



If You Must Cut Athletes from SCHOOL SPORTS TEAMS,

Consider Best Practices

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Youth who meet the recommended 60 minutes per day of physical activity are healthier (Lemstra, Nielsen, Rogers, Thompson, & Morris, 2012). In addition, sport participation in schools can contribute to academic success (Bowen & Hitt, 2016). However, many youth discontinue or “quit” sport during adolescence (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute [CFLRI], 2016), sometimes as a result of being cut from a sports team (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008). Cutting, or deselection, does not only affect the athlete. Coaches are also quick to reveal a high level of discomfort with the troublesome nature of this practice (Capstick & Trudel, 2010). Despite the inherent issues with cutting, coaches and athletic directors are often forced to do so for a variety of reasons. These reasons include selecting the best players to be competitive, reducing team sizes due to a limited number of coaches and lack of facility availability, and limited funding. As much as the authors would like to advocate for alternatives to cutting or little to no cutting in school sports (and developmental sport), the reality is that many programs use this practice — so the goal of this article is to address it head on. That being said, a short section at the end of the article provides some alternatives to cutting practices that have been observed in school sports.

There is a general lack of understanding surrounding the practice of cutting athletes. Little in the way of research evidence exists to assist coaches with this difficult task. Even more limited is any clear collection or analysis of school policies that outline best practices for cutting. Most of the literature regarding cutting either neglects the perspectives of athletes and parents (Seifried &

Casey, 2012) or is focused on high-performance athletes (Neely, Dunn, McHugh, & Holt, 2016). Therefore, since the authors wanted to find out more about cutting practices and policies in school sports, their study was designed specifically to gain an understanding of: (1) the current practices for cutting youth from school sports teams; (2) the experiences of all those involved in the cutting process; (3) the influence of cutting on youths’ physical, emotional and social state; and (4) best practices for cutting youth from school sports teams. The data were collected across two western provinces in Canada and included an online survey (respondents $n = 1,667$) that included teacher-coaches ($n = 1,280$) and school athletic directors (teachers; $n = 387$) in all regions of both provinces, as well as interviews with students who had been cut ($n = 14$), their parents ($n = 10$), coaches ($n = 18$), school administrators ($n = 5$), and athletic directors ($n = 5$; total $n = 52$). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the quantitative data set from the online questionnaire. Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify core meanings and themes within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), beginning with searching across the data set to find repeated patterns of meaning. Words and phrases that represented patterns in the data were recorded into initial codes,

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then sorted into descriptive categories, reviewed, and refined looking for patterns that cohered together meaningfully with clear and identifiable distinctions. Lastly, categories were defined to conceptualize as themes.

For the purposes of this article, two aspects of the results that will be most helpful to coaches and athletic directors will be focused on. First, the article explores the physical, emotional and social effects of cutting on the athletes themselves. Second, it will discuss evidence-based strategies identified by participants for cutting in school sports that will help coaches and athletic directors cope with the difficulties as best as possible. It is the authors' hope that this information will help athletes deal with the stress and strain of cutting and help them stay physically active for life (and perhaps even return to try out again).

Effects on the Athlete

Physical Effects. For the most part, research on how cutting in sport can affect an athlete physically has taken a back seat to literature sharing the general positive health effects and benefits of sport participation and literature focused on sport drop-out (CFLRI, 2011; Lemstra et al., 2012; Taliaferro, Rienzo, & Donovan, 2010; Temple & Crane, 2016). Blinde and Stratta (1992), however, concluded that the physical effects for athletes who had been cut were largely dependent on whether or not the individual remained an athlete. Teacher-coaches and athletic directors were found to be

aware that cutting can have various effects on physical activity levels, as these three teacher-coaches and athletic directors indicated:

“Some (students) are more active and motivated to improve and try again, others are not.”

“It depends on grade. Younger students will try out again, older athletes usually move to another sport.”

“Depends on the student. Most will try out for other sports and play sports outside of school.”

Teacher-coaches and athletic directors also noticed that there were a number of athletes who would rarely try out the following school year for the same team they were cut from. It was also noted that being cut deterred athletes from trying out for future teams in any sport. Finally, based on online survey results, approximately 30% of coaches and athletic directors observed a decrease in overall physical activity levels in students who had been cut. Given these results, as coaches examine cutting policies and procedures, it is critical for them to consider the ramifications for athletes' lifelong physical activity opportunities.

From the athletes' perspective, those who had been cut from a school team explained that their desire to play the sport they were cut from diminished, and for some their participation in that sport was minimal due to the following factors: (1) they were not aware of opportunities to participate in the sport outside of their school team, (2) they developed feelings of resentment towards the sport,

and (3) they had low perceptions of their own ability in the sport. Comments from student-athletes included:

“I was really upset after, but it was kind of because they didn’t really tell me what I did wrong... they were just very vague... But then I still have volleyball so I am still active and not just staying home and stuff...I just kind of gave up on basketball.”

“I didn’t really know what to do. I had a lot of time now, you know, free time to do stuff. I did join a gym with a friend and now we work out.”

Although not prominent, a few students did indicate they were motivated to improve their skills and try out for the team the following year:

“It was just a little bump in the road; I mean I’m still going to try out for the team this coming year and still play community. I wouldn’t say it really affected my whole opinion of playing basketball because I still want to play.”

“At the beginning, I was really upset... Then I started thinking that is stupid; why would I want to quit soccer just because I didn’t make one team? I just kind of pushed through and turned it into something that I can drive towards.”

Emotional Effects. The emotional effects for athletes who have been cut are significant — maybe even concerning. For example, Brandt, Wolf and Hoyer (2013) suggested that cutting athletes may

expose them to an increased risk of developing symptoms of mental disorders, particularly in young female athletes. For many students, physical activity and sport allow them to de-stress through simply having fun and playing. Being cut from a team can eliminate this benefit and leave students emotionally vulnerable. Grove, Fish and Eklund (2004) found that, following team selection, the “athletic identity” of those who were cut changed. In addition, Barnett (2007) explained that athletes who were cut experienced an immediate decrease in positive emotions. Brown and Potrac (2009) found that cutting left athletes in a state of emotional turmoil, generating feelings of shock, anxiety, humiliation, anger and despair. Athletic directors and teacher-coaches in the current study recognized the emotional effects the student faces when being cut. One teacher-coach shared that, “It depends completely on their personality, what they have been exposed to, and if they have ever experienced a loss or a disappointment before... this might be the last straw.” Some coaches even mentioned that they feel some of these negative emotional effects themselves:

“It is never easy or preferable to disappoint a young person. Worst part of coaching!”

“Letting a student down is the absolute worst, and I have major anxiety for the entire week of tryouts because of it.”

The emotional effect of being cut was evident in discussions with students and parents. One student recalled her feelings after being



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cut: “I was really upset and I was crying and I didn’t understand... I thought that I was good enough to make the team.” Another student described the work she put in to make the team, then her devastation when she found out she did not make it: “Really disappointed, working on it for so long to make a team and then not making it.” Parents also recognized the emotional effects on their children after being cut from a team and discussed how they had to support them through this emotional time:

“She just laid around for a couple of days, she was just really sad and genuinely heartbroken.”

“They just cut him. And that’s it. His life was turned upside down and I had to really support him through this.”

Social Effects. Being cut from a team also negatively affects the social interactions of students involved in school sports. Research on non-school sport deselection has illustrated a loss of identity when an athlete cannot play (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Grove et al., 2004; Munroe, Albinson, & Hall, 1999). Blankenbaker, Buchanan and Cotten (1976) also reported athletic ability to be a major factor in students’ perceptions of popularity within their social surroundings. More recently, Pomohaci and Sopa (2016) suggested that after family, the most important factors contributing to students’ socialization are classmates, friend groups, and school groups — all of which can be part of playing school sports. Furthermore, Baillie (1993) suggested that the social support athletes experience from sport participation disappears when they can no longer play. Many students rely on the social interactions found in sport, and the social ramifications associated with not making the team could be the hardest to cope with. One student participant shared,

“I didn’t really want to hang out with them (those who made the team) anymore, like when they all would hang out I wouldn’t really want to go because they are just going to talk about basketball and that’s not cool; I’ll be left out.”

The current study’s results show that teacher-coaches, athletic directors and parents are aware of the social effect that cutting has on students. They believe that cutting certainly impacts students’ social circles. It is not easy for kids to face their friends after being cut, particularly if those same friends were successful in making the team, as expressed by one parent:

“She had made best friends with lots of girls. One of her best friends, they were joined at the hip, they just hit it off so well. She is friends with all those girls, now she feels left out.”

If You Must Cut, Follow Best Practices

Coaches use a variety of methods when it comes to communicating cutting decisions to their players. From the authors’ research, the most common methods used were face-to-face athlete-coach discussions, posting a list of athletes who made the team, or a combination of the two (e.g., post list for first round of tryout, face-to-face discussions for later cuts). Decisions on what method to use for the communication of team-selection results were primarily based on two things: number of athletes trying out and number of tryout days. Capstick and Trudel (2010) found similar results with common approaches including posting lists, phone calls, written communication, and face-to-face interactions. The authors’ research revealed some interesting themes regarding the methods used for the selection of athletes for sports teams:

- Cutting policies are largely absent, unwritten and/or not communicated well to athletes, parents and administrators.
- Coaches show a desire for further supports, flexibility, direction and development of school district policies for team selection.
- In team selection, coaches admit feeling the pressure of parental influence, even fearing backlash. To avoid potential repercussions, coaches offer face-to-face meetings with certain players and their parents.
- Tension exists between what is easier for the coach versus what is best for the athlete. For example, coaches see posting a list as the easiest, but acknowledge that a face-to-face meeting is best for the athletes.

Based on the literature (e.g., Brand, Wolff, & Hoyer, 2013; Brown & Potrac 2009; Capstick & Trudel, 2010) as well as the current findings, the authors would like to propose four primary factors that could improve the cutting experience for all involved: expectations, immediacy, privacy and encouragement.

Expectations. Prior to tryouts, a coach should take the time to outline expectations and selection procedures to both athletes and their parents. To avoid potential miscommunication and conflict, Neely et al. (2016) stressed the importance of disclosing the selection process procedures to both athletes and parents before it starts. Teacher-coaches in the current study also expressed the need to put expectations up front, as stated by one teacher-coach: “Set standards of achievement for skills, strategic knowledge, fitness, academic standing, commitment and attendance.” Another suggested having a “parental meeting at the start of tryouts, where you discuss your team selection practices.” Setting clear expectations early on allows athletes and parents to approach tryouts with a clear understanding of what may happen.

Recommendations:

- Identify and revisit expectations and/or policies regarding team selection on a regular basis.
- Collaborate with administrators, athletic directors, coaches, parents and youth to create clear and detailed tryout expectations and selection practices.
- Share these expectations prior to tryouts. For example, send a letter home outlining what is expected during the process of trying out, how many sports are open, as well as how and why cuts will be made.

Immediacy. Coaches are encouraged to inform athletes of team-selection results as close to the final tryout as possible. Although there appears to be no significant literature regarding the effects of immediacy, the current study found that the athletes themselves clearly indicated a preference to know the results of the tryout as soon as possible. Providing results in a timely manner reduces the anxiety of athletes associated with team selection and the anticipation of whether or not they made a team. Athletes described their anxiety while waiting for tryout results: “I just remember sitting at the computer refreshing the page hoping an email would come. There was a lot of anxiety I guess.” Parents, coaches or administrators can also provide timely supports to help athletes cope.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that the selection process is completed in a timely fashion.
- Follow a “24 hour” rule: when you have made a decision, be sure to inform athletes within 24 hours.
- Provide students with a timeframe within which they can expect to receive the results of the tryout. For example, tell athletes they will receive an email at 8:00 p.m. the evening after the last tryout.

Privacy. Coaches should take every precaution to ensure that each athlete's privacy is protected. Sidelinger, Nyeste, Madlock, Pollak and Wilkinson (2015) noted that when students' privacy expectations are violated by a teacher's unexpected disclosure of selection results, it can damage the relationship between student and teacher. As noted earlier, although posting a list may be quicker and easier, this practice puts everything out in the open for everyone in school to see. Social media and smartphone proliferation also means that a list can instantly be sent far beyond the school walls. MacKay, Sutherland and Pochini (2013) explained that the biggest concern related to students and social media use is the risk of cyberbullying. Although posting a list is not in and of itself cyberbullying, the format lends itself rather too well for ridicule or abuse. Additionally, posting a list does not provide students with adequate reasoning as to why they did not make the team. As one teacher-coach said, "I always cut students with a meeting. The students should always know why they didn't make the team; a list doesn't do that." Coaches must understand that privacy needs to be acknowledged in extracurricular settings as well.

Recommendations:

- Use face-to-face meetings if at all possible.
- Avoid posting a list altogether. A private email or phone call may be an alternative that allows for privacy, if face-to-face discussions are not possible.
- Unless completely unattainable, inform each athlete of their results individually.
- Explain to all athletes the importance of privacy. Individuals' results should be theirs to share, or not share.

Encouragement. It is important for coaches to provide athletes who have been cut with encouragement for their future development and sport participation. Wang and Straub (2012) explained that encouragement and establishing a positive environment are key characteristics of effective coaching practice. Bollók, Takács, Kalmár and Dobay (2011) discussed the need for having a good balance between internal and external motivators to help kids in their social settings, and also to keep them inspired to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The findings from the current study led the authors to conclude that coaches should look to extend encouragement to *all* athletes, including those who they cannot keep on the team. One teacher-coach explained, "Being cut from a team can be disappointing but it is also a learning experience." If coaches view cutting as another opportunity to teach and provide support, they can still play a role in helping students stay positive and encouraging future sport participation. Additionally, in the discussion with parents it became evident that not all parents knew where their child could participate in sport outside of the school setting. Parents wanted information on sport opportunities in their communities that they could direct their child to, to encourage continued participation.

Recommendations:

- Maintain a positive and developmental environment throughout the entire selection process — prior to tryouts, during the selection process, and after cuts have been made.
- Focus on encouraging athletes in two primary areas: athletes' self-confidence in their abilities and their future participation in sport (e.g., community organizations, intramurals).
- Try not to sever ties with the athletes who have been cut. Of course, you will see them less, but make an effort to stay connected and be a supportive adult in their sporting life.

- Assist parents in finding other places (e.g., community sport) where their child can participate in sport. Consider providing the name and contact information of a local community sport association.

The Meeting with Athletes

Throughout the interviews with athletes who had been cut, one very clear point emerged. If a coach must cut, he or she should do it in a face-to-face meeting. These athletes identified four clear best practices for those difficult face-to-face conversations that will help promote future sport participation.

Be Upfront. Youth recommended starting with a simple and direct statement revealing the outcome such as, "I'm sorry, but you did not make the team." Due to the harsh nature of cutting, coaches often try to soften the blow of the tough news by starting conversations with comments such as, "You had a really great tryout!" or "You've improved so much!" These kinds of statements, although well-meaning, are misleading and can give a false hope to those receiving feedback and confuse the athlete regarding the reasons for the decision (Manzoni, 2002). Coaches should be forthright and inform athletes of the results at the beginning of the meeting.

Be Direct. Darekar, Sebastian and Kaur (2016) suggested that for effective feedback, a coach's evaluation should be performance-oriented. In the current study, youth informed the authors that they strongly believe that the specifics regarding their performance at the tryout are important. Coaches need to provide precise, individualized reasoning for their decision and should avoid open-ended explanations such as, "We had a lot of great players in your position" or "You had a really good tryout, but..." Athletes said that they perceived these generic statements to be impersonal and uncaring. This can lead athletes to believe that they simply are not good enough to play the sport and may reduce the likelihood of future sport participation. After athletes have been informed that they did not make the team, coaches can proceed to clarify exactly why the student was not selected. Use direct and specific language that gets right to the point.

Provide Actionable Feedback. Coaches should offer specific, actionable feedback regarding what the athlete can work on, as well as provide alternative avenues for sport participation. James (2015) suggested that feedback should be a balance of critique and positive reinforcement. When seeking this balance, coaches need to be careful not to provide unchangeable responses such as, "You are just not tall enough," as this discourages future participation and the athlete cannot do anything about it anyway. Manzoni (2002) referred to this type of feedback as restrictive framing, as it does not allow for further development and improvement. Athletes displayed a desire for clear feedback on things that they could improve. If athletes perceive that an unchangeable attribute (such as height) is the reason they did not make the team, they feel more restricted and are less likely to believe they are competent in that sport, and they are less likely to participate in the future.

Write It Down. Written feedback is a significant factor and tool for students to improve and further continue participation in sport. Glover and Brown (2006) suggested that written feedback must be aimed at not simply informing students of their results, but at further assisting their development and learning. Long (2014) indicated that written feedback also helps eliminate any potential misunderstandings. The youth in the current study shared that being cut left them in a tense, anxious state in which

they would forget what was said by the coach. Write it down. Although time-consuming, putting an evaluation and feedback on paper allows athletes to review it at a later time and such feedback can be shared with their parents. Using a clear rubric-type feedback form can be helpful (and the coach can share it before the tryout). Written feedback should connect to the original expectations and should include the reason why the athlete was not selected, what the athlete can do to improve moving forward, and alternate avenues for development and sport participation such as community sport, camps and so on. It is also recommended that coaches work together throughout the tryout process, as including feedback from multiple sources provides various perspectives and can help mediate potential misunderstandings or disagreements with athletes or parents.

Consider Alternatives to Cutting Athletes

The current study found that when students are cut from school sports teams, some become resentful toward the sport they are cut from and, at times, even discontinue participation in that sport. Since one of the goals of educators and coaches is to keep as many young people actively involved in sport as possible, it is important to consider alternatives to cutting athletes from sports teams. Here are three alternatives to help shift the mindset toward an education-focused model of student-athlete development and the promotion of sport participation among *all* students who want to play.

Everyone Plays. If a student wants to play on a school sports team, the answer is yes! There are logistics associated with this

alternative (gym space, number of coaches, etc.); however, schools and teachers have successfully made this alternative work (see <https://activeforlife.com/high-schools-new-sports-model/>). Teams practice in the mornings, at lunch and after school to help with facility availability. The school, administrators and staff create an environment where teacher-coaches are valued and supported and want to coach.

Tiered Sport Model. Students are tiered based on ability and placed on one of three teams. Tier 1 represents the school and competes against other schools in competition. Tier 2 and Tier 3 practice and have inter-squad competitions. If an athlete shows improvement, they can move up tiers.

More Teams. In this alternative, although students may still be cut from a sports team, schools create two teams (or more) as opposed to just one — allowing for more kids to play. One team is composed of more advanced players, while the other team is composed of less developed players. For interscholastic competition, the advanced teams can play each other and the less developed teams play each other, allowing for developmentally-appropriate, leveled competition.

Conclusion

The topic of cutting students from a team has been, and continues to be, extensively debated. Cutting athletes is not an ideal situation for anyone — coaches, athletic directors, athletes or parents. “This is the worst part about coaching, you can’t take everyone,” explained a coach from the interviews when discussing the



topic of team selection. However, as quickly revealed by another coach in the study, “in most school sport situations not cutting students is *impossible*.” For various reasons, many of which are out of the coaches’ control, alternatives to cutting are not feasible, and cutting thus remains a reality in today’s sporting world. From the physical effects such as decreased physical activity and sport discontinuation, to emotional effects and reactions, to effects on students’ social lives and identity, cutting comes with a cost. However, by following the best practices for cutting presented in this article, coaches may help minimize the potential consequences and fallout for the students in their care and promote future sport participation.

Providing clear expectations, offering immediate feedback, maintaining privacy, and encouraging athletes should be integrated into every coach’s practice. Furthermore, coaches are encouraged to handle the delicate process of cutting in gentle, but direct and clear, face-to-face conversations with athletes. These discussions must be forthright, not impersonal or generic, with specific reasoning for the decisions made. Information regarding why an athlete was not selected for a team should also be written down for the athlete to take home, and it must incorporate actionable feedback for the athlete to use for self-improvement with options for further sports development and participation.

If teachers, coaches and administrators are hoping to not only increase future sport participation but also generally look after those in their care, they must look to protect and support the physical, emotional and social well-being of all students, particularly of those left off the roster sheets.

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