

35 Secrets of Brilliant Coaches

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"He's 'just' a coach."

"She's 'just' a teacher."

These are two sentences that make my blood pressure spike to the point that I get a little dizzy.

Managing approximately 70 gymnastics professionals, all of whom are teacher-coaches, I am acutely aware of the amount of training and education that these dedicated pros undergo to instruct their young athletes. The technical knowledge of the skills in combination with understanding the progressions necessary to achieve the elements safely and the rules and regulations that govern the various competitive levels fills volumes of books, hundreds of DVDs and dozens of trainings and conferences.

But that is only part of the picture.

While superior knowledge of the sport is a cornerstone of a brilliant coach, it takes so much more than content and procedural knowledge to be a brilliant coach or teacher. Simply because a person has great knowledge of the sport and a fabulous win-loss record, does not mean they are a brilliant coach.

Brilliant coaches...

- 1. Cherish the child over the athlete.** Brilliant coaches know that being an athlete is just a small part of being a child. Brilliant coaches never do anything to advance the athlete at the risk of the child.
- 2. Treat their, and all other, athletes with respect.** Brilliant coaches treat all of the kids in the gym, on the field, court etc. with total respect. No matter what.
- 3. Communicate with parents.** Brilliant coaches understand that parents are not the enemy and, in fact, are an important ally in the development of the athlete.
- 4. Listen to their athletes concerns.** Brilliant coaches don't tune out athletes worries, fears or mentions of injury.
- 5. Connect before they direct.** Brilliant coaches understand the importance of emotional connection. You matter. You belong. You are important to me. Not you the athlete; rather, you the person. Our most fundamental need is safety. When we feel safe we can trust and when we trust we can learn. Brilliant coaches know that this foundation of trust is essential.
- 6. Begin with the end in mind.** Brilliant coaches keep their focus on the big picture of the goal of the athlete. They have a plan, but are flexible as they are aware the road to success is filled with twists and turns.

7. Are obsessive about fundamentals. Brilliant coaches understand the value of fundamentals as the core of all skills. The stronger the core, the more successful the athlete. Legendary basketball coach John Wooden would spend his first practice with his players instructing them how to put on socks. Correct wearing of socks prevents blisters, and feet absent of blisters can attend basketball practice.

8. Break skills into chunks. Brilliant coaches don't simply teach a cartwheel. They break that cartwheel into several key sub-skills and instruct on those skills first before putting them together to perform the cartwheel. Brilliant coaches know that by isolating the individual elements that are woven together to achieve the skill athletes will succeed faster.

9. Embrace athletes' struggle. Brilliant coaches understand that learning is a curve. Like muscle needs to break down before building up, athletes need to struggle to push forward. A brilliant coach doesn't panic when this struggle happens.

10. Make the boring interesting. Brilliant coaches connect the tedious to the goal and make games out of those things that can be counted. They issue challenges and create missions. The goal is to make these dull, but necessary moments more engaging.

11. State corrections in the positive. Brilliant coaches say "do this" not "don't do this." Don't bend your arms is less effective feedback than "push your arms straight."

12. Find the bright spots and build from there. Brilliant coaches are aware of weaknesses and try to improve them to meet minimal standard but spend much more focus on the areas that an athlete excels. Trying to turn a strong pitcher into a better batter is less effective than trying to make him better at his curve ball.

13. Don't try to break bad habits; rather, they build new habits. Brilliant coaches know that the most effective way to break a bad feedback loop is to replace one habit for another.

14. Give feedback in short, clear spurts that are precise and action oriented. No long speeches. John Wooden was once followed for a whole season so his motivational techniques could be studied. Wooden's average "speech" was four sentences. Furthermore, brilliant coaches do not engage in observational coaching. ("Get your arms up." Up where? "Your knees are bent." Tell me how to fix that.) Concrete feedback ("Your arms need to be right behind your ears." And "Squeeze this muscle and this muscle in your leg to make it straight.") is given instead.

15. Are careful about how they measure success. Brilliant coaches do not use scores or win-loss records as their sole measure of success. Brilliant coaches understand that doing so can erode the long term development of the athlete. Brilliant coaches instead develop competencies for the long run, even if that means sacrificing success at the beginning of journey. If you had to choose, would you rather have your child be the strongest student in the first grade or in the twelfth grade?

16. **Use the right mixture of attainable and reach goals.** Brilliant coaches have zoned in on the sweet spot of challenge.
17. **Keep momentum moving forward.** Brilliant coaches understand that objects in motion stay in motion, so there is not a lot of waiting around time in practice.
18. **Constantly are seeking continuing education.** Brilliant coaches never believe they know it all or that they cannot improve themselves. Quite the opposite. Brilliant coaches read journals, articles, books and scour the internet for training ideas. They attend professional workshops and seek mentorships from other coaches.
19. **Create, instead of finding, talent.** Brilliant coaches appreciate natural aptitude but know that it can only take an athlete so far. Furthermore, brilliant coaches are humble enough to admit that they are not perfect at predicting success, so they just get in there and work. Finally, brilliant coaches concede that extraordinary talent is not a fair assessment of their value as a coach; rather, they measure their coaching efficacy by taking an athlete who is less gifted and helping that athlete succeed.
20. **Observe intently.** Brilliant coaches are always trying to figure out what makes people tick so they can better reach them.
21. **Understand interpersonal relationships of the team are important.** Team building and bonding is not a waste of time but an essential element for success.
22. **Use imagery in coaching.** Brilliant coaches paint pictures in the athletes' minds. "Jump as high as you can," becomes "Push the floor away from you like a rocket blasting into space and reach that rocket to the stars."
23. **Separate learning from practice.** Brilliant coaches understand that practice begins after the athletes learn. As a result, they do not have athlete "practicing" something they have not yet learned so as to avoid creating bad habits. Learning takes place with close observation and direct instruction.
24. **Focus the athlete on what to do, not what to avoid.** Brilliant coaches tell their athletes things like "Shoulders squared and body tight" versus saying "Don't fall."
25. **Focus on the multiple ways of learning.** Brilliant coaches use auditory, visual and kinesthetic modes of teaching each skill, acknowledging that people learn differently.
26. **Understand child development.** Brilliant coaches have a working knowledge of the milestones of childhood and tailor their actions and expectations to meet the athletes where they are.
27. **End practice before athlete is exhausted.** Brilliant coaches know that bad habits and short cuts ensue when athletes are drained.
28. **Give plenty of time for new skills to develop.** Brilliant coaches allow at least eight weeks for athletes to learn a new skill. As the athlete progresses in the

sport that time frame will actually get longer, not shorter, as the skills are increasingly complex.

29. Use positive coaching techniques. Brilliant coaches do not yell, belittle, threaten or intimidate. They do not need to bully to get results. While short term success may occur under such pressure filled environments, a brilliant coach knows that in the long run these techniques will backfire and are dangerous to the development of the child.

30. Have a growth mindset. Brilliant coaches believe that our basic skills can be developed through dedication and hard work. They reinforce this with their athletes over and over so their athletes feel motivated and are productive.

31. Know what they don't know. Brilliant coaches are not afraid to admit that they don't have all the answers. They do not allow their ego to prevent them from getting additional help, training or even suggesting to an athlete's family that the athlete needs to move to a more experienced coach.

32. Educate their athletes. Brilliant coaches go beyond instructing their athletes, instead educating them in an age-appropriate way regarding the purpose of and objective of various drills, skill sequences and conditioning circuits.

33. Have clear rules and logical consequences. Brilliant coaches do not keep their athletes guessing with respect to the standards of conduct or the result that can be expected for breaches of those standards. Rules are applied justly without shame to all athletes, including the stars.

34. Understand that fun is an essential element in training, no matter how elite an athlete becomes. The number one reason that athletes quit sports, even sports that they love and in which they are succeeding, is because they are no longer having fun. Fun is not a frivolous sentiment but is the foundation of an athlete's healthy commitment to a sport.

35. End practice on a positive note. Brilliant coaches always find a way to seek the positive at the end of even the most awful workout. Even if it is as simple as "Tomorrow is a new day," brilliant coaches know that both success and failure are temporary states.

It is clear that content knowledge is just the beginning of what makes a brilliant coach (or teacher). Yet, absent these other qualities, all of the knowledge in the world does not make a smart or effective coach brilliant.

What do you think? What are other characteristics of brilliant coaching?

If you found this post to be helpful, please consider tweeting, emailing, sharing on other social media or forwarding it to the brilliant coaches and teachers in your children's lives. It will mean the world to them.