

Coaching Burnout

*The discontented man finds no
easy chair.*

Benjamin Franklin

There are different reasons why coaches give up their posts. It's understandable how a person who has coached for ten or fifteen years might choose to slow down, change direction, and try something new.

A person may decide to take a year off from coaching and teach night school, attend college, sell real estate, or go fishing. That's okay. The time off acts as a stimulant by pumping fresh energy into the coach's tired system.

What about the coach who waves a white flag and hollers "I've had it!"? The message comes through loud and clear—the coach wants out. Now.

Enter burnout. Exit coach.

COACHING BURNOUT: WHAT IS IT?

Burnout is a condition that results from the buildup of stress, tension, and anxiety. A coach weakens under the mounting pressure and becomes physically and emotionally drained.

Fatigued coaches who decide to "pack it in" say things like:

"I'm just totally drained."

"Hey, I'm wasting my time. The kids today aren't dedicated to sports."

"Nobody cares. Whenever I ask for something, I get the door slammed in my face."

Why do some coaches burn out? Simply because they become emotionally exhausted from dealing with people. And, in many cases, these close encounters produce conditions of chronic tension and stress. Take, for example, a coach who turns out losing teams year after year. Negative feelings abound. Mental strain leads to physical exhaustion.

There seems to be a parallel between burnout and low morale, absenteeism, and mediocrity in coaching performance. A losing coach tends to blame failures on bad luck, poor officiating, and lack of support from others.

According to a recent survey given to active coaches across the country, these factors lead to coaching burnout:

1. Too much time spent in preparing for competition.
2. Athletes don't care if they win or lose.
3. Too much pressure from everyone.
4. Few positive strokes from parents or administrators.
5. Taking sports too seriously.
6. Overenthusiasm followed by too many disappointments.
7. Specialization in only one sport.
8. Parental conflicts.
9. Program develops too slowly. Losing seasons, tight money, and poor facilities hamper progress and dampen team spirit.
10. Coach dwells on the belief that athletes "aren't what they used to be" and feels compelled to leave coaching.
11. Coaching too many sports in a single year.
12. Problem athletes take the fun out of coaching.

RECOGNIZING BURNOUT SYMPTOMS

Nearly every coach, at one time or another, experiences early signs of burnout. A coach may ignore these signals and miss the hidden message they carry. An occasional headache, for instance, might hold little significance. But a series of pounding headaches brought on by losing streaks, unruly athletes, or complaining parents may wear down a coach faster than the incoming tide over a sand castle.

What are the telltale signs of burnout?

1. Disenchantment. In other words, the thrill is gone. A coach loses the pre-season urge to get under way. Here's what happens. A coach pours every drop of energy into building a competitive squad. However, for a hundred reasons the coach seldom builds a winner. The

coach's teams never seem to reach the superlative level of expectation. Disillusionment replaces hope. As each season grows longer and longer, the prospect of quitting looms bigger and bigger.

2. Fatigue. Excellent coaching demands a huge chunk of a person's time, energy, and patience. Such dedication saps the energy barrel and tests a coach's level of endurance. When a coach's output greatly exceeds the input, the coach is likely to try something less tiring and more rewarding.

3. Apathy. Apathy, a cousin of disenchantment, whispers, "You don't care any more. Leave coaching. Do something else." As the whisper grows louder, other things in the coach's life become more appealing.

During this time a strange feeling comes over the coach. Many things suddenly become important and worth investigating. New interests spring up like fleas on a hot carpet. When the time is right the coach waves goodbye.

4. Anxiety. As pressure mounts, the coach pushes harder and expects more from each athlete. Others notice how little things irritate the coach. They begin to shy away. Stress and tension pave the way for early retirement.

5. Supersaturation. A coach agrees to handle two or three sports during the season. Everything seems fine until classroom paper work piles up on the coach's desk. The coach falls behind. Students grumble, parents complain, and counselors hammer away at the coach.

As a classroom teacher, the coach resents student pressure to work faster and take more interest in academic affairs. As a coach, the classroom teacher might resort to cutting down on practice time, cancelling several practice sessions, and relying on scrimmages and intra-squad games to survive loosely organized sessions.

The coach, like a ping pong ball, bounces back and forth between classroom and playing field. Frustration, tension, and anxiety gang up on the coach. This could well be the coach's last year.

6. Conflict. A coach grows weary battling other coaches over use of facilities and equipment. A sharing system only works when everyone cooperates. With few exceptions, two or three coaches manage to cause problems for others.

Conflicts lead to emotional tantrums which promote hard feelings between coaches. A coach soon tires of stepping off ten paces with another coach just to get a fair share of the pie.

7. "Nomoneyitis." Everybody needs money. There never seems to be enough to go around. A coach may not have the time or desire to set up fund raising projects. Perhaps the coach feels it's the school's

duty to supply athletic teams with enough money to survive. At any rate, a non-supportive school district forces a coach to make a decision—either coach under adverse conditions or resign.

There are other symptoms that may eventually lead to burnout. They are:

- A feeling of being "used" by an underpaying school system.
- A feeling of being a servant to self-centered athletes.
- A sensing of disrespect for the monetary worth of what a coach does.
- Failing health partially due to overwork.
- Expecting more from self than capable of delivering.

The following questions will help active coaches learn if they have some of the symptoms of coaching burnout:

1. Do you get upset easily when your athletes make physical mistakes? YES NO
2. Do you feel there are no excuses for athletes to make mental mistakes? YES NO
3. When you lose a key athlete or two, are you ready to write off the season? YES NO
4. Are you easily intimidated by disgruntled parents? YES NO
5. Do you blame yourself most of the time when things go wrong? YES NO
6. Do you lose patience with athletes who show little or no improvement? YES NO
7. Do you find yourself "badmouthing" the school and community for showing a lack of support? YES NO
8. Do you often feel like you're "spinning your wheels" and falling behind in your teaching responsibilities? YES NO
9. Do you often curse yourself for coaching when you could be doing something else? YES NO
10. Do you become more irritable and short-tempered while coaching than at any other time? YES NO
11. Are there certain occasions when you feel officials are favoring the other teams? YES NO
12. When pressure mounts during close contests, do you become overly excited? YES NO
13. Are you having trouble preparing yourself mentally for the coming season? YES NO
14. Do you feel today's athlete lacks dedication, desire, and determination? YES NO
15. Are you getting tired of maintaining your own playing facilities? YES NO

16. Do you feel the administration is supporting your program as it should? YES NO
17. Do you have a tendency to give up when things go wrong during a contest? YES NO
18. Do you find yourself holding grudges against certain athletes? YES NO
19. Are you more concerned with winning than with anything else? YES NO
20. Do you feel sports should be the most important event in an athlete's life? YES NO
21. Are you bothered by the low pay most coaches receive? YES NO
22. Are you finding it increasingly difficult to prepare yourself physically for coaching? YES NO
23. Do you feel that the local press "has it in" for you? YES NO
24. Are there several occasions when you cancel practice to do other things? YES NO
25. Do you have trouble sleeping at night during the coaching season? YES NO
26. Do you often feel depressed and threaten to quit coaching? YES NO

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you have symptoms that may indicate coaching burnout.

WHAT A COACH DOES TO BRING ABOUT BURNOUT

In this section we'll see how a coach contributes physically and mentally to the onset of burnout.

Physical Factors

- A coach, especially one new to the district, takes on too much work. This person wants to help out and finds it difficult to say no.
- A coach doesn't work out in the off-season and, as a result, nurses sore muscles for most of the year. The coach, being susceptible to injury, loses enthusiasm and limps through one practice session after another. The thought of doing something less strenuous becomes more attractive each day.
- A procrastinating coach waits until the last minute to organize practices, gather equipment, and inspect facilities. Usually the procrastinator wastes time running around looking for things. Confusion and frustration gnaw away on the coach's nerves like a termite in a rotting log.

- A coach from a poor school district spends considerable time preparing facilities for competition. Such a coach may line fields (soccer, football, and baseball), set up tables, mats, and bleachers (wrestling) or help clean playing courts (tennis and basketball). The same coach may volunteer to officiate contests for other coaches in order to save the school money.

The school may have an understaffed maintenance department which only spends one day a week servicing athletic facilities. The coach becomes mentally and physically exhausted half-way through the season by trying to keep facilities in playing condition.

- An active coach tries to relive the past by vigorously working out with athletes. As the years pass, however, it grows harder for the coach to get into shape. Muscles stay sore longer and interest in competing dwindles. Under these conditions, a coach may bow out of athletics and seek other employment.

MENTAL FACTORS

- A coach takes on the characteristics of an acceptor by pleading guilty to most of the team's ills. As problems mount, the coach may lose confidence, become depressed, and decide to do something less strenuous.
- A coach allows outside forces to control the decision-making process. Let's take the hypothetical case of Anne Davis, girls' varsity basketball coach.

Here's Coach Davis's problem: Should she start Louise or Rhonda at center in tomorrow's basketball game?

The decision-making process lights up the electrical switch-board in Coach Davis's brain. Positive and negative thoughts bounce around like pebbles in the bed of a pickup truck. It works something like this:

Negative Alternatives	Positive Alternatives
1. If I start Louise, then Rhonda may quit the team.	1. If I start Rhonda, then her parents will be happy.
2. If I start Louise, then Rhonda's father will blow his stack.	2. If I start Rhonda, then she'll be happy.
3. If I start Louise, then Rhonda may think I favor Louise.	3. If I start Rhonda, then she'll feel I have confidence in her.

After weighing the alternatives, Coach Davis makes her decision: She'll start Rhonda. After all, Louise is more mature and less emotional than Rhonda. Louise will understand and accept the decision without becoming upset. Besides, both athletes will see plenty of action.

Does anyone lose? Maybe yes, maybe no. It depends on the attitude of athletes. For example, if team members suspect that Coach Davis is easily intimidated by moody athletes or aggressive parents, they'll turn thumbs down on practically any decision she makes. When this happens, a coach's days are numbered.

- A coach teeters back and forth in his or her treatment of athletes. The coach lacks consistency in handling discipline problems, makes impulsive decisions, and waits until the last minute to plan practice sessions. Athletes peg the coach as a flake and quit working to please the coach.
- A coach plays the role of dictator and runs the squad like an army drill instructor. Athletes bark, parents complain, and school officials reprimand the coach for overaggressive conduct.

The coach retorts by accusing today's athlete of being soft, lackadaisical, and dull.

The coach decides these young athletes aren't worth saving in a "soft touch" society. The coach resigns at the end of the season.

- A coach spends the pre-season building a powerful team on paper. Everything falls neatly into place. Unfortunately, three weeks after the season begins, injuries claim three athletes, one key player moves, and two more are declared ineligible. The coach's game plan melts like an ice cube in July. It only takes a few seasons like this to kill a person's desire to continue coaching.
- A coach allows negative impressions to smother positive thinking. One coach, for example, resigned after spending the last three years bickering with athletes. After turning in his resignation, he asked the principal, "Why should I continue to put my sanity in the hands of juveniles?"

ATHLETES AND COACHING BURNOUT

Some ex-coaches confess that crybaby athletes drove them out of coaching. Here are eight pressure situations brought about by athletes that push a coach near the breaking point.

One, moody athletes with sensitive feelings whine about anything that doesn't go their way. A coach makes a gallant effort to keep these

athletes content without bypassing the needs of other team members. The coach, who is fighting a difficult battle, may crumble under the stress.

Two, certain athletes get down on themselves and give up in tight situations. A coach tries to instill confidence by pumping up these athletes with positive strokes. Nothing works. The coach feels responsible for not motivating these athletes.

Three, a coach builds a "buddy buddy" relationship with athletes. Athletes respond by developing a carefree attitude toward competition. After all, since the coach is their pal, nothing drastic will happen. The coach quickly realizes that a country club atmosphere suppresses competitive spirit. Now the coach faces the super challenge of tightening discipline and gaining control of the team again.

Four, a coach, acting as soul saver, keeps trouble makers on the team. These athletes miss practice, misbehave in class, and spend more time in the office than on the athletic field.

After several disappointing seasons the coach loses interest in trying to make chicken salad out of turkey liver. The coach fades into oblivion.

Five, a coach dedicates himself or herself to helping athletes reach their full potential. Some athletes, of course, develop into first-class performers; others fail because they either don't care, are too lazy, or have other interests.

The presence of apathetic athletes may suggest to others that the coach doesn't know how to develop talent. The coach may be thinking the same thing.

Six, a coach finds out that four veteran athletes aren't returning. It seems two found after-school jobs, and two plan on going out for another sport. The coach's dream of winning the league championship shatters into a million tiny pieces.

Seven, some athletes ridicule the athletic program and challenge the coach's ability to handle players. These athletes keep trouble brewing throughout the season.

Eight, a coach allows parental pressure to direct the thinking of certain athletes. For instance, an aggressive parent with miles of "athletic experience" offers to help the coach organize and guide the team. If the coach agrees, the coach may soon become the highest paid assistant around. Athletes fail to support a coach who allows others to take charge and run the show.

What can a coach do to limit problems created by athletes? Here are seven suggestions:

1. Make coaching philosophy crystal clear to athletes before the season begins. Leave no doubt in anybody's mind.
2. Be a tough, but fair, disciplinarian.
3. Be consistent, honest, and assertive when making a decision.

4. Direct parental complaints to the school principal or athletic director. Handle these problems in a calm, reasonable manner.
5. Weed out any athletes who attempt to downgrade fellow players or the athletic program.
6. When problems among athletes occur, find out why. Keep an open mind, but stay in control at all times.
7. Do the best job possible.

PARENTAL CONFLICTS CONTRIBUTE TO BURNOUT

There are parents who relive their glory days in sports through their children. These parents see their sons and daughters as future college stars, albeit many struggle to make the high school squad.

These athletes are led to believe that they can play on nearly any college team in the country. But when these athletes fail, irate parents spill forward with comments like these:

"Mary's coach didn't understand her. She didn't know how to handle her."

"I wanted Bob to pitch, not play the outfield. Bob lost interest in athletics in his senior year."

"Frank practiced his heart out every day. What good did it do? He seldom got to start in a league game."

"Joan said the coach played everybody but her in league games. She felt the coach didn't like her."

"Mark told me the coach was unorganized, inconsistent in handling athletes, and didn't know the first thing about coaching."

Notice that in every case it's the coach who fumbles, not the athlete. Maybe a parent feels that the coach's unorthodox style of teaching techniques has retarded the progress of athletes.

A coach can be whittled down by two kinds of parental pressure—indirect and direct.

Indirect Parental Pressure

John B. won several athletic awards participating in youth programs prior to entering high school. However, John whines constantly during practice and finds fault in many things the coach does. Besides, John's not used to playing on the second team.

John's father believes the coach is making a mistake by not starting his son. He doesn't say anything to the coach, but tells John to keep playing "the way I taught you."

principal, and coach. For instance, if the superintendent refuses to fold under community pressure, the coach wins. Conversely, a wilting superintendent sends the coach down for the third time. In most cases, the principal supports the superintendent's decision.

Clearly, then, an aggressive community can convince a coach to try something less strenuous, something far away from coaching. A stubborn individual may choose to continue coaching despite the opposition. Most coaches, however, would gracefully bow out and let somebody else take over. These coaches are mentally and physically exhausted from battling with the community.

HOW THE LOCAL PRESS SHORTENED A COACH'S CAREER

As a rule, the local press speaks favorably about athletes and coaches. Most newspapers make a sincere effort to print only those events that cast a positive light on an athletic program. After all, a reporter, in most instances, receives information directly from coaches.

Occasionally a feud erupts between the press and a coach. Maybe the paper misquoted the coach or criticized a decision that backfired. These are the exceptions rather than the rule.

A responsible reporter will not print any questionable or derogatory material about a coach or team without checking the sources firsthand. Several years ago a small town newspaper printed a letter written by an anonymous person. The letter accused the varsity basketball coach of being incompetent, stupid, and lacking in common sense. It also labelled the coach as prejudiced and "dangerous to the health and well-being of today's youth."

The outraged coach called the paper's editor, reprimanded him for printing such a damaging letter, and demanded that the editor print an apology. The district superintendent backed the coach by writing an editorial calling the person who wrote the letter a coward with questionable morals. The written apology appeared in the paper next to the superintendent's letter.

Unfortunately, the damage had been done. The letter's impact hit the coach hard; he resigned at the end of the season.

HOW TO PREVENT COACHING BURNOUT

Today there are specialists for practically every ill known to man. Yet a simple case of burnout can go undetected until a coach's energy pool dries up.

In educational literature, teacher burnout is commonly referred to as the big click; that is, the energy switch is stuck in the off position.

A coach, like a teacher, has a switch that can be turned off and on. Burnout does not have to be a final state, only an interim problem.

Dr. Dennis Sparks, director, Northwest Staff Development Center, Livonia, Michigan, offers these specific suggestions for avoiding burnout:

1. Good physical health helps immunize coach against stress and burnout. Practice what you preach with your team—get a good night's sleep; eat three meals a day, especially breakfast; use your "season" to get in shape, and maintain it throughout the year by regular, vigorous exercise; and quit smoking and consuming alcohol (or drink only in moderation).
2. Learn to pace yourself during the high pressure times of the school year. You can't do everything, so establish priorities and do only those things that are most important to you.
3. Involve yourself in activities that are intrinsically satisfying to you. Develop a hobby or avocation that presents a change of pace from your daily routine. The good feelings that come from this will help carry you through the unavoidable frustrations and disappointments of coaching.
4. Get together with others who understand your situation and talk about your feelings. Much of the internal tension you may experience will diminish and be put in its proper perspective as you discuss your concerns with colleagues.
5. Identify your strengths and successes. By focusing on the rewards that you get from coaching you can maintain a better sense of balance when things don't go well. Remember to attend and savor the moments and successes that can make working with young people so rewarding.
6. Most importantly, keep in mind that it is not the events of our lives that produce stress and burnout, but the interpretation or meaning that we give to these occurrences. Too often our expectations for self and others are unrealistically high, and consequently we cannot help but feel disappointment and failure. A "winning at all cost" philosophy on your part or at your school often leads to unnecessary (and unhealthy!) pressure and tension.
7. Recognize that a life-long coaching career may not be in your best interests. Don't sacrifice your health and happiness for an activity that is no longer satisfying.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

Coaching burnout—a condition that results from stress, tension, and anxiety in its victims—builds over the years and causes many coaches to quit.

What are the problems that lead to burnout? Apathetic athletes, deplorable playing conditions, lack of cooperation among fellow coaches and teachers, inadequate pay, interfering parents, community pressure, and non-supportive administrators are among those listed.

How can a coach prevent burnout? One way is by setting up a personal plan that includes the following:

1. Daily exercise.
2. Eating well and getting adequate rest.
3. Leaving your coaching headaches on the field.
4. Developing a hobby to take your mind off coaching.
5. Always having something to look forward to. This will keep your head up and your spirit happy.
6. Seeking to improve. Read. Talk to coaches in the field. Attend coaching clinics and seminars. Come up with fresh ideas to try in practice.
7. Setting realistic and flexible goals for yourself and athletes.
8. Doing your part, but knowing when to say no.

QUESTIONS

1. What is coaching burnout?
2. Why should a coach be on the lookout for early signs of burnout?
3. What are some of the early signs of burnout?
4. Why is it difficult to know when a coach might burn out?
5. Why might a coach develop the feeling of being "used?"
6. In your opinion, which factor—physical or mental—puts the most pressure on a coach? Explain.
7. What physical factors are most likely to lead to burnout? Why?
8. What mental factors are most likely to lead to burnout? Why?
9. Why is it a dangerous practice to "buddy up" to athletes?
10. Why does a coach who goes overboard trying to help an athlete sometimes run into trouble?
11. What can happen when a coach depends too much on certain athletes?
12. How can parents become a problem for the coach?
13. How should a coach handle interfering parents?
14. What is meant by indirect parental pressure? Give an example.
15. What is meant by direct parental pressure? Give an example.
16. What can a coach do to minimize parental pressure?
17. How does the athletic program lose when an experienced coach leaves?
18. How can a community help a coach build a strong athletic program?

19. What things can a community do to get rid of an incompetent coach?
20. How can the local press help a school's athletic program?
21. How can the local press be a detriment to a school's athletic program?
22. Can coaching burnout be prevented? If so, list four or five effective ways.

