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Open Amateur Club Sports: Policies Governing Professional Coaching Conduct

The adoption, implementation and enforcement of the USOC Coaching Ethics Code (or appropriate sport specific national sport governing body ethics code) and a detailed sport organization “Policies Governing Professional Coaching Conduct,” the violation of which may result in the coach’s immediate suspension and other penalties up to and including termination of affiliation or employment is an essential "standard of care" responsibility of youth sports organizations.

All paid and volunteer coaches should be required to annually sign a statement acknowledging receipt and understanding of the SafeSport Code that sport’s USOC and/or NGB’s “Coaching Ethics Code” and the sport organization’s specific “Policies Governing Professional Coaching Conduct” and their obligation to comply with such codes. The statement should specify that (a) violations of these codes may result in disciplinary action up to and including termination of employment or association with the Club and in the case of sexual misconduct and adjudication by the US Center for Safe Sport, the coach being permanently banned from coaching in the sport and NGB membership, (b) any coach, staff member or volunteer banned from Club membership or employment due to misconduct under this policy will be reported to the national sports governing body, and (c) if the misconduct results in the violation of any law, to the appropriate enforcement agency.

The specificity and clarity of the sport organization’s “Policies Governing Professional Coaching Conduct” with regard to prohibited behaviors and expectations is critical. While not all-inclusive, such policy should include at least the following basic specific expectations and prohibitions:

1.0 **Instructional Safety**. The Club shall employ coaches who 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 athlete care. Coaches are responsible for ensuring that paid or volunteer assistant coaches working under their supervision uphold the same instructional standards.

1.1 **Professional Development**. All coaches shall continue to advance their knowledge related to coaching excellence and safety considerations.

1.2 **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 the conduct of their sport. Safety alerts must be brought to the attention of facility operators, parents, athletes and other staff members as appropriate.

1.3 **Adherence to Physician's Instructions.** Coaches are obligated to follow the instructions of a medical physician with regard to return to competition or practice following injury, including any restrictions related to training limitations of injured athletes.

1.4 **Distribution of Fluids, Drugs and Supplements.** Coaches, volunteers and other employees are prohibited from dispensing or recommending for the improvement of health or performance, any drug, medication, vitamin, nutritional, or ergogenic aid or other ingestible solid or liquid supplement purported to improve health or performance to any athlete. Further, coaches, volunteers, and employees are prohibited from distributing to any athlete any prescription or over-the-counter medicines, including aspirins, cold medicines, etc. Water should never be withheld from any athlete. Any distribution of such substances or withholding fluids is grounds for immediate termination of employment. Any athlete with a medical problem should be referred to a licensed physician or allied health professional.

1.5 **Acceptable Physical Activities.** Coaches are expected to require that athletes take part in instructional, competitive, or conditioning physical activities during practices or contests that are relevant to the sport and meet conditioning and safety guidelines established by sports medicine authorities. Such activities should be based on the coach's training, educational background and experience. 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.

2.0 **Physical Abuse or Inappropriate Touching During Instruction**. Physical abuse of athletes is expressly prohibited. Coaches should be aware that physical abuse can take many forms including inappropriate or frequent unnecessary touching.

2.1 **Prohibited Behaviors Considered Physical Abuse.** Some of the more common forms of physical abuse include when a coach:

- requires or suggests that an athlete perform a physical act that has no relevance to the sport and that is intended to cause embarrassment, be degrading or punish;
- forces an athlete into training and/or competition that exceeds the capacity of his/her immature and growing body;
- attempts to control an athlete's weight or menstrual cycle;
- 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;
- places an athlete in a situation where he/she is mismatched physically with an opposing athlete causing the possibility of physical harm or the athlete is clearly unable to perform a physical activity safely or effectively without harm;
- fails to stop an activity where an athlete is clearly being subjected to physical harm;
- roughly yanks an athlete into a position on the court or field

It is good instructional practice to ask the athlete in advance if it is "ok" to touch them in order to put a

body part in the right mechanical position. An occasional “high five” or a pat on the head or back to acknowledge a celebratory performance is generally acceptable unless the athlete feels uncomfortable for any reason.

3.0 **Responsibility to Act**. Whenever a coach or supervising staff member observes a potentially unsafe situation, it is the coach’s or staff member’s responsibility to immediately discontinue the activity and restore a safe environment. Situations involving sexual harassment, hazing, bullying or other activities defined under this policy must be immediately addressed.

4.0 **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. Athletes should be fully educated about the nature of their sport education experience.

5.0 **Coach Responsibility for Positive Instructional Environment**

5.1 **Equal Treatment**. Coaches are expected to treat all athletes equally. Coaches are prohibited from socializing with individual athletes (see 6.6 and 6.7), singling out a player through excessive negative interactions, or ignoring individual players as punishment or to communicate disfavor. Coaches should avoid situations in which they are alone with any athlete. Coaches should encourage participation of all athletes and must never devalue any athlete’s role on the team, his/her potential for success, or an individual’s personal worth. Coaches are prohibited from discriminating against any athlete or group of athletes based on race, religion, age, disability, gender, or sexual orientation.

5.2 **Team Success and Failure**. It is paramount that coaches recognize that the successes and failures of athletes and teams are a result of multiple factors including athlete skill, collaborative effort and effective training by coaches. Coaches are prohibited from placing the blame for team failure on any one athlete or group of athletes. 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.

5.3 **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 including but not limited to such comments as alleging that the athlete is being too weak, too lazy or too fat. Error correction must be free from profanity or personally degrading language.

5.4 **Use of Peer Pressure**. Captains and other athlete team leaders are often given responsibilities to “set the bar” for teammates 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 athlete control through intimidation. Coaches are responsible for educating captains and other athlete leaders about their appropriate roles and monitoring the level of peer pressure that is being imposed. Coaches are prohibited from encouraging or allowing athlete team leaders to require activities outside of practice or levying sanctions or punishments in any way.

5.5 **Social Isolation**. Compared to many other activities, participating on a sports team or sport training program requires an inordinate time commitment. Daily practices, contests and the time spent traveling to and from contest sites can often prohibit 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, athletes also playing together on school teams, and the encouragement to engage in year around training programs, the result may be an environment of social isolation where the vast majority of an athlete's interactions are with teammates and coaches. Despite the fact that athletes voluntarily elect to participate in our Club program, coaches should not exacerbate this potential for social isolation. Therefore, coaches are prohibited from: (1) requiring (or implying that penalty will be imposed) that athletes spend even more time outside of Club activities practicing skills, watching film, lifting weights, etc.; (2) requiring (or implying that penalty will be imposed) that athletes eat together, live together or socialize outside of team planned activities; and (3) stating (or implying that penalty will be imposed) that an athlete's status on the team or playing time is in jeopardy if that athlete participates in a family, non-sport, or different sport activity or if athletes do not participate at all in the off-season.

6.0 **Inappropriate Professional Conduct.** Coaches, staff members, volunteers, or others who have authority over or provide professional services to athletes must exhibit the highest standards of impartiality and professional treatment and are prohibited from engaging in inappropriate conduct with athletes.

6.1 **General Physical Bodily Contact.** Coaches, other staff and volunteers 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 the coach asks for permission first to touch an athlete for the purpose of correcting physical form or placing a body part in a correct mechanical position; (2) giving a congratulatory "high five" or pat on the head or back to congratulate an athlete for a good performance; or (3) "spotting" or any protective coaching intended to reduce the risk of practicing or performing a skill that may cause harm with such "spotting" techniques explained to athletes beforehand. In general, if anyone touches an athlete, they should ask the athlete's permission before doing so.

6.2 **Sexual, Intimate, or Romantic Relationships**. Having a sexual, intimate, romantic or similar close personal relationship with individuals over which a person has an instructional or service responsibility, even if a consensual relationship between adults, creates the appearance or actuality of favoritism and special treatment, which is professionally unethical and expressly prohibited. Examples of other professionally inappropriate and prohibited behaviors include but are not limited to:

- Coaches performing back rubs or massage on an athlete even if the coach is a licensed allied health professional (must be performed by a non-coach who is a licensed allied health professional hired for this specific purpose and approved by the Club)
- Kissing
- Touching an athlete for instructional/mechanical instructional corrections without prior consent
- Commenting on athletes' or employees' bodies or appearance in a sexual manner
- Commenting on bodily changes and attire of the athlete that is unrelated to the athlete's athletic performance.
- Exchanging or giving gifts
- Romantic communications

- Showing obscene or suggestive photos
- Videotaping or photographing athletes or employees in revealing or suggestive poses
- Discussing/writing about sexual topics unrelated to work responsibilities of employees
- Making sexual jokes, sexual gestures, and innuendos or engaging in inappropriate sexually oriented banter (e.g. discussion of dating behavior)
- Sharing sexual exploits or marital difficulties
- Intentionally invading the athlete's or another employee's or volunteer's privacy during non-working hours or outside of regularly scheduled practice and competition
- Using e-mail, text-messaging, instant messaging, or other social media to discuss sexual topics with athletes or employees

Such unprofessional behaviors or sexual or romantic personal relationships undermine the trust in the coach or employee and belief that the athlete will be treated impartially. Employees or volunteers engaging in such unethical conduct shall be subject to immediate termination of employment or affiliation with the Club. Athletes, coaches, staff or volunteers with knowledge of the occurrence of such conduct shall be expected to immediately inform the Club president or Parent Athlete Advocate.

6.3 **Emotional or Verbal Abuse**. Coaches and athletes constantly engage in verbal interactions. It is the coach's responsibility to use such interactions for instructional and motivational purposes. Emotional or verbal abuse of athletes is expressly prohibited and can take many forms, such as when a coach: (1) excessively, in comparison to treatment of other athletes, singles out an athlete through negative interactions; (2) uses profanity or degrading language; (3) personalizes error correction; (4) devalues a player's role on the team, potential for success or value as a person; (5) constantly blames the team or groups of players for failures; (6) places athletes under consistent pressure to perform at unrealistically high standards given the athlete's development status; and (7) 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 athlete toward another while in the coach's presence. Coaches should refrain from and disallow their athletes from engaging in verbal discourse that denigrates others.

6.4 **Coach-Athlete Relationships**. Coach-athlete relationships can be 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 coach's full responsibility to maintain an appropriate professional teacher/student relationship with each and every athlete regardless of whether the 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 athletes.

6.5 **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.

6.6 **Romantic, Dating or Sexual Relationships.** A coach may never enter into any romantic, dating or sexual relationship with an athlete while that athlete is participating in our Club program, and for two years after cessation or termination of coaching that athlete in any program within or outside the Club, even if that athlete is not currently engaged in participating in the sport. The two-year prohibition is based on the belief that public confidence in the Club 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.

6.7 **Social Prohibitions**. Coaches are teachers first and foremost and have a significant responsibility to maintain a mentor-mentee relationship with athletes. Therefore, coaches are prohibited from: (1) engaging in a dependent friendship with any athlete; (2) regularly socializing with an athlete or a group of athletes outside of organized team social activities; and (3) having a romantic, dating or sexual relationship with an athlete.

6.8 **Prohibited Parent Requests.** Parents and athletes should never ask a coach to drive a Club participant home or to any other site after an event. If emergency transportation needs to be arranged, another parent should be contacted. This policy does not prohibit a coach from participating as a driver in normal club group transportation arrangements to and from practice and competition sites. Similarly, parents should avoid inviting coaches to dinners, family gatherings or non-team social events. As much as we like and appreciate our coaches, special treatment and benefits could be perceived by others as buying special treatment for Club participants. However, it is appropriate for coaches to be invited to attend events when the entire team is invited (i.e., weddings, etc.).

7.0 **Proper Supervision of Athletes**

7.1 **Appropriate One-On-One Interaction with Athletes**. Individual meetings with athletes outside regular practice or competition times should only occur when others are present or where the meeting can be easily observed. If a meeting takes place in an office, the door should remain open and unlocked. If the circumstance requires privacy, another staff member should be informed that the meeting is taking place. If appropriate, the presence or assistance of the club's Parent Athlete Advocate should be considered. Individual training sessions are prohibited and any training session with two or more athletes held outside a normal training time requires the permission of the athletes' parents or guardians who shall be encouraged to attend the training session. If parents or guardians cannot attend, the attendance of another staff member or volunteer should be arranged.

7.2 **Adequate Supervision.** Generally, coaches are expected to arrange for "two-deep" adult (coaches, staff, parents or volunteers) supervision during official club activities. At least one adult must be present whenever athletes are in the locker room and no athlete or supervisor is permitted to operate recorded devices in locker rooms, bathrooms or other changing areas. Coaches and staff are required to carry cell phones in order to eliminate the need to leave athletes unattended while seeking emergency assistance. Athletes shall not be left unattended or unsupervised during any practice or club activity.

7.3 **Travel Supervision**. Coaches, other staff and adult volunteers are not permitted to travel alone with a single unrelated athlete or, on team trips, to be assigned to occupy motel or hotel rooms or other sleeping arrangements with an athlete unless the coach is the parent, guardian, sibling or spouse of that particular athlete. Meetings shall not occur in hotel rooms. Two to four athletes, appropriately grouped by age and sex, shall be assigned to all hotel or other sleeping arrangements. Coaches shall be responsible for arranging that all pay-per-view television stations are blocked and in-room bars are locked. All athletes are required to travel to and from competitions using transport arranged by the club for the team or be transported by their parents or guardians. Coaches and other staff members are prohibited from arranging for athletes' private transportation. No coach, staff member, volunteer, parent or other team "chaperone" shall be permitted to use drugs or alcohol during any team trip.

8.0 **Possible Sanctions**. The Club has the right to impose the following or other appropriate sanctions on individuals or groups who violate Club policy:

- Warning
- Reprimand
- Probation with or without conditions
- Requirements for restitution
- Conditions intended to encourage personal rehabilitation
- Suspension for a definite period of time or until fact-finding a determination by the Ethics Panel is completed
- Report to police and possible criminal prosecution
- Termination from employment or affiliation with the Club

The Club reserves the right to enforce immediate sanctions for violation of zero-tolerance policies at the Club's discretion or for the purpose of restoring a safe environment. Coaches or other staff determined to be involved in or who condone such zero-tolerance activities shall be subject to immediate sanctions such as suspension of employment and/or affiliation with the Club pending completion of the complaint process.

The existence of a policy is meaningless if there is no effective communication to educate the individuals to whom it both applies and protects. There must be an annual commitment to review the policy in detail with both populations, including the parents of minors, accompanied by an encouragement to report violations, information on how violations should be reported, an assurance of "whistle-blower protection" and, in the case of athletes, an assurance that an Parent Athlete Advocate will be available for a confidential conversation and to act on behalf of the athlete.

Topics

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