

# Strategies

A Journal for Physical and Sport Educators

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ustr20>

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To cite this article: Brent Heidorn & Peter Stoepker (2021) Adopting the National Coaching Standards in Sport Programs, *Strategies*, 34:2, 31-36, DOI: [10.1080/08924562.2020.1867272](https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2020.1867272)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2020.1867272>



Published online: 03 Mar 2021.



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# Adopting the National Coaching Standards in Sport Programs

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By Brent Heidorn and Peter Stoepker 

**S**HAPE America – Society for Health and Physical Educators has recently developed National Standards for Sport Coaches. The purpose of these standards is to provide direction related to the specific knowledge and skills coaches should possess (SHAPE America, 2020). There are 42 individual standards organized into seven different themes. These themes include the following:

- Set Vision, Goals and Standards for Sport Programs;
- Engage in and Support Ethical Practices;

- Build Relationships;
- Develop a Safe Sport Environment;
- Create a Positive and Inclusive Sport Environment;
- Conduct Practices and Prepare for Competition; and
- Strive for Continuous Improvement (SHAPE America, 2020).

This article briefly highlights each overarching theme and provides insight for ways coaches can apply these standards while working with athletes in various sport environments (Table 1).

## Theme One: Set Vision, Goals and Standards for Sport Programs

Standards 1–5 address the importance of coaches creating a vision, goals and standards for their program(s). It is well documented that before a coach enters the coaching profession, a well-developed coaching philosophy needs to be developed. Without a sound philosophy, the program's overall impact could be limited (Gilbert, 2017; Gillham et al., 2016; Martens, 2012). According to the standards, a central focus of a coaching philosophy should be on the development and growth of an athlete. This means the primary emphasis is not on winning (Standard 1). Furthermore, it is critical for coaches to foster an environment where athletes desire to be lifelong movers (Standard 2). The program should also provide opportunities for behavioral and social growth and development (Standard 3). In addition, it is important for coaches to follow specific guidelines and rules of the sport(s) they are coaching (Standard 4). They should also focus on developing and/or maintaining an understanding of how to manage important team documents (e.g., physicals) (Standard 5). These first five standards are essential for coaches to recognize and comprehend. They can be the foundation for an effective and successful program.

### *Application*

There are many ways coaches can apply Theme One to their program. Due to the importance of developing a sound philosophy (Gilbert, 2017; Gould et al., 2017; Martens, 2012), coaches must do that—develop a sound philosophy. According to Martens (2012), one's coaching philosophy should address/include: (1) why you coach, (2) creating a positive/safe environment, (3) a playing/character philosophy, (4) team priorities, and (5) how you will implement your philosophy. Once a coaching philosophy is developed, the next step is sharing it with players and other stakeholders involved in the program.

## Theme Two: Engage In and Support Ethical Practices

Standards 6–8 provide direction for coaches to follow basic ethical standards. First and foremost, it is essential for coaches to adhere to a specific code of conduct established by the governing body of the sport (Standard 6). Additionally, coaches must teach this code of conduct to their athletes (Standard 7) and also need to ensure proper decision-making protocols to uphold these standard practices, ensuring effective team management (Standard 8). Standards 6–8 lay the foundation for coaches to engage in ethical behavior. This primary focus on ethical behavior can have a tremendous impact for how the community views the coach and the program, but also how athletes respond to various challenges during practices and competitions.

### *Application*

Coaches can apply Theme Two by first demonstrating positive behaviors. For example, coaches must be able to understand and demonstrate how to be fair, caring, respectful, responsible and sensitive. Athletes need this positive form of role modeling.



Instances of fairness, caring and respect, for example, can be shown in their verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, by having compassion for needs or issues outside of sport, and how to properly treat each other, including teammates, opponents, spectators and officials.

## Theme Three: Build Relationships

Standards 9–11 address the specific competencies needed for coaches to build effective relationships with athletes and team stakeholders (e.g., parents, community). Building relationships with others is critical for coaches. They need to know how to effectively communicate with their team(s) through developed written and verbal communication skills as well as understanding how to be a good listener (Standard 9). Further, coaches need to develop sociocultural competencies to effectively interact with a diverse group of individuals (Standard 10). Coaches also need to demonstrate professionalism throughout the program (Standard 11).

### *Application*

Coaches can apply Theme Three by first learning how to be a good listener. Athletes need to know that their coach is hearing them and not dismissing their thoughts or concerns. Regard-

less of coaches' tactical/technical expertise, without a solid understanding and foundation of communication skills, coaches' sport knowledge may not transfer to an athlete's development/growth (Cherubini, 2019). Due to this, coaches need to become good listeners, and also be aware of their own actions (Cherubini, 2019).

## Theme Four: Develop a Safe Sport Environment

Standards 12–20 address specific practices/procedures needed for a safe sport environment. These concepts are similar to promoting safety consistently recommended for teaching environments in physical education (Mitchell & Walton-Fisette, 2016), including routines, managerial procedures, and student behavior. The standards focus on ensuring a safe space that respects others (Standard 12). It is also important for coaches to identify and address physical injuries and emotional trauma, while maintaining positive collaboration with sport medicine professionals (Standards 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18). Coaches must also encourage their athletes to recognize and practice healthy behaviors (e.g., nutrition, sport supplements) (Standards 19 and 20).

### Application

Coaches can apply Theme Four in multiple ways. First, it is important that coaches have a basic understanding of how the systems of the body work, what is proper nutrition for athletes, and how to develop an effective and safe conditioning (physical fitness) program. Having extensive knowledge of human anatomy, exercise physiology, motor development, and biomechanics will not only help ensure efficient practices, but can also limit injuries among athletes. Beyond knowing how the human body works, coaches also need proper motivational techniques and methods for promoting a positive and nurturing environment for growth and development (Gano-Overway & Guivernau, 2018).

## Theme Five: Create a Positive and Inclusive Sport Environment

Standards 21–23 are focused on positivity and inclusivity within the sport environment. This includes coaches implementing “best practices” for enjoyment among all participants (Standard 21). Coaches should also provide fair and equitable opportunities for participation (Standard 22), and offer support and accommodations for athletes with disabilities. These types of coaching behaviors ensure that all athletes have opportunities to participate (Standard 23).

### Application

Coaches can apply Theme Five by making realistic and appropriate accommodations for all athletes. This can be done first by knowing if athletes need special accommodations, and then ensuring the environment is safe, enjoyable and fosters growth.



Having extensive knowledge of human anatomy, exercise physiology, motor development, and biomechanics will not only help ensure efficient practices, but can also limit injuries among athletes.

Additionally, DePauw and Gavron (2005) recommended that coaches should understand reasonable skill progression for all athletes, never underestimate what athletes with disabilities can do, and find appropriate ways to match athletes with comparable abilities.

## Theme Six: Conduct Practices and Prepare for Competition

Standards 24–37 address specific characteristics needed for generating quality practices that prepare athletes for competition. This specific theme is divided into four categories, including: (1) *Plan*, (2) *Teach*, (3) *Assess* and (4) *Adapt*. Standards 24–29 (Plan) address the need for coaches to develop appropriate skill progressions and tactics/strategies while promoting athletes' overall well-being. Standards 30–33 (Teach) emphasize the need for coaches to know the sport-specific skills, principles of effective teaching, and proper motivational techniques to enhance athletic performance. Effective principles of planning and teaching can be derived from various instructional resources (e.g., Greenberg & LoBianco, 2020; Mitchell & Walton-Fisette, 2016; Ward & Lehwald, 2018) appropriate for physical activities. Standards 34–35 (Assess) highlight how coaches need to implement appropriate assessment strategies for their athletes, allowing for continuous improvement. Standards 36–37 (Adapt) identify how coaches should adjust training based on athletes' needs, while also implementing effective decision-making strategies for improved performance throughout competition.

**Table 1. Youth and High School Sport-Related Application of The National Coaching Standards (SHAPE America, 2020)**

National Coaching Themes	Youth-Sport-Related Application	High School Sport-Related Application
Set vision, goals and standards for sport program	Youth sport focuses on participation and enjoyment for all athletes before winning. This means coaches should provide significant playing time for all members of the team, regardless of their ability or the score. Players also learn to play a variety of positions.	Coaches ensure all athletes are academically committed and eligible for competition. The state federation, conference, and school district rules are completely followed, regardless of the athlete's ability or level of impact on the team.
Engage in and support ethical practices	The league does not allow tobacco products on or near the premises. Coach Liam leaves his tobacco products at home, always.	Coach Ellie regularly communicates with the athletic training staff to ensure players are able to safely return to competition.
Build relationships	Jackson, a youth tennis coach, provides consistent positive feedback in support of athletes' self-esteem and enjoyment.	Coach Mia meets weekly with her team captains, providing feedback on decision-making opportunities, further instilling confidence in their leadership abilities.
Develop a safe sport environment	Coach Olivia monitors the heat and humidity during the summer months, ensuring athletes maintain appropriate level of rest and hydration during the softball season.	William is not just the high school soccer coach; he has also earned a national coaching license/certification for his sport.
Create a positive and inclusive sport environment	Coach Tom has 12 players on his basketball team, two needing special assistance or accommodations. Tom provides opportunities for those participants to bring the ball up the back-court in no-pressure situations.	Coach Libby recognizes the various cultural experiences and demographics within the community. She embraces best practices for inclusivity, ensuring that all athletes are welcomed, supported and valued.
Conduct practices and prepare for competition	Coach Emma diligently teaches and holds participants accountable for developing the fundamental skills and movement patterns needed for successful progression in gymnastics.	Each practice includes brief video sessions, modified game play with specific tactics implemented, and "chalk-talks," preparing players to effectively compete with their opponents.
Strive for continuous improvement	Football coaches Al and Hank get recertified in first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation, maintain concussion protocol certification, and participate in online football referee clinics for youth sport, specific to the ages they coach.	Due to a rigorous high school schedule, Coach Baker carefully plans his practices, games and tournament schedules, ensuring he has quality time with family and friends throughout the lengthy basketball season.

### **Application**

Coaches can apply Theme Six by diligent study of recommended principles for planning and teaching in physical activity environments, and then implementing what has been learned. Although planning and teaching include basic essentials common to all learning environments, effectively managing people, space, time and equipment in physical activity settings (Rink, 2020) is a needed skill, likely new to some coaches. Further, it is important to use appropriate assessment strategies that motivate athletes, incorporate safe fitness development strategies, and provide opportunity for feedback and growth. Finally, what has worked in the past might not always work in the present or future. Coaches should be continual learners of their discipline and of their

athletes, adapting to research-based and practical methods as things are learned.

### **Theme Seven: Strive for Continuous Improvement**

Standards 38–42 address the need for coaches to reflect, evaluate and continue in professional development. These final standards emphasize the importance of regularly engaging in self-reflection (Standard 38), developing strategies for monitoring self-, staff- and team-improvement (Standard 39), and becoming a lifelong learner of the sport. This includes engaging in the latest professional development and utilizing best practices (Standards 40 and 41). Finally, coaches need to ensure a positive work-life balance that practices self-care (Standard 42).



The recognition, review and implementation of the standards (including identifying goals, maintaining ethics, building relationships, ensuring safety, fostering positive environments, preparing for practices and competition, and continuously improving) will likely contribute to a healthy and meaningful sport experience for all participants.

### Application

There are many ways for coaches to continually improve their practice related to Theme Seven. Most sports have specific conferences at the regional and/or national levels. For example, the America Baseball Coaches Association hosts a national conference for baseball coaches each year. Additionally, SHAPE America has an annual convention with numer-

ous coaching sessions and topics. Online and in-person certifications (e.g., fitness development), trainings (e.g., USA Track & Field), webinars, and local professional learning opportunities are common among most mainstream sports, usually with general and specific guidelines and recommendations. When possible, coaches should regularly participate in one (or many) learning opportunities (e.g., conferences, video-sessions) throughout the year. Further, coaches should identify one or more trusted, seasoned mentors who can help them in their professional and personal endeavors. These positive relationships can lead to continued growth in the life of a younger or less experienced coach.

### Conclusion

Coaches play a very important role in an athlete's life. In many cases, this role continues far beyond one sport season. Therefore, it is imperative for all coaches to be cognizant of the nationally adopted standards of the profession, but more importantly, consistently apply them. The recognition, review and implementation of the standards (including identifying goals, maintaining ethics, building relationships, ensuring safety, fostering positive environments, preparing for practices and competition, and continuously improving) will likely contribute to a healthy and meaningful sport experience for all participants. As a result, regardless of the abilities of individual athletes, coaches can promote positive opportunities that lead to a lifetime of enjoyable physical activity.

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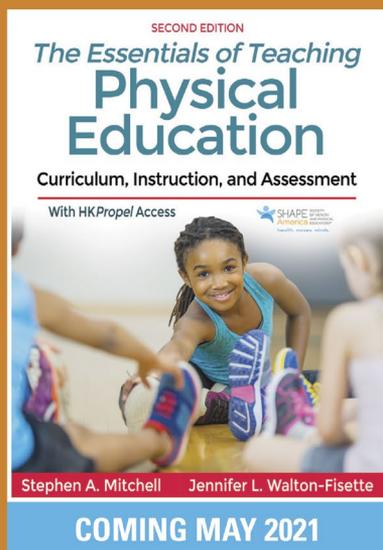
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