



COACHING IN THE LAST FEW MINUTES: Ten Things To Remember

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One of the ironies of a coaching life, is that the great majority of the long hours that elite coaches spend are not evaluated, while a small minority of their work is endlessly and publicly scrutinized. For most coaches, 95% of their work and time is spent in training and practice, yet the evaluations of coaches are often based on that 5% of time spent in competition. For coaches of some team sports, it is possible to take time-outs and talk to your team during competition, but in the great majority of Olympic sports, the ability of coaches to influence athletic performance stops the moment the event begins. Because of this reality, the last few minutes before a competition can loom large in the mind of coaches.

Is it possible, through your words and actions in those last few minutes, to help an athlete win a gold medal? Is it also possible, through your coaching words and coaching actions, to cause an athlete to lose a gold medal? While the impact of these last few minutes is often overstated in the media, there is certainly some value in considering the best ways for coaches to manage this time. Based on observations of great coaches, feedback from great athletes, as well as having watched things go terribly wrong in those last few minutes, here is a list of do's and don't's for coaches in the last few minutes before competition.

1. Have a coaching plan for the last few minutes. Just as we tell athletes to come up with a specific plan for competition (the goal being to maximize ideal thoughts, emotions, and behaviors), it is certainly worth taking the time to prepare a specific plan for managing yourself at competitions. As we tell the athletes, however, a plan should help free up your mind to adapt to the situation, not be a straitjacket that limits your behavior. A plan based on past excellent coaching moments reminds you of who you are at your best as a coach, and gives

you a framework for managing those last minutes before competition. Set aside time to think through what has gone well and what has gone poorly in the last few minutes, and make some notes. Summarize this raw data into some rules for coaching behavior just before competition and you will be more likely to succeed in those situations. It sounds simple, but I would guess that fewer than 10% of elite coaches have done this exercise.

- 2. Have a clear idea of what behaviors you are looking for from each athlete.** The odds of influencing behavior go up dramatically in your favor when you know what impact you want to have and what behavior you want to see. Successful coaches know how each of their athletes behaves at their best and their worst, and will orient their interactions with each athlete to maximize the best behaviors. This is a simple idea, but frequently under pressure, coaches do not take the time to clarify in their mind what they want to see from each athlete.
- 3. Try to do what you normally do.** One of the most common complaints we hear from Olympic coaches and athletes about the Olympics, is that too many things are different at the Olympic Games. These differences make everybody uncomfortable and out of their normal routine. Unfortunately, coaches can also change things up at big competitions, and this is frequently a mistake.



If you have been doing a good enough job to get to the big competition, you probably have managed the last few minutes just fine. Why change that at the biggest competition? An exception to this rule is when you observe that the normal program is obviously not working. A good rule of thumb is to do a lot of work determining the best pre-competition program for your athletes, with plenty of experiments early on. Then, once you have decided on the best program, stick with it. Athletes like routine, routines build confidence and certainty, and routines reduce decision making on competition day.

only know if they are effective if you have actually practiced these situations in training. Essentially, the goal is to organize competition simulations in which your athletes have to handle conditions at least as tough as the worst case scenario. Examples include competing without a normal warm-up, changing the time of competition, playing loud crowd noise (USOC Sport Psychology has a 30 minute crowd noise CD we have distributed to coaches and athletes), and any other logistical wrinkle or challenge you can throw at your athletes.

4. Individualize. Some athletes need to be pumped up. Some need to be calmed down. Some need a clear head. Some need specific technical information. Some need to laugh. Some need to get angry. NFL great Marshall Faulk was recently asked if coach Dick Vermeil deserved his reputation as the best pre-game motivational speaker. Faulk replied that he didn't know, since he didn't listen. His pre-game focus was on reading defenses, understanding new plays, and other specific tasks for the game. In my experience, the best way for coaches to determine what each athlete needs in the last few minutes is to ask each athlete individually. One strategy I have used is to have the athletes fill out a competition plan with their ideal thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and coach interactions. Once this is filled out, I have the coaches and athletes meet and discuss it.

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5. Raise energy, but not negative energy. While the pressure of competition requires that everybody take their job seriously on competition day, too many coaches equate a serious approach with a joyless one. While I have certainly seen exceptions, most of the best big event coaches raise their intensity but not their negativity for big events. When coaches are able to enjoy themselves under pressure, the message gets sent that everything is going to be ok. There is very little down-side to positive energy. Negative energy, on the other hand, can disrupt, distract, and drain useful excitement from staff and athletes. Frequently, negative energy comes from focusing on what might go wrong, or what has gone wrong. Either of these thoughts means that you aren't focusing on the present. The worst negative energy is externally-directed sniping at athletes or coaching staffs. Interpersonal conflict at competitions is distracting and threatens performance.

6. Prepare for the worst (but expect the best). Coaching in the last few minutes is much easier when you have done all the work you needed to in the hours, days, weeks, and months, preceding the last few minutes. Coaches who are scrambling in the last few minutes because they haven't prepared for the kinds of things that can change or go wrong at competitions, are rarely effective. When you have effective contingency plans for the worst case scenario, you can relax as a coach. You can

7. Think questions, not just speeches. We have all seen the movies where a coach gives an inspirational speech and the team goes out and "wins one for the gipper". Many coaches believe that a powerful speech is part of a job requirement to be a great coach, but as evidenced by the Marshall Faulk story, many athletes may not need or want speeches. I have seen many successful coaches use an alternative to speeches: good questions. Instead of a coach giving a speech, reminding players about a key defensive assignment, a coach simply asks each player or groups of players, "What is your key in this defense?" The athlete's answer tells you if they understand or not.

When athletes understand the keys to their performance, the process of answering a question actually impacts that athlete's self-talk in ways that you can see and react to. You simply don't know if that is happening when you give a speech.

When a coach uses open-ended questions such as "what's your main goal today?", athletes give that coach a wonderful opportunity to react and modify thinking. For example, I have seen athletes say "my main goal is to get a decent result" to which the coach responds, "Great! So, what do you need to do to make that happen?", which shifts the athlete's mind away from outcome onto the task at hand. By doing this, the coach keeps the athlete in the present, and keeps the athlete's focus on the controllable. If this coach had simply told the athlete what to think, the athlete would probably have just nodded, with the coach thinking they had gotten through, when instead, the athlete was still thinking about results. Effective questioning may be the best tool in a coaches bag of tricks in the last few minutes before a competition.

8. Don't Say "Don't!" (Frame behaviors in the positive). I will never forget a trip I took to work with coaches at one of our country's traditional college football powers. The football coach at that time had done a great job recruiting, but was under pressure because his team's regularly under-performed in big games, especially the annual giant game with a conference rival. We met in the football team's auditorium, and on the wall were the top 5 team "rules for success" on a giant sign. I immediately understood why the team failed on the biggest stage when I saw rule #1: "The team that makes the fewest mistakes wins." It's not that this isn't true. It's that athletes



and coaching staffs that focus on not making mistakes are not focusing on winning. They are focusing on not losing, not getting yelled at, not getting benched, not getting fired. This is the dark underside of perfectionism, and it makes athletes and coaches vulnerable in the big games, with the most pressure. In the case of this football team, rather than attempting great plays, the team focused on safe plays. Years later, a staff member on the team said that their opponent's defense in the big conference game was calling out the plays, knowing exactly what the team would do, because the team was avoiding anything risky. Contrast this fear of making mistakes to the quote from UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, whose teams dominated the big games for a decade: "The team that makes the most mistakes will probably win. There is much truth in that statement if you analyze it properly. The doer makes mistakes, and I want doers on my team -- players who make things happen."

By identifying specific goals to go after, rather than specific things to Not Do, coaches can help athletes focus on execution and excellence, reduce worry, and stay optimistic and positive. These are hallmarks of athletes who perform under pressure. Nowhere is this approach more important than in the last few minutes before competing. Identify what you want to see, not what you don't want to see, and keep the conversation on the positive competition behaviors.

9. Sweat the little stuff well before competition. The last few minutes before competition is the time for stripped down thinking, focusing only on simple, powerful, and useful ideas. Unfortunately, many coaches make the mistake of obsessing about little details that don't matter at that point in time. There is a time and a place for sweating the details, and the time is early and the place is away from competition. When you develop

your personal plan for competition (see point #1), you have a great opportunity to think of every possible detail and make a plan to ensure that the details are taken care of. If you are worrying about details at the competition, you didn't do your work ahead of time. I have known many nervous coaches, constantly and obsessively checking, and these coaches tend to irritate everybody around them. These coaches are frequently avoided by athletes and other coaches in the last few minutes, because the worrying rubs off on everybody and you may not have time in the last few minutes to clear your thoughts of these worries. If you are a coach who worries more than most people, you need to find a way to take care of the worries and let them go for those few minutes before competing. If you don't, you will have an unintended negative impact, creating much more lasting damage than some little detail left undone.

10. Remember the role of emotions. Emotions are the wild card in the last few minutes before competition. Sometimes strong emotions produce personal best results, and sometimes they create disasters. Because many of us are afraid of strong emotions, we frequently do what we can to put a lid on emotions. In the last few minutes before competition, the last thing many coaches want to see is an athlete crying, since many of us believe that someone who is crying is out of control. On the other hand, if you develop the skills to coach even when emotions run high, you can operate much more effectively in the last few minutes. If an athlete is able to tell you they are afraid, then you can help. If the athlete is unable to do that, then you cannot help, and the athlete will probably fail. Which situation would you prefer?

If you remember a couple of basic ideas when faced with emotions in the last few minutes, you may have an easier time with this important skill. One simple idea is not to be afraid. If tears or anger don't scare you, you can keep talking, and keep on working. Another simple idea is don't be embarrassed. Many coaches who see athletes with strong emotions stay away, because they feel the eyes of observers watching them and they are embarrassed to be on stage. If you act as if strong emotions are a normal occurrence, it has a calming impact on everyone in the vicinity, especially the athlete. One final idea when dealing with strong emotions is not to make any assumptions about what those emotions mean. An angry athlete may or may not know why they are angry. The anger may or may not have anything to do with the competition. The anger may be related to the coach, or it may not. The key strategy is engaging the athlete, talking through the situation, and remembering what you ideally want to see from this athlete in competition (point #2). As long as you know where you want to go, you can get there, even when working with a very emotional athlete. If the strong emotion throws you off your stride, however, and you forget your goal, you may end up throwing away a performance opportunity in those last few minutes. To summarize, if a coach is unafraid, unembarrassed, and doesn't make assumptions, they can be a great resource for an emotional athlete in the last few minutes before competing.