

## Energizer Coaching Tips

### Non-negotiables

The purpose of this article is to establish how coaches may use non-negotiables in the world of sport. It will highlight how coaches may use non-negotiables and how they can be used with athletes. It will also show how they can be used with other people that a coach may come into contact with – such as officials and parents.

#### What is a non-negotiable?

A non-negotiable is not open to discussion. It is a clear rule or belief that should not be broken.

#### Key Point

Ideally, non-negotiables should be used in areas within our control. This will often include a coach/athlete/team's **approach** to their training or competition.

It is very difficult to introduce non-negotiables in areas where we have less control, such as the result in a competition.

Here's a practical example of where a non-negotiable could be effective: a coach stipulates that every member of the team should arrive to a game on time. This is much more achievable than having winning as a non-negotiable. Winning is very outcome focused and can promote a fixed mindset approach. It is far more empowering to use process-focused non-negotiables with the view that this will positively affect an outcome.

#### What are the benefits of using non-negotiables?

- Set clear boundaries for athletes
- Give the athlete responsibility for their behaviour and performance
- Make athletes accountable
- Encourage an athlete to be positive in their approach
- Can help coaches manage large groups safely and effectively

#### Where could non-negotiables be used in sport?

Many clubs and coaches have rules. A non-negotiable is effectively a rule - that is often unwritten. However, with non-negotiables there is no leniency on the part of the coach. If a rule is negotiable, then it is disposable. The breaking of a non-negotiable should have consequences.

#### Behaviour

Example non-negotiable: 'Athletes will not argue with the officials.'

Reason: Aside from running the risk of being disciplined by the officials, time spent arguing is time being spent not performing effectively, which will affect the outcome of a competition.

Consequence: the coach may decide that the athlete will be substituted or suspended from competition if they argue with an official. This will hopefully deter them from making arguing with the officials a habit.

## Performance

Example non-negotiable: 'Athletes will always warm up before activity.'

Reason: The benefits of warming up for activity have long been sighted. In this context we are using it as it is a variable the athlete can control. There is always a risk of injury in any activity. However this risk can be mitigated with an effective warm-up. A coach is likely to be extremely frustrated if an athlete were to get injured and later confess that they did not warm up.

Consequence: If a coach believes a warm-up has not been performed effectively they may repeat the warm-up with the athlete or group of athletes. If this is repeated the coach may stop bring an early end to a training session.

## Learning

When teaching a new skill it is common for learners to make mistakes. Whilst making mistakes should not always be discouraged, a coach could enforce non-negotiables that could benefit the athlete and their learning.

To highlight this we will use a specific sporting example in football where an athlete is learning how to perform a side-foot pass.

Example non-negotiable: 'The athlete must keep their eye on the ball.'

Reason: This is in the athlete's control. They may not make the right contact and the ball may not go where they want to go, but they can make sure they keep their focus on watching the ball as they make contact with it. A coach may reinforce this by advising the athlete that it does not matter where the ball goes, only that they keep their eye on it when making contact. This takes the pressure off of the outcome. Over time the coach should gradually increase the difficulty of the skill with the basic skill of watching the ball deeply ingrained.

Consequence: If an athlete does not obey the non-negotiable, the coach has to make them accountable. This may be halting a training session to make this point. This may create some frustration for the athlete and motivate them not to do it again. The key here is that the coach should not have to keep repeating the non-negotiable. This is a simple command that is in the athlete's control. If they do not follow it, it forces the coach to spend time on areas that the athlete should be able to take responsibility for themselves. What is considered a non-negotiable is at the discretion of the coach.

## Other examples

There are other areas where a coach may want to bring in non-negotiables. When working with younger athletes the coach will often need to have more contact with parents. There may be conversations that a coach will decide should not take place with a parent and therefore should be a non-negotiable. An example might be in selecting a team. A coach may decide that it is inappropriate for them to talk about team selections with a parent. This means that if a situation were to arise whereby a parent questioned team selection, the coach could site this as a non-negotiable and comfortably abstain from engaging in the conversation. Which brings us to an important point...

### Set the non-negotiables in advance

It is important that the non-negotiables are set in **advance** of training, competition or an event. That way, athletes, parents and anyone else connected to the coach will be aware of where the boundaries are. Ideally, the athletes themselves will be part of the process of setting non-negotiables. This gives the athlete even more responsibility to make sure they are not disposed of.

### What happens if an athlete breaks a non-negotiable?

Any consequence has to provide enough of a stimulus for an athlete to want to make a change. The severity of the consequences will depend on the context of each situation.

If a non-negotiable is broken when learning a new skill, it may be enough to halt the session and highlight the error. That way, the individual or athlete are made aware that this will not be accepted.

A behavioural non-negotiable that is broken may have more serious implications. The coach must be aware that any behavioural issues will have an effect on those around them. Repeatedly breaking behavioural non-negotiables could lead to a drop in standards.

Some clubs and coaches enforce a 'three strike' rule that limits an athlete to three indiscretions before they may be suspended from training. In extreme circumstances the athlete may have to leave the club. The idea here is not to instil fear, but to create clear boundaries that will help the athlete(s) perform better.

### Conclusion

Using non-negotiables can be an effective way of developing a culture that makes athletes accountable for their actions. They can draw a line in the sand for what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Non-negotiables should ideally be framed positively (do, as opposed to do not) and within an athletes control.