

Strong Mind, Strong Team: Coaches' Handout

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The core idea

Strong athletes build strong teams, and athletes become strong where it's safe to fail.

In our sport, "safe to fail" means two things: physically safe (spotters, mats, progressions) and psychologically safe (no shame or punishment for a brave attempt). Athletes need both before they will risk a new skill.

Your role as a coach: **notice, support, repeat.** You are not a therapist, and knowing where that line is protects your athletes and you.

Fear of failure is learned. Athletes fear what comes after failure: losing approval, harsh criticism, letting others down (Sagar, Lavalley and Spray, 2007). How the adults around them react to mistakes teaches the response (Sagar and Lavalley, 2010). The environment is the lever, and we control the lever.

Strong Mind: the 4Cs of mental toughness for athletes and teams

Mentally tough does not mean never scared, never upset or never complaining. It means four things (Clough and colleagues):

C	In the athlete	Coach move
1. Control	Regulates emotions and nerves early; can tell fear from panic	Normalize naming and discussing the feeling: "I'm nervous" is information, not weakness
2. Commitment	Shows up and follows through when it's hard; finds success	Set clear goals with the athlete, that they own
3. Challenge	Sees failure as opportunity, a fall as a chance to grow	Treat mistakes as information to be shared and discussed
4. Confidence	Believes in their preparation, not their mood	Build progressions that stack proof-of-concept

Praise the attempt, not just the landing. Children praised for being smart chose easier tasks after a setback and performed worse; children praised for effort kept choosing harder ones (Mueller and Dweck, 1998).

First: praise the decision to go for it. **Second:** coach the technique.

"I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."
(Michael Jordan, Nike, 1997)

Strong Team: build the learning zone

Safety and high standards are not a trade-off. You need both (Edmondson).

Remember: psychological safety is a lack of fear, NOT a lack of accountability.

	Low standards	High standards
High safety	Comfort zone: everyone's happy, nobody improves	Learning zone: the goal
Low safety	Apathy zone	Anxiety zone: performance through fear

- **Safe teams surface problems.** In Edmondson's hospital research, the better-led teams reported *more* errors, because people felt safe admitting them. The team where athletes say "I'm hurt" or "I'm scared" is the team where you know what's really going on.
- **Reward effort and improvement.** Coaches trained to build a mastery climate, focused on effort and personal improvement rather than rivalry and ranking, lowered their athletes' performance anxiety (Smith, Smoll and Cumming, 2007).

Three coach habits:

1. Make it a safe place to say "I'm scared" or "I'm hurt." Thank the athlete for sharing, praise them, and dig into it.
2. Separate careless mistakes from brave attempts. A lack of focus or effort is not the same as a lack of consistency or execution.
3. Let stunt groups speak up early. Small tensions need to be shared to be relieved, like pressure plates in the earth. Big tensions erupt.

"Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to become the best of which you are capable." (John Wooden)

The glue: build cohesion on purpose

Chemistry isn't luck. It's built. Cohesion and performance are linked in sport teams, and the link is strongest on female teams. How much athletes like each other matters about as much as how well they work toward the goal together (Carron and colleagues, 2002). Team building works best for ages 15–20 and when it lasts longer than two weeks (Kwon, 2024).

1. **Bond on the mat:** a weekly team goal set by the athletes, rotating partner drills, two-minute stunt group check-ins, team challenges in conditioning.
2. **Bond off the mat:** team meals, community service, big/little mentoring between older and younger athletes, watching competition videos together.
3. **Every week, not once a season.** A retreat feels great for a week; habits last all year.

Safeguarding: with minors, parents know about every outside activity and at least two adults are present.

Team safety check

Rate your team on each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Adapted for cheer from Amy Edmondson's psychological safety scale. For the truest picture, have your athletes answer it too, anonymously.

#	Statement	Score (1–5)
1	If an athlete makes a mistake, it is rarely held against them.	
2	Athletes can raise concerns, including "I'm scared" or "I'm hurt."	
3	Athletes are comfortable asking teammates and coaches for help.	
4	No one on the team is rejected for being different.	
5	It is safe to try a new skill on this team.	
6	No one deliberately undermines a teammate's efforts.	
7	Every athlete's skills and talents are valued and used.	
8	Teammates are interested in each other as people.	

#	Statement	Score (1-5)
9	We regularly take time to improve how we practice.	
10	Concerns are raised openly at team meetings.	

Your score: (total – 10) × 0.25 = ____ out of 10.

- **0-2:** an unsafe environment. Start here before anything else.
- **3-7:** where most teams sit. Not toxic, but you're missing ideas, concerns and questions.
- **8-10:** strong safety. Keep it there and retest each season.

It's a journey, not a pass or fail. Retake it mid-season to see what has changed.

Where is your team stuck? Lencioni's five dysfunctions

A practical lens from Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Each level is built on the one below, so start fixing from the bottom. Trust is the base, and trust starts within each athlete finding something to trust.

Level	Dysfunction	What it looks like on a cheer team
5 (top)	Inattention to results (status and ego)	My skill or my spot matters more than the team score
4	Avoidance of accountability (low standards)	No one calls out missed practices or sloppy reps; peers wait for the coach
3	Lack of commitment (ambiguity)	Unclear roles and spots, so athletes half-commit
2	Fear of conflict (artificial harmony)	The stunt group that stops talking at breaks
1 (base)	Absence of trust (invulnerability)	Athletes hide fear, injuries or mental blocks

My team is stuck at level: ____ **One thing I'll do about it:** _____

What we are NOT building: the mental block

The worst case of the wrong environment is an athlete who **loses a skill they had already mastered**. This is different from healthy fear of a new skill: the training and ability are there, but the athlete can no longer perform it.

When pressure is high and safety is low (the anxiety zone), healthy fear can escalate:

1. **Fear:** a normal response to real or perceived danger.
2. **Anxiety:** can be normal or not, depending on the situation.
3. **Panic:** starts to disrupt the ability to perform.
4. **Trauma:** a clear disruption to physical, mental or emotional performance.

What feeds it: pressure from coaches, parents, teammates or the routine itself; punishment for mistakes; being pushed through fear without support.

First step if you see it: remove the pressure and the negative environment. Pushing an athlete through it is like driving on a flat tire: the damage gets deeper and harder to repair.

Competition ready

Mistakes in practice are cheap; mistakes at competition are expensive. Training that expects errors and teaches people to learn from them beats error-avoidant training, especially when skills must transfer to new situations (Keith and Frese, 2008). Practice falling and resetting with progressions and spotting, so the competition floor is never the first time.

What a mentally strong team does on the day:

1. **Pre-routine habit:** the same rhythm and the same cue, every time.
2. **Reset cue after a mistake:** breathe, check the thought, take the next eight count.
3. **Team talk that builds:** short, specific and about effort.

Practice responding to:

- An athlete says, "I don't want to throw it today."
- A stunt falls in warm-up, ten minutes before you take the floor.

Know your team: VIA Character Strengths

The [VIA Survey](#) is a free, research-based survey of 24 character strengths, built on Peterson and Seligman's work. The youth version covers ages 8–17, takes about 10 minutes and is available in 46 languages. Using your strengths is linked to higher well-being (Seligman and colleagues, 2005), and early research in youth sport is promising.

How to use it with your team:

1. **Take it:** athletes complete the survey at home.
2. **Share:** athletes share their top five within stunt groups and with coaches.

3. **Strength spotting:** each teammate names one strength they see in another. It builds trust, the base of the pyramid.
4. **Coach:** use the results for roles, captain picks and feedback ("I saw your perseverance on that last rep").

The rule: strengths to use, not labels to wear. The strengths at the bottom of the list are "lesser strengths," not weaknesses.

Safeguarding: get parents' permission before sending minors a link to an outside website.

Know the line: notice, support, repeat

Mental health symptoms are common in sport. A 2026 review supporting the IOC's consensus statement found that about **1 in 3** current elite athletes report distress, about **1 in 5** report symptoms of depression or anxiety, and over **1 in 4** report disordered eating (Gouttebarga and colleagues, 2026). These are symptoms, not diagnoses, but they show this is not rare.

Notice: changes that last two weeks or more, or a sudden big change

- **Mood:** persistent sadness, irritability, hopelessness, or losing joy in the sport.
- **Behavior:** withdrawing from teammates, missing practice, a drop in effort or schoolwork.
- **Body:** changes in sleep, energy or appetite; frequent unexplained aches or illness.
- **Eating and body image:** talk about weight or body shape, skipping meals, extra secret training.
- **Performance:** losing mastered skills, or panic before performing.

Support: how to respond

1. Talk privately and calmly: "I've noticed _____. How are you doing?"
2. Listen. Don't diagnose and don't try to fix it.
3. Don't promise secrecy. With minors, safety concerns go to parents or guardians and your club's safeguarding lead.
4. Follow up, and make sure the athlete knows their place on the team is safe. Then repeat: keep checking in, because one conversation is rarely enough.

Who can help

- A family doctor (GP), a sport psychologist, a licensed mental health professional, or a school counselor.

Urgent: if an athlete talks about self-harm or suicide, or you believe they are not safe, do not leave them alone. Contact emergency services (112 across Europe) and their parents or guardians right away.

Coach don'ts: don't comment on athletes' weight or body shape, and don't use conditioning as punishment for mistakes.

Further resources: the free [IOC Mental Health in Elite Athletes Toolkit](#), and Mental Health First Aid training, offered in many countries.

My Monday commitment

One thing I will change with my team this week:

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