Coaching the Generation “Z” Athlete

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Outline

1. Defining Generation Z
2. Characteristics of Gen Z individuals
3. MSU research study on coaching Gen Z athletes
4. Strategies for Coaching Z
5. Guidelines
Generation Z

- Born after 1996.
- First generation to have grown up in a totally digital world.
Discussion

How would you characterize Generation Z athletes?
Research on Generation Z

The literature has shown….

‣ Short attention spans

‣ Excellent technology skills

‣ Need structure and boundaries

‣ Lack strong interpersonal skills

‣ Best-educated generation

‣ Want to be involved in decision-making
MSU Research Study

Purpose:

- Determine experienced sport science providers' perceptions of the attentional, motivation and communication characteristics of today's elite junior player and the barriers and keys to helping players use sport science to develop and improve their games.

Participants:

- 9 tennis coaches
- 1 strength and conditioning coach
- 1 sport psychologist
- 1 athletic trainer
Results: Characteristics

Lack of independence

“I think a dependence on me to solve their problems...you know you miss a shot or you’re winning and all of a sudden you start losing, they’re looking to the sideline, their looking for help” P2

Visual learners

“They have the ability to look at video of themselves or other players and really draw a lot of information. They’re pretty astute and they’re pretty complex in their ability to interpret through video.” P7
Want to know the ‘why’

“They have a more critical, in some ways, view of things or at least they’re asking why. And I think you need to explain to gen Z why we’re doing this. What’s the purpose of this.” P5

Sensitive to negative feedback

“I do think they struggle with negative feedback, I think they take it personal. I think they, they again to the self-worth, I think as far as willing to separate it, I think when they receive negative feedback for whatever sport, it is to the person rather than the player” P4

Short attention spans

“Paying attention for them is a struggle sometimes...It’s [attention span] short, I think it’s shorter um than is has been in the past. Something that I’ve learned working with this generation"
Struggle with Adversity

“I don’t believe that when they are faced with adversity, which I would say, you know in sports is, you know a loss or a failure of some type. I don’t think that they’re particularly well prepared and have good coping mechanisms.” (P3)

Lack strong interpersonal skills

“In my experience with these player’s, there are just general social skills, like you know, introducing yourself to somebody new um you know being able to strike up a conversation uh is not, is not as good.” P8

Need to be on social media and phone frequently

“The social media piece is two things. I think one is they’re addicted to it, I think that’s one. But I think two is, that it has now become the language of caring for them”
Discussion

What do the characteristics of Generation Z athletes mean for your program and coaches?
Strategies

Give instructions when giving negative feedback

“They seem to handle it fine especially when you're presenting this is how you can do it better so you're maybe criticizing them but you're telling them how they can actually do it better you know so the tennis game I think they're fine” P8

Have rules pertaining to cell phone use

“They need to create certain parameters where, you know, you can't use a phone during practice. Now when I take them to tournaments I take the phone away an hour before. You know, I take the phone away at night because they can become quite challenging” P5
When presenting information, keep it short, ask lots of questions and have players reflect on the ‘why’

“I think you wanna just, you still make your point what the purpose of the drill is and so on but uh the feedback has to be quick and to the point and then move on.” P2

Build Resiliency Through Stressful Situations

“In practice come up with ways that they're going to be uncomfortable and you make them get through it. And so, you know, unless you teach them that and they get confidence from that, they're not going to deal with adversity very well.”
Build independence by giving players responsibilities

“The more you give the player, players of this generation, the more you give them input, the more you give them a voice, and allow them to kind of create and um and design their own schedules um the more independent they become.”

Set Clear Expectations Agreed Upon with Athlete

“So their expectations, that absolutely needs to be set, needs to be clear, needs to be agreed upon by the player if you're going have success going forward. If you do those things well then the results and the winning will take care of themselves.”
Use Open-Ended Questions to Facilitate Feedback

“The question part of it is so important. Because when you do get into the habit of asking questions, you kind of facilitate that feedback and then it becomes much easier to pick up on how the player is feeling.” (P7)

Purposefully teach interpersonal skills

I've taught them to, to go up and introduce themselves you know that um good morning when you see somebody, thank you when the practice is done, you know, that's like a constant, constant thing that I think build just general social skills.” P8
Exhibit Specific Coaching Qualities for Gen Z Athletes

- Develop trusting and strong relationships
- Manage the team and parents around athletes
- Develop both people and athletes
- Learn and adapt to Gen Z athletes
Other Key Points

Why a Coming of Collective Coming-of-Age Crisis? (Sasee, 2017)

- Screen time – distracts and causes youth to drift
- Softer parenting
- More protection of young people leads them to be intellectually fragile
- More dependent on parents/less independence
Take Home

1. What are two specific strategies that you can use in the upcoming season?

2. How can you use this information to help your coaches?
Conclusions

- Generation "Z" athletes are different but also the same.
- Every generation has positive and negative characteristics.
- Need to find the balance between challenging them and meeting them where they are.
- You still need to get the player to the same place but the way you get there is different.

"I think that's really the difference. I don't, I think at the end of the day, you're, you still have to get to the same place um but the way that you, the way that the coach gets there is, is much different."
Thank You!