



## MAINTAINING MOTIVATION FOR COLLEGIATE BASKETBALL PLAYERS

ANDY GILLHAM, PHD, CC-AASP, CSCS

College basketball season begins around the time that pumpkins appear in stores and student-athletes face the consequences of their mid-term grades while continuing through multiple major holidays prompting discussions of family traditions. Fall semester final exams, holiday celebrations to end one year and begin the next, and the start of the spring semester all take place before conferences host their end-of-season basketball tournaments. Depending on each school's academic calendar, those conference tournaments may occur around spring break and spring semester midterms, both of which are significant dates for student-athletes. All of those events are going to occur regardless of how well the team, or individual athletes, perform. Therefore, finding ways to maintain motivation is critical to the success of both individual student-athletes and the team.

Motivation should not only be viewed from a quantity (e.g., a player does not have enough motivation) component, but also from a quality (e.g., effectiveness of motivation) component. A variety of theories have been developed to explain motivation, including the coach-athlete motivational model, achievement goal concepts, competence-motivation, and self-determination theory (SDT) (1,4,5,6,8,9). SDT is one of the most prominent theories; therefore, the remainder of this article will focus specifically on identifying key components of SDT and providing possible examples that strength and conditioning coaches may find useful in order to maintain athlete motivation throughout the collegiate basketball season (3).

### BACKGROUND ON SDT

SDT is a comprehensive theory that has been applied in a variety of settings (7). SDT specifically addresses the quality of motivation by identifying a continuum that includes amotivation and multiple versions of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. There are several mini-theories involved in SDT, including the cognitive evaluation theory, organismic integration theory, causality orientations theory, basic physiological needs theory, goal content theory, and relationship motivation theory (1,9). For the purpose of this article, the focus will be on the mini-theory known as the basic needs theory. The basic needs theory contains the three psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence is when athletes are able to demonstrate their skills and abilities. Autonomy refers to the degree of control athletes have over their experience. Relatedness is a feeling of being connected to coaches and teammates. These three components are thought to be universal across all demographic categories and strength and conditioning coaches can directly affect them as a coach.

Student-athletes demonstrate and develop competence from a variety of sources, both academic and athletic. On the athletic side, research has explored the specific sources of sport confidence and areas that strength and conditioning coaches can consider for adjustments (10). The sources identified are demonstration of ability, mastery, physical and mental preparation,

physical self-presentation, social support, vicarious experience, coach's leadership, environmental comfort, and situational favorableness (10).

The idiom of “catch them doing something good” may be a helpful reminder when thinking about helping athlete motivation in terms of competence. Every repetition on every set of every exercise is a chance to point out high effort or spot-on technical execution. The expectation here is not that a strength and conditioning coach monitors all athletes for all repetitions and constantly tells them how great they are. Instead, the expectation is that each athlete knows what the strength and conditioning coach feels they do well and that some member of the staff mentions that to them at various points. For example, the tall athlete that consistently gets good depth on a squat needs to know that the strength and conditioning coach noticed that depth and approved. This type of acknowledgement and approval can help build the confidence level of that athlete. It is also an opportunity to reflect on coaching skills. For instance, how many athletes know what the strength and conditioning staff feels is done well during training? This may also be an area to help graduate assistants and interns improve their coaching and attention to detail by having them identify the best lift of a session, the highest energy contributor, best spotter, or another component that is appropriate for a session or team.

Opportunities for athletes to improve their confidence do not always have to come verbally from a coach. A systematic goal-setting approach has been used with teams for on-field performance, which could be adapted to focus exclusively on training (2). Specific to athlete competence, the idea of goal setting is that the athlete has upfront, objective goals for each session. Accomplishing those goals provides the positive feedback that allows confidence levels to increase. Employing a systematic goal setting approach does require a time investment from the strength and conditioning coach in order to make each athlete's goals specific, but once the program is in place it should reinforce itself and continue with a relatively small time investment. Another option is to remove a majority of the input from the staff by giving team members the responsibility of identifying high-energy contributors or the best lift of the session. This could be highly detailed by providing technique checklists for the athletes to evaluate their teammates. It can also be used in a less formal manner that pairs upperclassmen with lowerclassmen, or starters with reserves, to increase certain individual's connection with others. Adjusting the pairs based on how the season is going or the team's current needs may be the most effective coaching practice and it may play a role in establishing relatedness as well.

## AUTONOMY

A good way to think of the concept of autonomy is to picture a leaf floating in the wind. That leaf has absolutely no autonomy, or self-control, over where it goes. That is the exact opposite of what should happen with athletes. Ideally, a strength and conditioning coach should foster an environment where athletes are allowed to make some decisions, but whatever decisions the athletes make still result in beneficial training

sessions. Much like how the coach and administration decide how to establish discipline, how much choice is built into the training program is a reflection of the coaching style and philosophy of the strength and conditioning staff. The key here is to reflect on coaching skills and identify the situations with the best possibilities of increasing athlete autonomy.

The following questions are meant to help strength and conditioning coaches reflect on ways to include athlete choices in training sessions. Due to the variety of facilities and localized variables specifically relevant to each coach, not all of the following questions will apply, but these questions should spur some thought about possible options. Can the location vary for where the cardiovascular conditioning takes place (e.g., at a track, on campus, at a field, etc.)? Is the staff willing to allow the exchange of one exercise for a similar exercise (e.g., flat barbell press swapped for flat dumbbell press)?

Being creative with what the athletes wear during training sessions may not only provide a chance for the athletes to have a little bit of control over the experience, but it may also provide some fun to help break up the gloomy winter days of a long basketball season. Even something as simple as allowing the athletes to select which corner of the court they begin their dynamic warm-up from is one way to allow the athletes some level of autonomy. The key message here is to find some opportunities where strength and conditioning coaches are comfortable ceding some control to the athletes. Increasing athlete autonomy can be a great coaching tool, as long as it does not threaten or detract from the strength and conditioning coach's goals.

## RELATEDNESS

In the context of SDT, relatedness is about the athlete having a connection to the other players, the sport coaches, and the strength and conditioning staff. The objective is to create meaningful connections and a sense of belonging that goes beyond basketball or training-specific circumstances. The standard to achieve is not best friends, life-long comrades, or even some abstract vision of respect; rather, the goal is simply to achieve and maintain a meaningful connection.

At the center of relatedness are interactions between people. The role of the strength and conditioning coach may be centered on providing an opportunity for those interactions to occur in a comfortable environment. Depending on the coach's context, there are many ways to create groups for training sessions. For instance, can training sessions include the men's and women's teams training together? Can a local high school or club basketball team be brought in to train with the college athletes? Giving some autonomy to the athletes in selecting the clothes they train in by having different subsets of athletes wear different clothes can be a way of creating relatedness. As an example, the frontcourt players could all wear red tops and the backcourt players wear green tops around Christmas time. Similarly, clothing could be used for other holidays (e.g., orange shirts for pumpkins) or special events (e.g., snowflakes for winter).

Even though it may sound like a silly suggestion, remember that the objective of relatedness is to build a connection. The athletes may need to spend time together away from practice and training to create or plan their clothing, which could help tremendously in terms of establishing a connection. Carrying the idea forward over a number of seasons is a way to establish and build a culture that can effectively improve connections between returning players and new additions to the team.

Meaningful connections can involve the strength and conditioning staff, too. In fact, that may be the best way to help jump start the athlete-to-athlete connections. Pairing athletes for a training session based on hometown, places they have traveled to, favorite hobbies, even favorite cookies, or anything they might have in common is a simple way to start. Staff members getting involved in the conversation by telling a story of a trip, or their hobbies can serve as another conversation topic for the players with each other and with the strength and conditioning staff. It may seem strange to talk about cookies, but that next road trip when there are cookies at the hotel or in the buffet line, the athletes may remember the conversation they had about cookies. Providing opportunities for conversations that are not just based on the training, practice, or a game at hand is what relatedness is all about.

### CONCLUSION

Competence, autonomy, and relatedness are three keys to promoting a more intrinsically motivated athlete. These components can be combined in nearly limitless ways, which is especially important for basketball student-athletes with a lengthy season. Consulting with a qualified, certified sport psychology consultant may provide additional guidance or more ideas based on localized facility, staff, and athletes. Some recommendations can be found below for strength and conditioning coaches to help motivate their athletes:

- Reflect on coaching practices within the context of providing athletes opportunities to develop competence, and exercise some control over their training to make meaningful connections with others.
- List possible ways for athletes to demonstrate competence, exercise autonomy, or build relatedness.
- List current methods that may impair athletes' opportunities to demonstrate competence, exercise autonomy, or build relatedness.
- Identify the changes that are viable for the specific facility and the athletes.
- If you identified more than one change, implement the changes in steps according to an overall plan rather than all at once.

### REFERENCES

1. Deci, E, and Ryan, R. *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. New York, NY: Plenum Press; 1985.
2. Gillham, A, and Weiler, D. Goal setting with a college soccer team: What went right, and less-than right. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action* 4(2): 97-108, 2013.
3. Hagger, MS, and Chatzisarantis, NLD. *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Exercise and Sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics; 2007.
4. Harter, S. Effectance motivation reconsidered. Toward a developmental model. *Human Development* 21: 34-64, 1978.
5. Mageau, G, and Vallerand, R. The coach-athlete relationship: A motivational model. *Journal of Sports Sciences* 21: 883-904, 2003.
6. Nicholls, J. *The Competitive Ethos and Democratic Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1989.
7. Ntoumanis, N. A self-determination theory perspective on motivation in sport and physical education: Current trends and possible future research directions. In: Roberts, GC, and Treasure, DC (Eds.), *Advances in Motivation in Sport and Exercise*. (3rd ed.) Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics; 91-128, 2012.
8. Roberts, G. Motivation in sport and exercise from an achievement goal theory perspective: After 30 years, where are we? In: Roberts, GC, and Treasure, DC (Eds.), *Advances in Motivation in Sport and Exercise*. (3rd ed.) Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics; 5-58, 2012.
9. Ryan, R, and Deci, E. *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester; 3-33, 2002.
10. Vealey, R, Hayashi, S, Garner-Holman, M, and Giacobbi, P. Sources of sport-confidence: Conceptualization and instrument development. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 20(1): 54-80, 1998.

---

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Gillham owns and operates Ludus Consulting, LLC, which focuses on performance enhancement for athletes, coaches, and business executives. Of specific note is his work with coaches and athletic administrators on improving systematic coach evaluation and providing targeted coach development opportunities. Gillham is a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist® (CSCS®) through the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) and a Certified Consultant through the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (CC-AASP). He serves as a sport psychology consultant for collegiate teams and coaches as well as individual athletes competing at high school and college levels in the United States and Canada. Gillham is an Editorial Board member for two peer-reviewed journals, the *International Journal of Sports Sciences and Coaching* and the *International Sport Coaching Journal*. Gillham earned both his Bachelor of Science degree in Fitness and Master of Science degree in Human Performance from the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse. He received his PhD in Education with a Major of Sport and Exercise Psychology from the University of Idaho.

