trust,



credibility, and long-term effectiveness. A coach's ability to maintain high ethical standards directly influences their professional reputation and the outcomes their clients achieve. Ethical coaching creates a foundation of mutual respect and understanding, which is crucial for building a strong and productive coach-client relationship. One significant aspect of ethics is honesty, which ensures clear communication and realistic goal-setting. Clients are more likely to engage and commit to the process when they know their coach is transparent and trustworthy. Similarly, confidentiality strengthens the bond between coaches and clients by providing a safe space for open dialogue. Clients feel comfortable sharing sensitive information, which is essential for addressing core issues and achieving personal growth.

Adhering to fairness further enhances coaching success by ensuring unbiased treatment. A coach who respects diversity and provides equal opportunities helps clients feel valued and motivated. Additionally, accountability fosters credibility as it demonstrates the coach's commitment to their responsibilities. This ethical practice encourages clients to take ownership of their actions, promoting sustained progress. Another critical factor is respect for the client's autonomy and values. By honoring individual perspectives, ethical coaches empower clients to take charge of their decisions, fostering confidence and independence. The cumulative impact of these principles significantly elevates the quality of coaching, leading to higher success rates. Studies and anecdotal evidence consistently show that ethical adherence enhances client satisfaction and measurable outcomes, such as goal achievement and improved well-being. Conversely, the absence of ethics often results in mistrust and dissatisfaction, limiting progress. In essence, ethics are not just an accessory to coaching but a core element that shapes its effectiveness and sustainability, driving both personal and professional success.

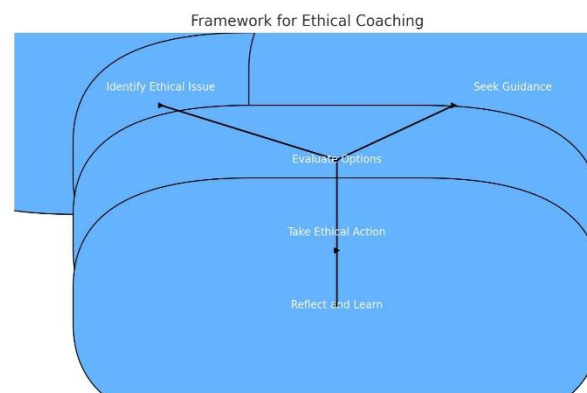
**Framework for Ethical Coaching**

A robust framework for ethical coaching provides guidelines to ensure professional



integrity, build trust, and promote effective outcomes. This framework is structured around core principles and actionable steps that help coaches navigate complex situations while adhering to high ethical standards.

The first step in this framework involves identifying ethical issues. Coaches must remain vigilant and aware of situations where ethical dilemmas might arise, such as conflicts of interest, confidentiality breaches, or unfair treatment. Recognizing these challenges early is crucial to addressing them appropriately. Next, coaches should evaluate their options by weighing the potential outcomes of their decisions. This includes considering the client's best interests, the coach's professional responsibilities, and any relevant organizational or legal obligations. This step ensures that decisions are made thoughtfully and align with ethical principles. When uncertainty persists, seeking guidance from mentors or ethical boards becomes essential. Consulting experienced professionals or referring to established codes of conduct can provide clarity and reinforce the ethical validity of the chosen course of action.



The most critical step is to take ethical action based on the insights gathered. This requires courage and commitment to uphold integrity, even when the situation presents challenges or risks. Coaches must prioritize fairness, respect, and honesty in their decision-making process. Finally, reflecting and learning from each experience is key to personal and professional growth. By analyzing the outcomes and effectiveness of their actions, coaches can refine their ethical approach and better handle future dilemmas. This framework promotes accountability and fairness, ensuring that ethical considerations remain at the heart of every coaching interaction. It provides a structured pathway for coaches to navigate challenges, fostering trust and enhancing their ability to deliver meaningful and sustainable results for their clients.

### Case Studies Present in Literature

A coach's primary duty is to provide players with proper instruction on playing and participating safely in a sport. This responsibility requires the coach to exercise reasonable care to protect athletes from foreseeable harm, thereby avoiding potential negligence claims. In the case of *Vendrell v. School District No. 26C, Malheur County*, a 15-year-old football player who suffered a broken neck during a game alleged that his coaches' negligent training and instruction caused his injury. However, the Oregon Supreme Court ruled that the coaches were not liable, as they had provided adequate, standard instruction and practice. The court emphasized that while it is not possible to eliminate all physical risks inherent in football, a coach's role is to minimize serious harm. In this case, the





coaches implemented measures such as physical conditioning, the use of protective equipment, and detailed instruction on safe techniques for running, tackling, and handling contact during play, ensuring players were prepared to mitigate injuries effectively.

In *Thompson v. Seattle Public School District 47*, a Washington high school football player was awarded damages after suffering injuries due to his coach's negligence. The coach failed to adequately warn the player about the risks associated with lowering his head to fend off tacklers while carrying the football. This action significantly increased the likelihood of serious neck injuries. The case highlights a coach's responsibility to provide proper instruction and warnings to players to minimize risks and ensure their safety.

In *Baker v. Briarcliff School District*, a New York court ruled that a coach's failure to properly warn students about the risks of not wearing a mouthpiece during a girls' high school field hockey practice significantly increased the risk of injury. The court determined that the coach's negligence in not ensuring the athletes used appropriate protective equipment created potential liability when one of the players suffered a mouth injury due to not wearing her mouthpiece. This case emphasizes the coach's legal obligation to ensure athletes are properly equipped and aware of the safety risks associated with their sport.

Coaches are legally obligated to supervise athletes properly and maintain a safe environment during sports activities. In *Stirgis v. St. John the Baptist Parish School Board*, the court emphasized that coaches must provide "reasonable, competent supervision" suited to the age and conditions of the children involved, protecting against unnecessary risks. For instance, a football coach was found negligent when football drills were conducted on a wet gym floor, which could lead to injury. Similarly, in *Vargo v. Svitchan*, a coach was found liable when pushing a student to exert himself beyond his physical limits, resulting in severe injury.

The legal duty of coaches also extends to ensuring the safety and health of their athletes in emergency situations. In *Mogabgab v. Orleans Parish School Board*, two coaches were deemed negligent for failing to seek immediate medical care for a player showing symptoms of heatstroke, ultimately leading to his death. In *Halper v. Vayo*, a coach was found liable for worsening a player's knee injury by improperly attempting to treat it without medical expertise. Additionally, coaches are expected to recognize when a medical emergency requires professional intervention, as highlighted in *Jarreau v. Orleans Parish School Board*, where a coach was found negligent for allowing a player to continue playing despite significant pain from a wrist injury.

However, coaches are not liable in all circumstances. In *Zemke v. Arreola*, the court ruled that a coach was not responsible for a player's brain injury after a head injury was not foreseeable, as the player only appeared to have a dislocated finger. Similarly, in *Cerny v. Cedar Bluffs Junior/Senior Public School*, a coach was found not liable for a subsequent severe brain injury after a player was properly evaluated for a concussion and allowed to return to play. These cases highlight the coach's duty to exercise reasonable care while making decisions about athlete safety, particularly in relation to injuries and emergency care.

### Discussions and Conclusion

The ethical role of coaches in preventing injuries represents a vital intersection of sports science, ethics, and athlete well-being. This research highlights the complex challenges coaches face in balancing competitive pressure with their moral responsibility to ensure the health and safety of their athletes. It is evident that coaches must prioritize the



adoption of injury prevention strategies, including proper training techniques, the use of appropriate protective equipment, and collaboration with medical professionals. These measures can significantly reduce the risk of both acute and long-term injuries among athletes, reinforcing the ethical imperative to safeguard their physical and psychological health.

However, this balance is often disrupted by external pressures, including the demand for competitive success, organizational expectations, and financial incentives. These factors can lead coaches to unintentionally prioritize performance outcomes over the welfare of athletes. The discussion emphasizes the need for a cultural shift in sports environments, promoting the idea that success should not come at the expense of athlete safety. Ethical training practices, transparent communication, and a commitment to athlete-centered coaching are key to fostering a safer and more sustainable approach.

Another critical aspect explored in the research is the legal and ethical accountability of coaches. While athletes inherently accept certain risks associated with sports, coaches are responsible for mitigating foreseeable risks through reasonable care and sound decision-making. The findings also underscore the significance of educating coaches on injury prevention and ethical practices. Enhanced training programs focusing on these aspects can equip coaches with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions that prioritize athlete safety without compromising their competitive edge. The research identifies a gap in the existing frameworks for ethical coaching, calling for more comprehensive models that integrate ethical theories with practical injury prevention strategies. By addressing these gaps, the sports community can empower coaches to navigate ethical dilemmas effectively, ensuring a safer environment for athletes. The discussion reaffirms that injury prevention is not merely a technical or legal responsibility but an ethical mandate. Coaches must lead by example, fostering a culture where athlete safety is paramount and competitive goals are pursued responsibly.

In conclusion, the ethical role of coaches in preventing injuries is a delicate balance between fostering competitive performance and ensuring athlete safety. Coaches have a fundamental responsibility to provide proper training, appropriate supervision, and a safe environment that minimizes the inherent risks associated with sports. While they are not expected to eliminate all risks, they must exercise reasonable care to prevent foreseeable harm. This includes offering appropriate instruction, ensuring the use of protective equipment, and responding promptly to injuries. Furthermore, coaches must recognize their limitations and seek professional medical assistance when necessary. The ethical challenge arises when competitive pressure pushes coaches to prioritize performance over safety, which can lead to negligent actions and severe consequences for athletes. Therefore, coaches must adhere to ethical guidelines and legal standards, ensuring that athlete welfare remains a priority without compromising the integrity of the sport. By maintaining this balance, coaches can contribute to a safer sporting environment while nurturing the development and well-being of athletes.

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