



Coaching Indigenous athletes

All athletes are individuals and bring different backgrounds, cultures and understanding to your coaching sessions. As a coach you are not expected to have an in-depth knowledge of every athlete's background and culture, however there are some considerations to take into account when coaching Indigenous athletes.

It is highly recommended that all coaches working with Indigenous athletes participate in a cross-cultural awareness course.

Note: The following considerations will not apply to every individual, but knowledge of them may help avoid misunderstanding and conflict.

1. **Importance of family.** The family network plays a very important role in an Indigenous athlete's life. Family approval and acceptance of you as a coach and your training program is important. This is even more crucial if you want an athlete to relocate for their sport.
2. **'Shame Job'** is a term used to explain the reluctance of some Indigenous athletes to be singled out for achievement or recognition. Even if the recognition is positive, it may be that the athlete does not want to be seen as better than their peers. This attention can result in the athlete actually performing below their skill level in order to gain less attention or they may even stop participating.
3. **Eye Contact:** This varies between different groups of people, but in traditional Indigenous communities, looking someone in the eye, particularly elders, is extremely rude and disrespectful. This may also follow that some younger athletes may not look a coach in the eye. Rather than not paying attention, they may simply be showing respect for your position.
4. **Culture:** Various ceremonies can result in unexplained absences from training or a fairly vague reason for non-attendance, such as 'family business'. As a coach, you should respect and be sensitive to the different cultural requirements of individuals.
5. **Communication:** English may be an athlete's second or even third language, so assuming a high level of understanding of technical terminology may result in misunderstandings. Vary your methods of communication and use appropriate terminology for your group to minimise breakdowns in communication. Simply asking 'does everyone understand?' does not always help, as many Indigenous athletes are less likely to say they don't understand or ask questions for clarification. Providing good demonstrations is important.
6. **Respect:** This is not always given just because you are a coach. Particularly if you are young or female, this may need to be proved. One way to assist in gaining respect is to have the support of someone who already holds a position of respect in the community.



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7. **Time:** The concept of time can be fairly flexible in some communities and it may take 'time' and education for athletes to understand that 5pm training means 5pm. An athlete turning up late may not be a sign of disrespect or lack of commitment, but simply that the concept of structured time is less important. This is certainly something that can be worked on.
8. **Health and socio economic status:** While it may seem a generalisation, research tells us that Indigenous Australians face a number of health and socio economic disadvantages. Indigenous Australians suffer a higher level of illness and infectious diseases, are more likely to be hospitalised, are more likely to live in crowded accommodation or be homeless and are more likely to be long-term unemployed or low income earners. Therefore, you shouldn't assume that all athletes have had a good night's sleep and a meal before training or games. This may be the reason for lethargic performance or lack of attention.
9. **Protocol:** When working with an Indigenous community, you need to be aware of the organisational structure of the community and protocols involved. Permits and permission from local councils may be required before an activity can be conducted, so find out what is required first and follow the correct procedures and protocols.

While Indigenous athletes are less likely to be critical to your face, if they don't like your coaching, they will very quickly vote with their feet and not turn up again.

Sport is an important part of all athletes' lives. Having a little bit of cultural sensitivity can only make you a better coach.

Case study

Ethan has just moved to an Indigenous community and is coaching the junior football team. The team is competing in a regional competition and Ethan is delighted to notice that Ben, in particular, is a real star. Ethan praises Ben's skills and starts using him to demonstrate many of the skills and activities. However, after a couple of weeks Ben's performance starts dropping rapidly and he is often late for training. Ethan cannot understand what has happened.

In some Indigenous groups, being singled out and identified as being better than others can be very embarrassing (sometimes called 'shame job') and can result in an athlete underplaying their skills or giving up a sport. Being able to 'read' a situation such as this and being sensitive to the different cultural needs of individuals and groups will improve a coach's effectiveness.