

Lead Your Athletes from Conflict to Character with These 3 Tools

By David Benzel



Have you ever cheered at the end of a feel-good movie because your favorite actor (or actress) worked through a difficult conflict and came out a better person because of it?

This is an outcome we all applaud. We instinctively know that it doesn't happen easily or by accident. Conflict is tough and it doesn't always bring out the best in us.

There are typically two ways we approach it. One is a mindset that at whatever cost we pursue a desired outcome – often times at the expense of a relationship.

The second is we work to resolve the conflict in a way that builds trust. Our intent is to protect the relationship **in addition** to finding a resolution.

The worthwhile payoff to this second approach is **character development**. As coaches and parents, it is our responsibility to teach and equip our young athletes towards this end.

How exactly can an athlete be taught to do this?

It is by using their eyes, ears, and mouth.

1) Eyes That See the Other's Perspective

Take a moment to imagine this scenario.

You are first in line at an intersection, and the light turns green. Out of the corner of your eye, you see a woman quickly pushing a stroller in the hopes of getting safely across – so you wait and do not pull out. However, a driver behind, who apparently does not see the woman, begins honking the horn angrily and may even try to pull out and go around. You are bothered by the driver's impatience and troubled at this attempt to pull out.

Sometimes just one piece of information changes the way we see a situation. When a conflict arises between two people, there is a good chance they are not operating with the same information, or at the very least, are interpreting it differently.

Conflict that arises out of a difference in perception is fairly easy to correct. However, seeing things through someone else's eyes does not come naturally for most young athletes.

The "empathy muscle" is underused by most of us.

Action Step: Help your athlete to develop the skill of "seeing through someone else's eyes" by walking through these steps when there is conflict:

- Take the time to see and understand **each** person's point of view – allow them the space to feel understood.
- Have them verbalize the scenario as it might be seen by the other person.
- Encourage each athlete to voice one positive aspect of the other's perception.

2) Ears That Listen Actively

It is really quite powerful when you see how quickly a conflict can de-escalate by just actively listening to the other side.

This is a skill that we often employ **with** our children from a very young age. However, teaching them to **use** this form of effective communication is a tool they can practice over and over again in sports interactions, school relationships, and eventually in their job settings.

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Here are important elements of active listening to use when in conflict:

- Make eye contact with the speaker
- Nod when appropriate so that the other person can see you are making an effort to hear what they have to say
- Have a relaxed stance while listening
- Be aware of your facial expressions and keep them friendly
- Recap what was said

Action Step: Teach young athletes to utilize this form of listening during normal interactions. If it is practiced in friendly situations, it will happen more naturally when resolving a conflict.

3) A Mouth That Responds With “I”

Have you ever said something, in the heat of the moment, that may not have accurately reflected the truth? We all do it. When emotions take over we tend to state our opinions as though they are facts.

Anyone disagreeing is put into defense mode. This is not an ideal place to avoid and/or resolve conflict.

Responding instead with an “I” statement ensures that you are not blaming others but rather taking responsibility for your own feelings.

Here is how it works.

Statement that puts others on defense: “You don’t take practice seriously and that is why we keep losing.”

“I” statement: “I get frustrated when our practice does not prepare us well for the game.”

Our kids learn best when we demonstrate personal responsibility by using “I” statements.

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Action step: When teaching young athletes to resolve their conflicts, encourage them to...

- Use “I” statements to state their side of the story.
- Resist the urge to blame or accuse their conflict “partner.”
- Use a respectful tone as they share their feelings.

Final Thoughts

Conflict in sports is inevitable. Equipping young athletes with the tools to successfully work through to resolution can be a springboard to developing their character. Use the visual of eyes, ears, and mouth to help them remember three ways to make their communication more effective.

[CLICK HERE](#) to ask David Benzel a question about this topic:

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