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Sample Policy: Standards of Professional Coaching Conduct

Note: The following sample policy is an excerpt from a prepublication manuscript: Lopiano, D.A. and Zotos, C. (Publication 2014) *The Athletics Director's Desk Reference*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics. The nature of this subject reflects a philosophical position about the proper conduct of educational sport that could be different from other equally viable perspectives. Thus, changes in this policy may be required to conform to other perspectives. However, care should be taken about changes in policy expectations related to student-athlete's health and safety. Do not use this sample policy without customizing for your institution, and if necessary, having the document reviewed by institutional legal counsel or higher administration to ensure consistency with local, state, and federal laws and institutional policy.

1.0 Supervisory Responsibilities of the Athletics Director. The Athletics Director or designee shall be responsible for administering policies and procedures that specify standards of professional coaching behavior.

2.0 Coaches' Code of Conduct. All coaches shall be required to annually sign a Coach's Code of Conduct Agreement, attesting to their receipt and understanding of this policy and understanding that violations of this policy may result in sanction or termination of employment.

3.0 Obligation to Report Observed Violations. These policies shall be annually reviewed at a meeting attended by all coaches, trainers, strength and condition staff, event managers, facility supervisors and other administrators responsible for the supervision of coaches. Employees shall be informed of their obligation to report any situation which endangers the health and safety of student-athletes.

4.0 Team Meetings. An athletic administrator assigned to directly supervise each sport program shall attend a meeting with the coaches and student-athlete members of each sport team for the purpose of reviewing important departmental policies applicable to coaches and student-athletes, which shall include a discussion of these policy issues.

5.0 Captains' Council. The Athletics Director shall ensure that the athletics department administrator assigned as advisor to the Captains' Council [or other name of student-athlete advisory group] annually reviews the proper role of team captains, how team captains can contribute to a positive team

atmosphere and proper procedure for dealing with complaints related to coach behavior.

6.0 Meeting of Contest Site Supervisors. The Athletics Director shall annually conduct a meeting of all athletic event site supervisors and security personnel to discuss this policy as it applies to fan behavior and coach conduct. Such personnel shall discuss the types of situations that should be reported to the Athletics Director.

7.0 Supervision of Coaches and Instructors. The Athletics Director or her/his designee shall have evaluation procedures in place that include the regular observation of practices and competitions of each coach for the purpose of evaluating instructional performance.

7.1 Complaints. The Athletic Director shall be responsible for establishing a fair process for handling student-athlete or parent complaints related to the instructional ability or behavior of a coach, that is consistent with standard procedures for handling employee conflicts or performance issues but also includes:

- the opportunity for a student-athlete to report cases of abuse [whether verbal, physical, or otherwise] to a neutral third party outside the athletics department procedures that protect the privacy of the athletes and coaches and limitations on confidentiality
- procedures for determining whether abuse has occurred that protect the legal rights of coaches and players until an investigation has been completed
- an internal institutional appeals procedure in the event that the accused or the alleged victim is dissatisfied with the outcome of the investigation or hearing
- requirement to inform those involved about his or her opportunity for redress in a court of law
- procedures that protect coaches and athletes from retaliation before, during, and after a hearing or appeals process with retaliatory behavior viewed as seriously as abuse itself and acknowledging that retaliation can occur independently of whether a charge of abuse is substantiated
- requirement for immediate action to ensure that the environment is free of abuse and ensure that an investigation proceeds in a timely manner
- investigatory guidelines to ensure that institutional investigators follow proper procedures for an immediate, fair, and unbiased investigation

7.2 Annual Performance Appraisal. The coach’s annual performance appraisal shall include an assessment of each of the areas covered by this policy: safety, professional development, instructional ability, program success, student-athlete performance improvement, practice learning atmosphere, professional relationships/conduct and interaction with other constituents.

7.3 Student-Athlete Coach Evaluations. Student-athlete annual evaluations of coaches are required. The Athletics Director or his/her designee shall administer such evaluations without coaches being present.

8.0 Instructional Safety. Institution shall employ coaches that have the necessary credentials and

experience to safely and efficiently teach the skills and strategies included in their sport and establish practice environments that minimize the potential for physical harm. Coaches are responsible for conforming to the highest levels of student-athlete care.

8.1 Safety Alerts. Coaches are required to stay up-to-date on all safety alerts that are publicly announced by equipment manufacturers, sport governing bodies, or any other organization associated with their respective sports. Safety alerts must be brought to the attention of the Athletics Director.

8.2 Physical Abuse. Physical abuse of student-athletes is expressly prohibited. Coaches should be aware that physical abuse can take many forms. Some of the more common forms of physical abuse include: (1) when a coach touches an athlete in a non-instructional, non-consoling, or non-congratulatory way; (2) when a coach requires or suggests that an athlete perform a physical act that has no relevance to the sport and which is intended to cause embarrassment, be degrading or punish; (3) when a coach requires or suggests that an athlete continue to perform a physical act, whether it is relevant to the sport or not, that compromises established conditioning and safety guidelines; and (4) when a coach fails to stop an activity where an athlete is clearly being subjected to physical harm.

8.3 Adherence to Emergency Medical Plan. Each coach is responsible for adhering to the athletics department Emergency Medical Plan whenever dealing with serious injuries occurring in athletics facilities.

8.4 Collaboration with Support Staff. All coaches will collaborate with the Strength coach and the Athletics Trainer to create practice workouts that are efficient and adhere to sound principles related to a variety of factors such as safety, hygiene, conditioning, hydration, and environmental conditions such as weather and facility anomalies. In any case where the Strength Coach and/or the Athletics Trainer disagree with a coach on an issue related to health or safety, the coach must defer to the expertise of the Strength Coach and/or the Athletics Trainer or engage the Athletics Director in a meeting with this group to determine the appropriate course of action.

8.5 Acceptable Physical Activities. Coaches may require that athletes take part in instructional, competitive or conditioning physical activities during practices or contests that are relevant to the sport and, through collaboration with the Strength Coach and the Athletics Trainer, meet conditioning and safety guidelines. Such activities should be based on the coach's training, educational background, and experience and any new techniques for which training or certification does not exist, must be prefaced by reasonable external consultation or review by experts and must not impose danger, risk, or harm to participants that would normally not be encountered by participation in that sport.

8.6 Excessive Physical Activities. Coaches may not require or suggest that athletes continue to take part in physical activities beyond reasonable limits that could compromise student-athletes' health or conditioning and/or safety guidelines.

8.7 Responsibility to Act. Whenever a coach observes a situation where an athlete is mismatched physically with an opposing athlete and in danger of being harmed or the athlete is clearly unable to perform a physical activity safely or effectively, it is the coach's responsibility to immediately discontinue the activity for that athlete.

8.8 Responding to Athlete Questions. Coaches are expected to be responsive to respectful athlete

questions regarding the purpose and intended impact of training and instructional activities.

9.0 Professional Development. All coaches shall continue to advance their knowledge related to teaching excellence and safety considerations by attending at least one coaches' workshop, clinic or other professional development experience per year at his or her expense or using institutional professional development funds as a condition of employment.

10.0 Physical Bodily Contact With Athletes. Coaches may not have any physical bodily contact with athletes outside of the practice or contest environment. Within the practice or contest environment, coaches may not have any physical bodily contact with athletes except under the following conditions: (1) when correcting physical form for skill or strategy execution; (2) when comforting or consoling an athlete who is visibly upset or injured; and 3) when congratulating an athlete for a good performance.

11.0 Emotional Verbal Abuse. Coaches and athletes engage in verbal interactions constantly. It is the coaches' responsibility to use such interactions for instructional and motivational purposes. Emotional verbal abuse of student-athletes is expressly prohibited. Emotional abuse of athletes can take many forms such as: (1) when a coach excessively, in comparison to treatment of other athletes, singles out an athlete through negative interactions; (2) when a coach routinely uses profanity or degrading language; (3) when a coach personalizes error correction; (4) when a coach devalues a player's role on the team, potential for success, or value as a person; (5) when a coach constantly blames the team or groups of players for failures; and (6) when a coach isolates a player by ignoring him or her. Coaches must make every effort to avoid such conduct. Coaches should immediately call a halt to any bullying or emotional verbal abuse undertaken by any student-athletes while in the coach's presence. Coaches should refrain from and disallow their student-athletes from engaging in verbal discourse that denigrates others.

12.0 Proper Error Correction. Coaches are expected to correct inefficient performance of skills and strategies by athletes. Error correction should always be targeted at the actual physical performance or the effectiveness of the decisions made. Coaches shall not use error correction in ways that target personal attributes or characteristics of the athletes such as alleging that the athlete is being too weak or too lazy. Error correction must be free from profanity or personally degrading language.

13.0 Equal Treatment. Coaches are expected to treat all players equally. Coaches are prohibited from singling out a player through excessive negative interactions or from ignoring individual players for any reason. Coaches should encourage participation and must never devalue any player's role on the team, their potential for success, or their personal worth. Coaches are prohibited from discriminating against any student-athlete or group of student-athletes based on the individual's race, religion, age, disability, gender, or sexual orientation.

14.0 Team Success and Failure. It is paramount that coaches recognize that the successes and failures of teams are a result of skill, collaborative effort, and effective training by coaches. Coaches are prohibited from placing the blame for failures on any one player or group of players. Coaches should never deflect the responsibility for failure completely away from the coaching staff. Analysis of success and failure should be confined to critiques of skill execution, strategy, consistency of effort and other objective elements of performance.

15.0 Coach-Athlete Relationships. Coach-athlete relationships are extremely powerful. Coaches and

athletes spend an inordinate amount of time together in an activity that can be intense and emotional. There is always the danger that the relationship between a coach and an athlete may cross the line from mentor-mentee to one that is based on total control, dependence and/or romance. It is the coaches' full responsibility to maintain an appropriate professional teacher/student relationship with each and every student-athlete regardless if the student-athlete is an adult and can legally consent to entering into a dating, romantic, or sexual relationship with the coach. The coach must maintain an unbiased position, demonstrating no appearance or actuality of favoritism toward any one or several student-athletes.

15.1 Control and Dependence. The nature of participating on a sports team demands a certain amount of inter-team dependence and discipline. It is the coaches' responsibility to establish a team environment and ethos that maximizes cooperative effort and performance without compromising basic individual rights. There must be appropriate times in which athletes are free to question and discuss and the coach to respond with explanations. A coach's system of discipline should at all times be reasonable and professional. Care must be taken to avoid creating an atmosphere based on fear, intimidation and total compliance. Such systems of control are antithetical to the learning environment. Team environments should be a balance between positive, nurturing and supportive and highly organized, disciplined and efficient.

15.2 Romantic, Dating or Sexual Relationships. A coach may never enter into any romantic, dating, or sexual relationship with a student-athlete, while that student-athlete is attending that institution and any athletic eligibility remains for that student-athlete, and for two years after cessation or termination of coaching that athlete in any program within or outside the institution, even if that student-athlete is not currently engaged in participating in that athletic event. The two year prohibition is based on the belief that public confidence in the athletics program will be undermined by the appearance or actuality of intimate relationships with former athletes. A coach who engages in such activity even following this two-year period still bears the burden of demonstrating there has been no exploitation of the coach-athlete relationship if faced with allegations of impropriety. This prohibition and obligation to demonstrate no exploitation is consistent with the United States Olympic Committee Coaching Ethics Code.

15.3 Social Prohibitions and Sexual Abuse. Coaches are teachers first and foremost and have a significant responsibility to maintain a mentor-mentee relationship with student-athletes. Therefore, coaches are prohibited from: (1) engaging in a dependent friendship with any student-athlete; (2) spending social time with an individual student-athlete or a group of student-athletes outside of the team environment; and (3) having a romantic, dating, or sexual relationship with a student-athlete; (4) engaging in any unwelcomed quid pro quo sexual activities between the coaches and any student-athletes or potential student-athletes, including requiring that student-athletes or potential student-athletes engage in any sexual activities with their coaches in order to receive an athletic scholarship, playing time, participation on the team at a specific position (such as basketball guard or softball pitcher, etc.), or to remain on the team; and (5) creating a hostile environment by engaging in sexual harassment activities.

16.0 Peer Pressure. Captains and team leaders are often given responsibilities to "set the bar" for other student-athletes by demonstrating intensity in practice and games, positive energy, and an unwavering level of commitment to team principles. The positive purpose of such captain leadership is to create an athlete driven system of motivation and support that becomes contagious throughout the team. At times, however, delegation of high levels of control to captains can create unreasonable peer pressure that could become a conduit of abuse characterized by student-athlete control through

intimidation of teammates. Coaches are responsible for educating captains and other student-athlete leaders about their appropriate roles and monitoring the level of peer pressure that is being imposed. Coaches are prohibited from encouraging or allowing team leaders to require activities outside of practice or from levying sanctions or punishments in any way.

17.0 Social Isolation. When compared to many other student activities, participating on a sports team requires an inordinate time commitment. Daily practices, contests, and the time spent traveling to and from contest sites can often prohibit student-athletes from taking part in other social activities with peers and family. When these regular sport time commitments are added to the common practice of extending sports seasons through championship play, student-athletes playing together on non-school teams and the encouragement of year around training programs, the result may be an environment of social isolation where the vast majority of a student-athlete's interactions are with teammates and coaches. Despite the fact that student-athletes elect to participate in sports, coaches should not exacerbate this potential for social isolation. Therefore, coaches are prohibited from: (1) requiring or suggesting that athletes spend even more time outside of team activities practicing skills, watching film, lifting weights, etc.; (2) requiring or suggesting that student-athletes eat together, live together, or socialize outside of team planned activities other than the use of athletics residence halls; and (3) stating or suggesting that an athletes' status on the team or playing time is in jeopardy if that athlete participates in a non-sport or different sport activity or if that athletes does not participate at all in the off-season.

18.0 Interactions with Other Constituents. Coaches interact with many different constituents such as faculty members, parents, booster groups, fans, alumni, contest officials, and the media. At times these interactions may be contentious. Coaches are expected to maintain a teaching presence and a professional demeanor at all times. Any situation that cannot be comfortably handled by the coach or that may have department-wide ramifications (i.e. fan behavior, inappropriate parental interference, etc.) should be brought to the attention of the Athletics Director. If a situation occurs at the site of a contest, the site supervisor and/or public safety officer should be engaged for assistance.

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