

## **SHEET 1. Coaching Mastery:** **A Guide for Parents, Fellow Coaches, and Support Staff**

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You might be in the car on the way home, in the locker room, or on the side of the playing field. You might be a parent or a coach, or in any other role in the team.

Things might have gone well, or not well. You have a moment to be helpful. Here are some guidelines:

### **The Philosophy**

- Sport is important, but life as a whole is more important.
- People first, athletes second.
- Fun, first, and foremost.
- Connect first.
- Advice without connection can be harmful.

### **Mistakes and Getting Better**

- When athletes feel upset or frustrated, give them time and support to recover.
- Learning happens best when they feel connected and calm.
- Making mistakes is how people learn.
- Trust them to learn from mistakes.
- What the athlete notices from a mistake is more important than what you notice.

### **Motivational Interviewing**

- Be in the right mindset to speak to an athlete.
- Connect and empathize with how athletes feel.
- Ask them before telling them.
- Notice and highlight strengths.
- Listen while they tell you why and how they might improve.
- Summarize the positive things they tell you.
- Ask them what the next step might be and what a good plan might look like.

### **Skillful Coaching**

- Coaching is a skill set.
- It takes time, courage, and humility to be a good coach.
- You never arrive at destination “good coach.” The journey never ends.
- Enjoyment and connecting are infectious and lead to happier outcomes.

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## **SHEET 2. Relationships: The Foundation of Masterful Coaching**

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Good relationships in sports don't just happen but are worked on and built up, and if they are undermined, they can be repaired. They do not cost any money, athletes thrive on them, and they correlate with well-being, higher motivation, better teamwork, and improved performance. Poor relationships demotivate athletes and can spread into the culture of a team like a virus.

### **Develop Trust**

It is possible to work on building trust. Distrust brings the worst out of athletes. It makes it harder to motivate them, undermines self-confidence, and affects performance. Developing trust is not about being weak, soft, or losing control of decisions.

- Be *reliable*—follow through on decisions.
- Be *consistent, caring, and honest*.
- Be *transparent*—avoid talking about athletes behind their backs.
- Develop practice routines that focus on player cooperation.
- Communicate—show interest in them as people, in their lives outside of sports.
- Listen to their concerns.
- Address problems by being clear and compassionate at the same time.

### **Show Respect**

It's only by showing respect yourself that you earn it. Its absence undermines relationships and good progress, and can cross over into bullying, abuse, and harassment.

- Highlight respect as a core principle.
- Provide examples of what respect is, and what it isn't.
- Model respect for others in all you do and say.
- A key practice for modeling respect: listen.

### **Encourage Enjoyment**

It will be easier to win when you and your players enjoy their sport.

- Look after your own well-being. Search for opportunities to enjoy yourself.
- Look for opportunities for players to have fun.
- Ask players for ideas for building fun into practice routines.

### **Express Empathy**

This is a skill and the most direct route to building relationships, improving trust, and showing respect for athletes. It's a skill where you listen to athletes and tell them what your understanding is of what they are saying and experiencing.

- Before talking to athletes, imagine what they might be feeling and why.
- Ask them open questions about the issue, regardless of the subject.
- Convey your understanding through using listening statements and summaries.

### **Motivational Interviewing**

MI uses a good relationship to help athletes to motivate themselves and make plans that make sense to them and you.

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## SHEET 3. Empathy: Becoming a Better Coach

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Empathy is a talent we can develop through intentional practice, much like athletic ability. As you get better at empathizing, it not only affects the athlete and your conversations; it changes you.

### What Empathy Isn't

Empathy isn't being friendly or kind or solving problems for athletes. It also isn't "feeling sorry" for athletes or pitying them.

### What Is Empathy?

Empathy is standing in someone else's shoes, imagining their experience. You get to see how they see things, all the better for helping them to find the next step. You say something that shows them you are connected (empathy goes beyond something you feel).

### What Are Empathic Listening Statements?

A technique for conveying empathy is empathic listening statements; you say something that captures their experience—a statement, not a question. They recognize that you are "with them," that you care and understand how they are feeling. This allows you to build powerful connections over time.

### MI and Empathic Listening

In MI, you ask about improvement and use listening statements to help athletes dig deeper, resolve uncertainty, and firm up their plans.

### Why Empathize?

Teachers with better empathy skills have students with higher grades. More empathic counselors have clients with better outcomes. Increasing your natural talent for empathy can make you a better coach, improve your life away from sports, and lead to better sporting outcomes.

### The Technique

Listen in order to capture the meaning of what someone is saying. Then, give that meaning back to them in a statement. It might feel awkward and pointless at first, but the payoff comes just as surely. Here's how it looks:

ATHLETE: I'm fed up with my progress. I'm getting nowhere fast.

COACH: *You are not happy about this.*

ATHLETE: Say that again.

COACH: *Something's not right with your technique.*

ATHLETE: I think I need to. . . .

### Conclusion

Practicing empathy is an essential counterbalance to the fixing skills that we use all the time in coaching. Using empathy does not oblige you to give up your passion for excellence. It also does not mean you must change your personality. Empathy will indicate you consider your athletes' perspectives to be valid, and thus give a "green light" to them to express whatever they are feeling. It also shows you are willing to listen and can respond without pushing. If you eventually decide to give advice (fix), athletes will be more open to your ideas once you have connected with them.

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## **SHEET 4. Overview of Motivational Interviewing**

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### **What Is MI?**

Think of it as a coaching style, comprising communication tools and strategies for drawing out athletes' internal motivation for doing better, whether as individuals or in a team.

### **Main Message**

Telling, commanding, and instructing, used exclusively, can lead to pushback, or even undermine athletes' enthusiasm. MI provides tools for engaging better and helping athletes to motivate themselves to address challenges and reach their potential.

### **History**

New in sports, MI developed in behavioral science as a method for lifting motivation and encouraging behavior change.

### **The Coach's Attitude**

Coaches use a mindset shift, from fixing to guiding—"I have ideas to offer you, but I am curious about how you see yourself improving." Trust and mutual respect are the foundation for this shift and for using MI.

### **The Method**

The method consists of a defined set of communication skills, such as curious open questions, listening statements, affirmations, and summaries. These are used to draw out athletes' ideas about how they might improve on and off the field. The more coaches use these skills, the better the athletes' performance, self-confidence, social skills, and your relationship with them will be.

### **Focus on Language**

As athletes talk about change, they use language that lifts their motivation. Your job is to notice this and encourage it.

### **Highlights**

- You can connect skillfully and rapidly in most conversations.
- Structured strategies for lifting motivation can be learned and practiced.
- Advice or feedback can be delivered with listening at its center.
- Pausing and listening are powerful responses to argument, disappointment, or difficult behavior.
- Affirmation is a powerful alternative to praise.

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## SHEET 5. MI Mindset

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### What Is an MI Mindset?

In sports we are programmed and trained to fix. We teach, advise, and correct. *Fixing* is a critical style needed by coaches, managers, and all involved with fitness, performance, diet, and well-being. A second style needed for coaching mastery is *following*, where you listen well and demonstrate empathy or understanding. Then a third style is *guiding*, on which the MI mindset is based: You actively and purposefully guide athletes to offer up what's important to them in their development. Having these three “speeds” requires practicing shifting from one to the other in conversations with athletes individually or in groups.

### Main Message

All humans have a “righting reflex,” a tendency to immediately jump in and correct something we see as wrong. There is wisdom in holding the righting reflex in check, “staying cool,” and using the following and guiding styles from your toolbox.

### The Coach's Attitude

One motto for MI in sports is “I guide, you decide.” Making a decision to use a guiding style is the first step, but being an excellent guide takes practice. Learning skills that help you to be centered and relaxed in each conversation helps you to have better access to your MI skills, in the same way that a focused and prepared athlete will have better ability to perform.

### The MI Mindset: Getting Better at Guiding

*Breathe.* Regulating your heart rate by breathing slowly for 1 minute (4 seconds in through your nose, 4 seconds out through your mouth) can help keep you to keep calm as a coach or athlete in sports and other settings. Take a couple deep breaths before you have an important conversation to help slow yourself down.

*Self-Coach.* Before a conversation that you know will be tense, remind yourself and the player of the purpose of the conversation—for example: “I want to start by simply listening to this player during the next few minutes,” or “Jimmy, I would just like to take a few minutes to understand your perspective. How would you feel about that?” This commitment to yourself and to the player may help a great deal in staying focused and resisting the righting reflex.

*Catch Yourself Fixing.* It's never too late to turn your conversation around. At any point you notice your focus weakening, you can apologize to athletes and remind them (and yourself) of your hopes for finding what might be helpful to them—for example: “Hold on a second, Maria. I'm sorry—I got a little carried away there. It's just that I'm really passionate about helping you be at your best. Please tell me your point of view on this.”

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## SHEET 6. Learning MI

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Once you have grasped the basics of MI, sort out for yourself where it fits into your development.

### The Basics

Learning MI often starts with observing rather than stepping in, taking time to wonder about what will motivate an athlete. When you notice athletes not responding to your efforts, could you draw solutions and inspiration from them? Consider these routes to progress:

- Focus on those three communication styles (fixing, guiding, and following), and practice shifting among them.
- Catch yourself before acting on the *righting reflex*, and practice asking searching, open questions that you don't necessarily know the answer to.
- Practice using a guiding style with questions about improvement. Then produce listening statements by imagining athletes' experience and offering your listening statements back to them. Other skills from the toolbox (like summarizing and affirmation) soon become familiar means to move the conversation forward.

### What's Your Priority?

Learning MI requires that you step back and observe yourself and the athlete in conversation. From that position of observing, you can then take whatever MI strategy makes sense to you and practice using it—for example:

- *If you are or want to be a good listener*, explore using listening statements efficiently, along with purposeful guiding questions. Summaries will help you to move on in a conversation and not meander.
- *If fixing is a harder habit to break than you expected*, just stepping back will reap rewards, and all the skills of MI are open to you.
- *If you enjoy the technical side*, you should notice immediate improvement when you use the “ask–offer–ask” strategy for providing advice and feedback.
- *If you tend to be a bit too serious*, remember that you don't have to solve every problem. Good guides also enjoy what they are doing, and they let the athletes do most of the work!

### Practice

You learn MI the same way an athlete learns new skills. What's your next goal for improvement? Which athlete can you try things out with? Who will help you to improve your skills? Use MI with everyday coaching challenges. Jump in and try these skills. In the end, it's down to enjoying practice out there with athletes themselves.

## SHEET 7. Useful Questions

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Questions are a great way to get the best out of athletes, particularly if you invite them to search for answers with a guiding style and questions that are “open” rather than “closed.” You might or might not know the answer yourself, but this is not so important—it’s what the athlete uncovers that’s important.

Use questions along with other skills, such as listening and summarizing. Notice evidence of strengths as they talk, and use affirmations to highlight these. Open, thoughtful questions can help you deepen your connection with athletes and can also be more focused on improvement.

### To Connect

Curiosity is your number 1 starting point.

- How did you manage to hit that ball so hard?
- What happened for you out there?
- How is your game going at the moment?
- How are you today?
- What’s it been like in practice today?

Ideally, use listening statements immediately after the athlete responds, and if you get a bit stuck, summarize and move on to another question.

### To Address Improvement

When using MI, questions are forward-looking and designed to focus on improvement and change. The answers to them will be change talk, things that athletes say that help them to motivate themselves.

### Behavior Problem

“How do you see yourself dealing with this better in the future?”

“What are the benefits to you of handling this more constructively?”

“You are late for practice again today. What can you do to improve next time?”

### Motivation

“What’s going to help you get fired up today?”

“How do you see the benefits of moving to your new position?”

“How important is it for you to have an overpowering serve?”

“How confident do you feel about covering their left wing?”

### Goal Setting

“What’s holding you back?”

“What goal do you want to aim for?”

“Why is this goal important to you?”

“What will help you to be your best?”

“What’s the best way for you to reach this goal?”

“How committed are you to this plan?”

“What’s helped you in the past?”

“What’s the first step you could take?”

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## SHEET 8. Listening: Getting the Basics Right

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MI involves using the skill of listening in a purposeful way when talking about improvement. To do this, it's important to get the basics right.

Listening reinforces your respect for the athlete's own wisdom, and your care for the athlete as a person. It entails hearing what is said and then responding in a way that demonstrates you are present (not distracted by other thoughts or pressures) and that you care. As is often the case, clearing your mind and following your curiosity will set you up to listen well.

An example: The day before a big competition, one of your top athletes says, "Can you sit down, because I have some really bad news." Your mind is immediately clear and receptive, and you are curious about what's going to be said. Connecting involves curiosity and only one focus: the athlete's experience or concern.

*Hear what is being said:* "Yesterday I was told that my brother's been taken to the hospital, and he's really close to me. They say he collapsed and had a heart attack, at 19 years old, and now he's in intensive care and two hundred miles away. He's alone, and maybe I need to go and see him, so now what?" Imagine her brother lying in a bed in an ICU.

*Summarize it in your own mind:* Read what the athlete in our example said; then turn your head away from this page and summarize for yourself what you have heard. Keep it brief. Here's our suggestion: "You've had quite a shock, and you are not sure what to do."

*Say your summary back to the athlete:* "You've had quite a shock, and you are not sure what to do." That's a listening statement. She will feel that you understand and quite naturally will want to say more.

*Don't jump in:* Stay quiet, pause, and even take a breath, because your statement is an invitation to her to speak more. Notice her reaction.

*Being precise is not the goal:* If you are genuinely curious and you don't get it quite right, the athlete will correct you—and if she doesn't, just ask her to. Your listening statement needs to be somewhere in the ballpark of correct, but it doesn't have to be a direct hit. As long as the athlete knows you are listening, you can expect the conversation to proceed productively.

*Simple statements:* Some listening statements say more or less what the athlete has said ("Your brother is alone and not well, and you want to see him").

*Complex statements:* Some listening statements are more complex, adding new meaning that you hope is accurate. They might speak to an underlying meaning or feeling that the athlete left unsaid ("You are not sure you can make the competition tomorrow").

*Double-sided statements:* Your statement might also capture both sides of a conflict or dilemma ("You might want to do the competition, but you need to see your brother").

*Statements that focus on emotions:* Or you might comment on the athlete's feelings ("You are really upset about him").

*Questions and listening statements working together:* If you start with a curious question, try to follow it with two to three listening statements. As you confirm the athlete's experience with the statements, the connection between you strengthens.



## SHEET 9. Summaries

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A summary is a striking opportunity to highlight both the strengths of the athlete and whatever has been said about change. Giving a summary can go wrong if you focus only on problems or deficiencies. Here are three brief summaries offered to an athlete, a hurdler, who has asked his coach for help with his form. They all involve accurate feedback, but notice the differences among them.

### Summary of Deficits

“If I can just summarize, OK? [Pause.] You are struggling with your form, and you don’t quite know why this is. Maybe your right arm is not quite right at that first jump. Or maybe you don’t raise it quickly enough. You head out there and tend to overthink things and slip out of that zone, and you don’t know how to get back into it.”

*Accurate:* Yes.

*Focus on a person with strengths:* No. It’s about an athlete with deficits.

*Focus on change:* No.

### Summary of Strengths

“If I can just summarize, OK? [Pause and wait for athlete to indicate he is open to hearing the summary.] You’ve got your life outside of athletics in good balance right now. You have been determined to improve your times, and yet you are struggling to get back into that zone you know so well. You have worked hard at trying to figure out what’s going on with that right arm.”

*Accurate:* Yes.

*Focus on a person with strengths:* Yes.

*Focus on change:* No.

### Summary of Strengths, Using MI

“If I can just summarize, OK? [Pause.] How to get back into that zone is not easy for you, yet it’s something you are determined to deal with. It’s a question of how. You don’t want to overthink it all right now. You think there might be a way to change your right arm as you approach the first hurdle. You are going to try this out this afternoon.”

*Accurate:* Yes.

*Focus on a person with strengths:* Yes.

*Focus on change:* Yes.

The first summary focused on problems. The second was focused on a person with strengths, contained a number of affirmations, and carried the potential to lift morale. Only the third, though, was consistent with MI—because it had forward momentum and effectively summarized the change talk that was heard. This last one is most likely to lift motivation and affect behavior change.

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## SHEET 10. Teamwork 1: Improving Social Skills

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The first step in building teamwork is to help athletes improve their social skills. As they do this, they develop respect for each other, and teamwork improves. In short, you want the players to improve their skills at saying what they think and feel, listening to others, avoiding blaming others, interrupting less, and allowing quieter athletes to talk. Here's a quick sketch of how to do this.

**Aim:** *Open discussion* in which players say what they think and feel, free of fear.

**Scenarios:** Informal conversations and group meetings.

**Getting started:** The discussion can focus on any subject that they all have a view about. It could be personal or linked to sports. Help them to use the skills when talking about simple topics to begin with. When you feel more confident, try guiding them through using these skills in a discussion when strong feelings are around, such as after losing a competition or game.

**Doing it right:** You may need to kick off these group conversations at first. But keep the discussion among the players. Think of it as if you are tossing a balloon into the group with an open question, then stepping back as they toss the balloon around among themselves.

### Guidelines to Be Shared with Athletes

- Respect for each other is essential.
- Speak for yourself and about how you feel, rather than about others.
- Listen rather than interrupt.
- Feel free to say nothing.
- Give space to the quieter ones to speak as well.
- Commit yourself to working on the issue as a team, together.

### Coach Conduct

- Gently but firmly reiterate guidelines.
- Ask a positive, open question about something they have in common.
- Avoid interrupting, passing judgment, or solving problems.
- Use listening statements; capture what's been said and then hand the baton straight back to them to say more.
- If all goes quiet, consider questions like "What else?" or "What do others feel?"
- Summarize before moving on.

### Traps

- Avoid back-and-forth conversations between you and individual athletes.
- Don't give advice or solve problems (yet!).

## SHEET 11. Teamwork 2: Making Decisions as a Unit

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Once you have guided your players in sharpening their basic social skills, in the second step to improving teamwork, you can now help them focus on making decisions together.

**Aim:** Help a group to make decisions together.

**Scenarios:** Small or large meetings, informal or formal.

**Skills:** Take the skills from Sheet 10 and refine them. You want athletes to listen to others, avoid criticizing others' ideas, and accept group decisions for the sake of the group.

**Topics:** Easier decisions first on any subject—personal or linked to sports.

**Doing it right:** Keep returning the floor to the players, such that they make the decision, not you.

### Guidelines to Be Shared with Athletes

- Respect for each other is essential.
- Speak for yourself and about how you feel, rather than about others.
- Listen without interrupting.
- Feel free to say nothing.
- Give space to the quieter teammates.
- Go along with decisions that the majority agree on.

### Coach Conduct

- Remind the players about guidelines.
- Ask a positive, open question that will unite their focus on the decision.
- Avoid interrupting, passing judgment, or solving problems.
- Use listening statements, which capture what's been said about the decision and which hand the baton straight back to them to say more.
- If all goes quiet, consider questions like "Who else would like to speak?"; "Where are we with this decision?"; "What else do you need to discuss?"; or "Who else feels like that?"
- Summarize their progress with the decision (and ideally the outcome agreed on). Adjust any part of the decision you feel you need to.

### Traps

- Avoid back-and-forth conversations between you and individual athletes.
- Don't make the decision for them (rather, offer suggestions for them to decide on).

### Useful Techniques

**One-at-a-Time Technique:** Here, you make sure everyone gets a chance to speak, and the athletes also get high-quality time listening to others. Each round involves answering one question. Ask them to address the question one at a time, in turn, briefly, without interruption and with freedom not to speak. Other guidelines: No cross talk; speak for yourself, not others; and say what you think and feel. This technique is excellent for resolving conflict and can be used very briefly, even at halftime in a match. More rounds and questions can be used with more time available.

**Ask–Offer–Ask Strategy:** When you want to contribute information or suggestions, (1) ask athletes what they know about it and listen well, (2) offer ideas as suggestions, and (3) ask them what they think about the decision you are making together as a unit.

**Solo Tasks:** Have players address a question privately, even writing down their thoughts.

**Pairs:** In turn, have them listen to each other's answers to that question. This method is good for very focused discussion.

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