

## YOU AND THE LAW

# New Coach Obligations for Student-Athletes and Personal Safety

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### Abstract

*A new athletic coach must ensure they are knowledgeable of many things beyond teaching student-athletes how to play a specific sport. This is necessary to protect themselves and the student-athletes under their supervision. This article overviews four common areas with which new coaches must ensure familiarity: provision of a safe environment, proper supervision, quality general safety, and appropriate documentation.*

### Introduction

As an individual new to coaching or an agency, a coach may find themselves in a situation that puts them at risk simply due to a lack of quality communication by their new employer, which can be further complicated by a hesitancy to ask questions as a new employee. This communication breakdown can be further complicated by agency leadership, which assumes that the new coach possesses knowledge that has not yet been acquired or that previous coaching expectations differ from those of the current agency. To protect themselves, it becomes a coach's responsibility to ensure they reach out to their

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athletic director (AD) to ensure they have been fully informed during pre-season meetings and training. This is especially important when “training” has been minimal.

This is not to infer that a coach is responsible for risks that are inherent to the game, such as a twisted ankle occurring during a volleyball game when landing on another player’s foot or a concussion that occurs during a football scrimmage. Potential coach liability occurs when the coach’s action or inaction increases the injury risks associated with a particular sport. When alleging coach liability, a student-athlete must prove wrongful action (or inaction) by the coach causing the injury to recover damages. Injured student-athletes typically seek damages due to negligence on behalf of the coach, and negligence is typically defined as a failure to use reasonable care, resulting in damage or injury to another. As a result, coaches and other athletic staff must ensure necessary steps are taken to mitigate or prevent injury from occurring. This is especially true of situations resulting in permanent (death) or otherwise serious injury to the student-athlete. In addition to the legally reasonable standard of care, a coach has an ethical obligation to provide a safe environment and ensure proper steps are taken to protect their athletes (Mitten, 2012).

New coaches must ensure familiarity in four common areas: 1) provision of a safe environment, 2) proper supervision, 3) quality general safety, and 4) appropriate documentation. This risk mitigation information is not meant to replace legal counsel and specific variations and expectations may exist within school districts and/or programs.

### **Safe Environment**

Before the first practice even begins, a coach is responsible for ensuring student-athletes are provided a safe place to practice and compete. Responsibility includes ensuring both the facility and the equipment provided are safe before each practice/competition occurs. Any concerns must be mitigated before activity initiation. In addition, weather can also be a factor for many sporting events and requires written policies for addressing threatening weather situations, including, but not limited to, heat/cold extremes, lightning, standing water on the field, etc. Policies should identify proper responses to weather issues, as well as who is responsible for making

any judgment calls. Whenever activity occurs in high-heat situations, the coaching staff must ensure student-athletes performing without air-conditioning are provided additional breaks and access to liquids throughout practice/competition.

Concerning any required protective equipment, all coaching staff must reinforce the necessity of utilizing protective safety equipment properly, and the warnings must be repeated throughout the season. Equipment should be properly fitted to the athlete's physique to ensure correct functionality. In addition to verbal communication and enforcement of use, warnings regarding improper use should be discussed later in the documentation process (Armstrong & Stevenson, 2023).

## **Supervision**

Supervising student-athletes and all assistant coaching staff is necessary. Regarding student-athletes, general supervision begins before the practice is scheduled to begin and can extend beyond the end of the scheduled practice period. With younger student-athletes, the necessity to supervise after practice can continue until parents or other responsible parties collect their student-athletes. Supervision may also extend beyond the immediate practice area (gym floor, field, pool, etc.) to include locker rooms, bus rides, parking lots, etc.

Supervising the assistant coaching staff is also the responsibility of the head coach. In many situations, the head coach may have full authority to hire their assistants. As a result, athletic directors must ensure that head coaches are doing so while following all school/district HR hiring procedures. Additionally, head coaches may be responsible for much of the assistants' training. Ultimately, the head coach will need to ensure that their coaching staff members are all reinforcing the same skills, behaviors, and expectations.

Every agency must have an established practice for notification of any unusual behavior or suspected injury. This information should be communicated through proper channels to the appropriate individual(s), including the head coach, athletic training staff, AD, and the student-athlete caregiver. All coaches must be aware of the expectation to pass along any incident they witness or hear to the AD (Mitten, 2012).

## **General Safety**

The head coach may be responsible for collecting required physicals or, at a minimum, for ensuring that any without a physical or other required paperwork on file is restricted from activity. The head coach is also responsible for assessing whether student-athletes are in condition for the level of activity they will be exposed to before the first practice. This also applies to student-athletes who are returning post-injury.

When the athletic training staff is absent, it should be clear who can make injury decisions. It is extremely important to recognize the difference between evaluating an injury for first aid purposes and diagnosis. Coaching staff should never overextend themselves beyond their training/certification or overrule any medical professional's decision. When coaching younger players, deferral to caregivers to take the injured child to seek professional care is recommended.

All coaching staff should possess basic first aid and CPR certifications, know the location, and have access to AEDs. Documentation of coaching staff certifications should be maintained on file with the AD and revisited annually. Concussion policies and protocols need to be established and well disseminated. The coach is responsible for ensuring processes are followed when an athlete is assumed to have a concussion.

In the event of an emergency, all coaches should be very familiar with the response plan. This becomes especially important when a team may be distributed throughout a building or other playing area (i.e., players scrimmaging while others are weight training). To best reinforce expectations for emergencies, practice drills should occur. It is vital to document who was there, when it occurred, and what was practiced, and record with the AD (Armstrong & Stevenson, 2023; Sawyer, 2019; Sport Coaching Legal and Compliance, 2024).

## **Documentation**

A coach assuming they can walk into practice and “wing it” is not safe for the student-athletes, the coach, or the agency. Detailed practice plans should be developed and retained in the event a student-athlete is injured and later litigates. These plans must be detailed to include skills addressed, drills run, who was supervising, time, date, and location. Establishing a team handbook can also be essential and

useful when communicating expectations to players and student-athlete families/caregivers. With the easy availability of technology, film recordings of instruction can also serve as documentation in the event of litigation (Armstrong & Stevenson, 2023).

In addition to documentation of what is expected and communication of the expectations, it is also necessary to ensure that student-athletes and caregivers are warned of the potential risks that are inherent to the activity. The handbook plays a major role in this effort, including liability waiver forms to be signed by the player and/or caregiver, as well as warning posters in the locker rooms and practice areas. Furthermore, Sawyer (2019) indicates that conducting beginning-of-the-year meetings, documenting who was there, when and where it was conducted, and reviewing these documents will reinforce expectations as well as answer questions individuals might have.

## Conclusion

A new athletic coach must ensure they know many things beyond teaching student-athletes how to play a specific sport to protect their student-athletes, themselves, and the overseeing agency. Four common areas to mitigate safety issues include providing a safe environment, proper supervision, quality general safety, and appropriate documentation. Further, additional risk management considerations consist of coaches participating in regular coaching education opportunities and professional development to maintain knowledge of skills and risk management techniques and learn from their professional organizations' standards and rule changes as they change over time (Sawyer, 2019).

## References

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