

5-17-2013

Coaching Strategies for Exceptional (ADHD) Athletes

Mike Wilus

La Salle University, wilusm1@lasalle.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/graduateannual>

Recommended Citation

Wilus, Mike (2013) "Coaching Strategies for Exceptional (ADHD) Athletes," *Graduate Annual*: Vol. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/graduateannual/vol1/iss1/13>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu. Articles published in the Graduate Annual reflect the views of their authors, and not necessarily the views of La Salle University.

Coaching Strategies for Exceptional (ADHD) Athletes

Mike Wilus
Master of Arts in Education
La Salle University
Philadelphia, Pa.
wilusm1@lasalle.edu

Abstract

How can athletic coaches use research proven teaching accommodations, modifications and strategies to get the most out of their players with ADHD? Though the law does not require athletic coaches to accommodate these children, coaches should educate themselves on the disorder and the strategies used to help these children to benefit not only players with ADHD but the whole team. After describing the characteristics and behaviors of ADHD children, this paper lays out a series of accommodations, modifications and strategies that coaches can start using tomorrow.

Coaching Strategies for Exceptional (ADHD) Athletes

John, one of the players on your team, is very difficult for you to coach. He has difficulty following rules, has a short attention span, and while waiting in line to participate in a drill he will frequently talk and fool around with others. When the inevitable argument ensues, he always seems to need to get the last word. Though physically talented, John has difficulty spending the requisite time to perfect a skill. Sometimes you want to throw your hands up in frustration because John doesn't pay attention, but requires more of your attention than your other players.

For decades teachers have been accommodating students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in the classroom through specific intervention and teaching strategies. The goal of this paper is to provide athletic coaches with strategies they can use to accommodate their players suffering with ADHD on the playing field.

What is ADHD?

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a persistent disorder characterized by significant problems with attention, impulsiveness, and over activity (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). With 5 million children ages 3-17 affected by the disorder, it is one of the most common childhood mental health disorders (CDC, 2010). Children suffering from ADHD have trouble staying on task without supervision, commonly blurt out answers and interrupt others when they are speaking, and suffer from high levels of hyperactivity causing them to make noises and leave their desired seat or place in line. Also, it is common for these children to have difficulty following directions and behave aggressively toward their peers (Montager & Warger, 1997).

Treatment and Prevalence

There are currently three common, research-supported treatments for ADHD. The treatments include the use of psychostimulant medications, behavior interventions, and a combination of both (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004). For the purpose of this paper we are going to focus on behavior intervention strategies and classroom accommodations that can be applied to an athletic setting. According to the U.S Department of Health and Human Services center for Disease Control and Prevention, the incidence of ADHD diagnoses increased an average of 3% annually between 1997 and 2006. With the ever increasing population of youth diagnosed with ADHD, it is extremely important that coaches are just as educated as teachers about the disorder because the same kids that struggle in the classroom will struggle on the athletic field if accommodations are not made.

ADHD in Athletics

In a recent study, Rosen and Johnson (2000) examined differences in sport behavior between boys with and without ADHD. Results showed that athletes with ADHD displayed higher levels of aggression, emotional reactivity, and frequency of disqualification. Rosen and Johnson (2000) found that the team sport environment was especially difficult for participants with ADHD. They concluded that team environments posed greater opportunity for potential negative peer feedback and off-task behavior. This study suggested that parents of males with ADHD explore the individual sports setting. The research clearly demonstrates that ADHD affects athletes on the playing field, but rather than having young athletes quit team sports, I believe coaches should be made aware of the disability and held accountable to accommodate the players.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted by Congress to ensure that children with disabilities have the opportunity to receive a free appropriate public education. When students are diagnosed with ADHD, "schools have a legal responsibility to determine whether a child is eligible for special educational services, such as tutoring or adaptation of educational methods, and to ensure that these services are provided" (Smucher & Hedayat, 2001, p.6). However, the law does not require these services to be provided to students while participating in other school functions outside of the classroom such as athletics. Therefore, coaches need to educate themselves about the disorder and realize that by accommodating their players with ADHD, they will allow the players to perform and succeed to their maximum potential.

In many circumstances coaches may not even know which players on the team are diagnosed with ADHD. This information is confidential, but I believe that coaches just like teachers have the right to know this information so they accommodate the players as directed. I believe that it is in the best interest of the players and the team for the coach to seek out this information. Every coach should hold an early meeting to go over team rules with players and parents. At this time the coach should address the issue of ADHD, noting that it is possible to accommodate the disorder on the field of play. The coach should request that parents or players notify him or her about the disorder or if they would like to discuss the issue further. The coach should then provide a respectful mechanism for having a confidential conversation about the matter.

There are also many common traits that a coach can look for that most children with ADHD express. When evaluating a child for ADHD physicians look at a list of characteristics. For a child to be diagnosed, six symptoms of inattention and six symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity must have persisted for at least six months to a degree that is maladaptive and inconsistent with developmental level (Smucher & Hedayat, 2001). Coaches are not doctors and will not have access to historical behavioral data, but can consider this list below which is located in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders created by American Psychiatric Association, to gauge the behavior their players. Coaches are obviously not qualified to make a diagnosis and prescribe prescription medication, but they can use this list and consider behavior modifications and instructional strategies that would be helpful not only for players with ADHD, but all players.

DSM-IV Criteria for the Diagnosis of ADHD:

Inattention

1. Often does not give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork, work, or other activities.
2. Often has trouble keeping attention on tasks or play activities.
3. Often does not seem to listen when spoken to directly.
4. Often does not follow through on instructions and fails to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace (not due to oppositional behavior or failure to understand instructions).
5. Often has trouble organizing activities.
6. Often avoids, dislikes, or doesn't want to do things that take a lot of mental effort for a long period of time (such as schoolwork or homework).
7. Often loses things needed for tasks and activities (e.g. toys, school assignments, pencils, books, or tools).
8. Is often easily distracted.
9. Is often forgetful in daily activities.

Hyperactivity

1. Often fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in seat when sitting still is expected.
2. Often gets up from seat when remaining in seat is expected.
3. Often excessively runs about or climbs when and where it is not appropriate (adolescents or adults may feel very restless).
4. Often has trouble playing or doing leisure activities quietly.
5. Is often "on the go" or often acts as if "driven by a motor".
6. Often talks excessively.

Impulsivity

7. Often blurts out answers before questions have been finished.
8. Often has trouble waiting one's turn.
9. Often interrupts or intrudes on others (e.g., butts into conversations or games).

While this list is mainly directed towards characteristics expressed in the classroom, a coach can look at a characteristic like "does not give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork, work, or other activities" and relate it to "does not give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes while going over drills or offensive and defensive tasks". If a coach believes one of his or her players is affected by ADHD he or she should do everything in their power to help that player succeed on the playing field. In the following sections of this paper you will find specific strategies that coaches can use to accommodate these players during athletic related activities, with the focus being placed on practice time.

Accommodations, Interventions, and Strategies

Classroom Management and Structure

Almost all of the research compiled on ADHD and the possible accommodations for students in the classroom states the importance classroom management and structure. "To be successful academically, students with ADHD must be able to focus their attention on the instructor and the lesson. Therefore, students with ADHD benefit greatly from an orderly environment" (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004, p.2). For an athlete with ADHD to be successful his or her coach must provide an environment that stresses structure and organization. Distractibility is a significant issue for students and athletes affected by ADHD. "The first key for getting the most [from] practice is to have a structured environment" (Stabeno, 2004, p.93). When introducing or reviewing a drill or play coaches should place players affected by ADHD in the drill or in the front of the team, just as teachers would seat these students in the front of the class. It is suggested for teachers to surround

students with ADHD with well-behaved and attentive classmates (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004). These positive peer interactions, through the structured grouping, will help eliminate inattentive behaviors and allow the ADHD affected athlete to concentrate on what is happening on the “field of play”.

Teachers are asked to plan their lessons and post them on a daily basis. The first thing seen as you walk into most classrooms is a detailed plan for the class period written on the board. A classroom schedule is imperative to note the procedures that guide lesson times, activity transitions, and behavior (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004). Students affected by ADHD benefit from this schedule because it allows them to predict what will happen next. Coaches should post a practice plan ahead of time. Whether that means emailing it the night before or posting it in the locker room prior to the practice, it will help players cope with the anxiety of wondering what will come next. Figure 1 gives an example of a practice plan acceptable for accommodating players affected by ADHD. You will notice the distinct time slots and drill sections. This allows players to foresee what will happen throughout practice, and provides the structure necessary to accommodate athletes with ADHD.

Both in the classroom and on the playing field rules that govern behavior are extremely important. “Well defined procedures for performing tasks, clearly communicated expectations for student behavior, ongoing positive and corrective feedback, and fair and consistent treatment of students are requisites for good classroom management” (Montague & Warger, 1997, p.10). When it comes to defining rules and procedures for those with ADHD teachers and coaches must be clear and consistent. That means posting simple and clear rules in the classroom, locker room, team website, or fence of the stadium/field. If there is “a desired behavior or conduct expected in an activity; post it, define it, and practice it” (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004, p.3). Coaches need to take special consideration for players with ADHD when defining and enforcing team rules. Coaches should hold a meeting before the first practice of the year and announce the rules and the type of behavior is expected throughout the season or school year. This means handing out a list of rules, reviewing each rule, and having each player sign a contract acknowledging the rules and expectations that they can hang in their locker or bed room to be reminded on a daily basis. Individuals with ADHD tend to struggle during transitions (Montague & Warger, 1997). For example, if one of your team rules was that after a drill segment ends, players are expected to jog to the next drill. A player with ADHD may become distracted during this transition and forget about the rule, therefore receiving backlash from many coaches and teammates. Sometimes rules need to be explicitly taught and for a rule such as the one above coaches should consider pairing their players in a buddy system, and make sure players with ADHD are paired with students who do not struggle with transitional periods. When the whistle or horn sounds announcing the end of one drill and the start of another, buddies need to find each other and make their way to the next drill as a pair. The buddy system is simple but extremely helpful if pairings are thoughtfully made for students affected by ADHD.

Consequences must be clear for each infraction and followed through upon consistently and calmly (Yehle & Wambold, 1998). These consequences must be reviewed throughout the season

because “understanding consequences is difficult for students with ADHD who often face punishment without knowing what they did wrong” (Montague & Warger, 1997, p.10).

At a team meeting before the long preseason training months it was explained that the team takes a bus to the off-campus practice field. The coach announced that if you are late for the bus, you will be dismissed from the team. This was stated at the first meeting to the team and never reiterated or discussed with any of the players. The first day of training John showed up five minutes late and the bus had left. He walked to the stadium and was told to go home. He was not given an opportunity to explain himself. John was confused and did not understand the harsh punishment.

John was a player that suffered from ADHD and did not understand the severe consequences that came with being late. The coach never handed out a sheet of rules and consequences to remind a player like John, nor did he send a text message or email leading up to the first day to remind the team of the rule. He did not accommodate John. Athletics, which might be his only release, has been removed for the time being. Coaches, just like teachers, need to make an ongoing effort to help players like John work through the struggles of ADHD. When it comes to management and structure, including the enforcement of rules and consequences, coaches need to rethink their current procedures and take advantage of the management strategies discussed in this section.

Instructional Strategies and Modifications

During a men’s lacrosse practice the coach decided that it was time to introduce a new offensive play to the team. He asked all the offensive players to line up across the midfield line and picked six individuals to walk through the new play. He instructed the six players and explained the play out loud. This took about fifteen minutes, and only the original six players got on the field. For the next ten minutes, he allowed the other players to walk through the new play and a few of them failed to do it correctly. The coach visibility got aggravated and shook his head.

Most sports require coaches to teach new skills and concepts during practice. The example above is how many coaches attempt to accomplish this task. It is during this phase of practice where players with ADHD struggle. When teaching new material in the classroom, teachers use several strategies to accommodate students, which coaches can translate into practice. Montague and Warger (1997) suggest delivering lessons at a brisk pace and breaking up long assignments into shorter ones. For coaches this means that slowing down practice for twenty five minutes to teach a large concept such as a new play may not be helpful for players with ADHD, who struggle to remain focused. Figure 2 illustrates lacrosse drills labeled, “Jam to 1 more” and “Get through and curl”. These drills are parts of the team’s offense broken into smaller segments. It allows for players, especially those with ADHD, to grasp a small concept and transfer that to the bigger picture when it is time to put the whole play together. Figure 2.1 shows how those drills fit into the larger offense.

Also, by teaching the new play by breaking it into more manageable segments, it allows for many repetitions and reduces inactivity

during practice. If a coach asks players to stand at the midline and watch as others walk through the play, those with ADHD will be easily distracted and lose focus. Keeping the practice up-tempo with a lot of moving and repetitions will help players with ADHD concentrate on the skills they are working on.

Dr. Ronald Kamm, a Sport Psychiatrist and member of the USA Gymnastics Board of Sport Science and Health Care Consultants, discusses tips for coaching the child with ADHD. His primary suggestion for coaches is to teach using short time periods. He suggests to “make sure a clock is visible. ADHD children can often control their behavior for a set amount of time if they know what that time is, and it is clearly visible to them” (Kamm, 1999, p. 4). If coaches have access to a score board they can use it to keep time for drill and allow it to be visible to everyone. Coaches can also purchase a portable digital clock and place it on the sideline to accomplish the same thing.

Reiber and McLaughlin (2004) stress the importance of immediate feedback for students affected by ADHD. It allows these students to stay focused and motivated to complete the day's activities. From the onset of practice if coaches were to give positive reinforcement and feedback during routine drills it would keep players with ADHD motivated and engaged. Kamm (1999) also suggests that coaches “be a slot machine for Praise” (p.5). He emphasizes the fact that ADHD children are in constant need of reward and praise (Kamm, 1999). Many coaches that are quick to criticize and give negative feedback before sharing positive feedback and it can be extremely detrimental to the mindset of players with ADHD.

It was the first practice of the year and everyone on the team was excited to get out on the field. The practice was exciting and filled with new drills and competitions that kept the players engaged. Over the course of the next month practice didn't change much and the drills were very repetitive. The players began to get tired of doing the same thing every day, and their focus and concentration during practice began to wane.

While accommodating students with ADHD, teachers are instructed to “keep the curriculum interesting, vary presentation formats and task materials through the use of different modalities to increase and maintain student interest and motivation” (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004, p.4). Coaches need to make a genuine effort to change practice from day to day to keep player interest high. The order of practice is extremely important when facilitating motivation. Many coaches start every practice with basic skill practice such as stick work, dribbling, passing, and catching. I would suggest starting practice with some type of competitive drill to get the emotions of players into practice. This will motivate them from the onset of practice and keep them focused for the next set of drills or instruction. Many teachers start their class period with an attention grabber (e.g., question of the day, joke, or experiment), to motivate and gain the attention of their students (Yehle & Wambold, 1998). Coaches should do the same at the start of practice with a new drill, skill, or competition.

Many coaches have a standard and consistent way of introducing a new play, offensive or defensive set, or major. They have players line up and listen, or draw the play on board, which can become tedious. Most coaches have access to a variety technol-

ogy and resources that can be used to motivate players, and keep them engaged in learning tasks. The use of technology along with checklists and graphic organizers can help players with ADHD be more successful during these instructional periods (Montague & Warger, 1997). If a coach has access to a classroom, living room, or any room with a television or projector he or she can combine all of these methods together to create an engaging learning environment for all players, but especially those affected by ADHD. Figure 3 illustrates a lesson I used with my team to teach a lacrosse concept I label the “second level of offense”. I incorporated the use of technology, diagrams, checklists, cooperative learning, and hands on experiences. A lesson like this takes time to plan and execute, but the results were amazing. It kept the players engaged and motivated while differentiating the instructional methods to help my athletes affected by ADHD.

Coaches frequently yell directions and instructions throughout practice. Many times these directions are only stated once. Yehle and Wambold (1998) advise teachers to (a) foreshadow directions to students and point out the importance of listening, (b) give directions one at a time and have students repeat them aloud or to themselves, and (c) to repeat and paraphrase important directions two or three times. Coaches can take these strategies and apply them to giving directions for drill, concept, or skill instruction. For example, if a coach was explaining a new move or technique to a player he or she should start by explaining the importance of the task at hand and make it clear that the athletes must pay attention. Coaches should then demonstrate the technique and explain the directions out loud asking the players to repeat the steps back aloud. Finally, the coach should make sure he or she repeats the directions at least two times. When teachers give direction in the classroom it is suggested that they give both written and oral directions and assist the students with directions by calling attention to relevant information by highlighting, underlining, or bolding specific sections (Yehle & Wambold, 1998). If coaches are planning on teaching a large concept such as an offense or defense they should hand out written directions to go along with the one field instruction. Figure 4 demonstrates a set of written directions I used with my team when introducing one of our offenses. Notice the formatting of the text and highlighted sections. I suggest coaches' hand out directions like these at least two days prior to teaching the concept on the field.

During the course of the season John has accumulated a lot of paper from his coach including plays, scouting reports, checklists, and readings. One day after practice the coach asked John to bring the papers that illustrated the base offense to practice the next day. John went home and searched everywhere but could not find the paper. Most of his papers from the season were scattered all over the place in his room. The next day when the coach asked John to pull out his paper, John had to tell him he couldn't find it. The coach was upset that John lost something so important and decided to make him run.

Individuals affected by ADHD tend to struggle with organizational tasks. Yehle and Wambold (1998) state that becoming organized is an arduous task for many students with ADHD, and suggest a variety of strategies that teachers can use to assist these students. For example, teachers are advised to “clearly designate a space for the students to keep his or her materials in the classroom” (Yehle & Wambold, 1998, p.9). Coaches can take this advice, and require their players to put all of their papers in a binder specifi-

cally for team materials. It should be required for players to bring their binder to every practice and coaches need to be persistent in checking that they have it. Teachers routinely model organizational skills by asking students write down homework in assignment logs and file worksheets and assignments into folders. Coaches should check their player's binders for organization and content weekly. This will allow players to always have access to their important papers that coaches put a lot of time into producing.

Token Economy/Sticker Program

In the classroom setting, other than stimulant medication, token economies are the most widely evaluated treatment for ADHD (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004). "Classroom token economies involve the presentation (token reward) and or removal (response cost) or both of tokens, points, or other items" (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004, p.6). Teachers pair these tokens with praise when a desirable behavior is performed and students can add them together to gain a larger prize. Prizes usually consist of tangible items such as objects, activities, or privileges (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004). Coaches can use this idea of a token economy on the practice field. For example, if your players are expected to pay attention to a demonstration, and they do it up to your standards, a point or token can be awarded. Coaches should add and subtract points for desired and undesired behaviors during practice. At the end of the week, points can be tallied up and if the team reaches a number that you decide on, a larger prize or privilege can be given such as no conditioning at the end of practice. Token economies can be designed for individual students or for the entire class (McLaughlin & Williams, 1988). "Involving the entire class may be particularly effective when peer contingencies are competing with instructor contingencies" (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004, p.6). I suggest coaches involve the whole team in the token economy. Teammates will remind each other of the desired behavior because they all want the final outcome. A system like this will take time to create and keep track of but token economies produce high levels of on-task behavior (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004).

Conclusion

When a student leaves the classroom, ADHD is not left behind. ADHD is a lifelong condition that affects individuals in all aspects of their life. "School districts are mandated to provide services to students with ADHD" (Montague & Warger, 1997, p.16). However, coaches are not required by the law to accommodate these children on the athletic field. Therefore until the law is changed, I believe that coaches must educate themselves on the disorder and possible accommodations that can be made to allow his or her players affected by the disorder to reach their maximum potential. Throughout this paper accommodations, interventions, and instructional strategies that teachers use in the classroom have been explored through an athletic setting. "Children with ADHD require our best efforts and instruction" (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004, p.10). It is my hope that by providing coaches with these procedures that it will become more clear as to how coaches can help these children on the "field of play", and spend less time shaking their heads.

References

- American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association, 2000.
- Bloom B, Cohen RA, Freeman G. Summary health statistics for U.S. Children: National Health Interview Survey, 2009. National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Health Stat 10(247). 2010.
- Johnson, R. C., & Rosen, L. A. (2000). Sports behavior of ADHD children. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 4(3), 150-160. doi: 10.1177/108705470000400302
- Kamm, D. (n.d.). Tips for coaching a child with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *USA Gymnastics*. Retrieved from <http://usagym.org/pages/home/publications/technique/1999/10/adhd.pdf>
- McLaughlin, T. F., & Williams, R. L. (1998). The token economy in the classroom. In J. C. Witt, S. W. Elliott, & F. M. Gresham (Eds). *Handbook of behavior therapy in education* (pp.469-487). New York, Plenum
- Montague, M., & Warger, C. (1997). Helping students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder succeed in the classroom. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 30(4), 1-60.
- Pastor PN, Reuben CA. Diagnosed attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and learning disability: United States, 2004-2006. National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Health Stat 10(237). 2008.
- Reiber, C., & McLaughlin, T. F. (2004). Classroom Interventions: Methods to improve academic performance and classroom behavior for students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity Disorder. *International Journal of Special Education*, 19(1), 1-13.
- Smucker, W. D., M.D., & Hedayat, M., M.D. (2001). Evaluation and treatment of ADHD. *American Family Physician*, 64(5), 1-10. Retrieved from www.aafp.org/afp/2001/0901/p817.html
- Stabeno, M. E. (2004). *The ADHD affected athlete*. Victoria, B.C.: Trafford.
- Yehle, A. K., & Wambold, C. (1998). An ADHD success story: Strategies for teachers and students. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 30(6), 8-13. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov>