

CHAPTER 2

THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP



Chapter Objectives

At the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. Describe how coaches can use immediacy to build the efficacy of their athletes.
 2. Explain why coaches need to balance immediacy and feedback in their coaching.
 3. List three nonverbal immediacy behaviors and three nonverbal immediacy behaviors.
 4. Give an example of times when they have used anticipatory regret messaging.
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Key Terms

Immediacy
Efficacy
Self-efficacy
Team efficacy

Verbal persuasion
Vicarious experience
Live modeling
Symbolic modeling

Regret messaging
(counterfactual and
anticipatory)

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INTRODUCTION

It is a blistering hot summer day in the fictional town of Dillon, Texas, home of the fabled Dillon Panthers in the acclaimed television show, *Friday Night Lights*. In the series pilot episode, viewers are introduced to the Panthers football players and see that the eyes of an entire city are on the Panthers to bring home a state championship. It is the first day of summer two-a-days and new head coach Eric Taylor and his staff are busy getting their football team ready for the new season. We see the typical swagger of teenage boys who are considered kings in their small town, but by the end of that first episode, we see that the team has suffered a major setback with the loss of quarterback Jason Street to injury (Berg, Aubrey, Freed, & Cameron, 2011). Though one of his star players is out for the season, this does not reduce the pressure on Coach Taylor and the Panthers to win state—the only thing that matters in the state of Texas from August to December. This fictional depiction of life, and the pressures of sport, in small town Texas focuses not only on the relationships between the players and their peers in Dillon High School, but goes in depth into the relationships that Coach Taylor forms with many of his athletes. We see the importance of creating a sense of immediacy with each individual athlete, as well as each athlete as an individual. Viewers also see how the immediate relationships help create a sense of efficacy within the athlete, allowing the most unassuming of heroes to surface throughout the progression of the show. This chapter will look at the theories

of immediacy and efficacy and how each relates to the success of coaches and their athletes.

The relationship between a coach and his or her team is often a balancing act among discipline, power, appreciation, and education. This balancing act can often be made easier through the use of immediacy within the relationship. Creating a sense of efficacy, or a sense of one's ability, in athletes is often a difficult task as well, considering most of what a coach says during practice and/or game situations revolves around discipline or correction of a player's behaviors and efforts (Vargas-Tonsing, Meyers, & Feltz, 2004).

This is often when the balance between immediacy and feedback come into play to build athlete efficacy (Vargas-Tonsing, Meyers, & Feltz, 2004).

IMMEDIACY AND EFFICACY DEFINED

The first issues to be addressed are: what is immediacy and what exactly is efficacy? Immediacy in the field of communication studies has been defined as an individual's ability to demonstrate that they are open for communication through both verbal and nonverbal means (Rubin & Martin, 1994). In the field



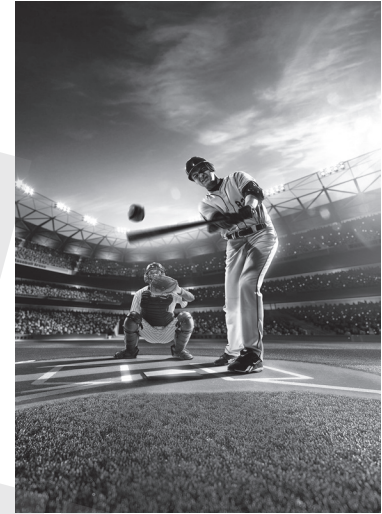
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of sport research, **immediacy** has been defined as the comfort and/or closeness that are perceived to be shared between the players and the coaches on a team (Rocca, Martin, & Toale, 1998). Examples of a strong immediate relationship between a coach and his or her athletes can be seen in the celebratory, or consoling, hugs coaches give to athletes when they walk off the playing field. Consider a professional athlete and his or her coach as an employee and boss. How often does a boss hug their employee after a bad day? The unique relationship that exists between coaches and athletes allows for many behaviors to take place that would usually not happen in other interpersonal or group settings. This concept will be explored further throughout the chapter.

Immediacy the comfort and/or closeness that are perceived to be shared between the players and the coaches on a team.

SELF-EFFICACY

According to Bandura (1977), an individual's sense of **self-efficacy** is based on one's perception of their own performance during, as well as in the final outcome, of a task. Four sources of self-efficacy are performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and/or emotional arousal (Bandura, 1977). In sports, a positive or negative sense of self-efficacy is usually based on whether an athlete is satisfied with the outcome of a performance. A positive sense of self-efficacy is usually the basis for continuing to build on success, leading to further goal-setting behavior and future achievements based on the outcome of the goal-seeking behavior (Burke, Peterson & Nix, 1995; Rocca et al., 1998; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). How a coach's behavior can influence an athlete's efficacy will also be detailed further.



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Self-efficacy one's perception of their own performance during, as well as in the final outcome, of a task.

THE IMMEDIATE RELATIONSHIP

From Pop Warner Football to the NFL, no matter the context of the dyad within the relationship, the communication between a coach and an athlete will always will be multifaceted and complicated. The reason for the difficulty within the coach-athlete dynamic resides in the fact that this relationship does not only exist in the realm of sports, but also has a strong interpersonal component, as well. Coaches often have to use assertive communication on the field during games and practices, which results in the need for immediacy to counter balance the behavior (Amorose & Weiss, 1998; Matsui, Kakuyama, & Onglatco, 1987; Rocca et al., 1998). The need for immediacy in these relationships often resides in the lack of power balance between the individuals involved, much like those between teachers and students in the classroom (Rocca et al., 1998; Turman & Schrodts, 2004).

As stated before, immediacy in the field of sports is the perceived comfort and/or closeness that is shared between a coach and his or her athletes (Rocca et al., 1998). Research has often compared this to the teacher-student relationship because of the education factor that is an essential component to the coach-athlete relationship (Rocca et al., 1998; Turman & Schrodts, 2004).

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The difference between the teacher-student relationship and that of the coach and athlete dynamic is the amount of time coaches spend with their teams both on and off the field. For example, a high school teacher will spend class time with his or her students as part of the everyday routine of school; however, once the class ends, the students often will move to their next class and interact with a new teacher. The time spent between the teacher and the student is limited to the structure of the school day, assuming that the teacher does not have to meet with the student about grades or behavior issues before or after class. The coach also has set times for practices and games that structure the standard time they will have to spend with their athletes; however, once practice or games are over, the time spent interacting with the athlete is often not over.



Keeping with the example of the high school student-athletes, when you look at the practice and game schedule of a sports team, the times listed on any formal schedule are actually just a fraction of the time a coach spends with the team. There can be team meetings before and after the practices and games, travel to and from the events, tournaments (depending on the sport) when teams spend a lot of non-playing time together between games, etc. When teams spend an abundance of time together it is easy for the relationships between coaches and athletes to become more familiar and create a sense of family (Rocca et al., 1998; Turman & Schrodtt, 2004). As coaches work to maneuver the difficult job of leading a team, it is important for everyone to realize how

to keep a sense of comfort within the team while still keeping the coach's sense of leadership and power intact.

LIFE BEFORE FRIDAY NIGHT

Taking a look back at the example from the show *Friday Night Lights*, when we first see the Dillon Panthers and Coach Taylor, the mood is anything but light. In the opening scenes of the show, Coach Taylor looks like a stereotypical coach, screaming at his players, making them run, tackle, run some more, calling out plays and yelling in faces of players who do not execute correctly. This is in stark contrast to the next scene when Coach is being interviewed and is seen praising Jason Street for his talent, skill, and work ethic. Though these scenes show two different sides of Coach Taylor, they also demonstrate two of the many different dynamics that are present between coaches and athletes. If the coach did not praise his football players as much as he yelled at them, it could jeopardize the performance of the team due to the lack of immediacy. The immediate relationship is necessary to establish a sense of trust, both in the techniques that a coach uses to lead as well as

the overarching philosophy around which the team is centered (Rocca et al., 1998; Turman and Schrod, 2004).

Albert Mehrabian's work on immediacy was a catalyst for more current work in communication-based immediacy research, namely the work of Virginia Richmond and her colleagues who established the "principle of immediate communication" (Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003). Though research on immediacy has taken place in much of the social sciences, the use of communication to help establish the immediate interpersonal relationships is the format that is most important in sport communication. Starting with Mehrabian (1972), the *immediacy principle* initially stated that individuals will be/are interested in, or drawn to, those things that they find alluring, and logically will avoid those things that they do not appreciate. Applying this to sports, the principle would conclude that an athlete would want to continue playing a sport that he/she is enjoying playing, and not continue one that is not enjoyable. This clearly does not seem like a moment of sudden epiphany, as individuals tend to experience this nearly every day. For example, if someone does not like a particular food, he or she does not eat it. If we do not like a particular sports team, we do not cheer for them. However, taking this concept of acceptance and avoidance and transferring the behaviors to human interaction helps to explain how and why individuals interact and communicate with each individual they encounter as an *individual* (Mehrabian, 1972; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000; Richmond et al., 2000). In sports, the immediacy principle can help to explain why coaches interact differently with each player on a team, and why trying to treat each player the same can actually hurt the team more than it can help.

Moving the work of Mehrabian (1972) to a communication perspective, Virginia Richmond and colleagues (2003) established the *principle of immediate communication* as a means to help explain how immediacy influences day-to-day interactions. Immediacy behaviors in communication are rarely as simple as attraction or avoidance, but rather encompass many different verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are used to create the perception of immediacy or a lack thereof (Richmond et al., 2003). Immediate behaviors can, and usually do, vary depending on the intent of the communication encounter, as well as the individuals who are participating in the conversation (Richmond et al., 2003). An example of how these verbal and nonverbal behaviors are contextual in nature can be seen in the differences between how coaches and teachers interact with their athletes/students. In the classroom, praise for a student will usually take the form of verbal praise (e.g., "way to go," or "good job") along with nonverbal cues such as a smile. Though the verbal praise from a coach may take the same form as a teacher's verbally, the nonverbal praise is often different.



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Nonverbal immediacy behaviors can include behaviors such as non-threatening touches, smiling or eye contact during conversation, or even animated speaking.

Coaches can be seen jumping up and down on the sideline, pumping their fists after a play, or giving the hug mentioned in the beginning of the chapter; however, teachers would not generally perform these behaviors in a classroom. Immediacy in communication is clearly contextual (Richmond et al., 2003), and as such, the creation of an immediate relationship needs to be addressed in a very deliberate manner.

In general, **nonverbal immediacy behaviors** can include behaviors such as non-threatening touches (e.g., the high fives or pats on the back), smiling or eye contact during conversation (as mentioned in teacher-student relationships), or even animated speaking (e.g., an enthusiastic pre-game speech) (Richmond et al., 2003). These may seem like basic tools that any individual would use in everyday conversation, and the truth is they are. However, when used intentionally, nonverbal and verbal immediacy skills can be used to help create positive interpersonal relationships in a multitude of situations (Richmond et al., 2000).

The messages that coaches send to each of their athletes often vary greatly from moment to moment. A coach can correct a player's behavior, then discipline counterproductive behavior, and follow up with words of encouragement, all within the span of one game or one practice. Coaches often play the role of leader, motivator, teacher, mentor, confidant, parent, and friend (Haselwood, Joyner, Burke, Geyerman, Czech, Munkasy, & Zwald, 2005; Pogue & AhYun, 2006). The messages they send have to convey each of these roles, often simultaneously (Pogue & An Yun, 2006). Messages of encouragement can easily be used to help build immediacy as they are positive and convey what the individual is doing correctly. As much as positive feedback would make building immediacy easy, the need for performance feedback is part of sports, and this feedback includes negative feedback by way of corrective messages.

Negative feedback needs to be balanced or the athlete will not be able to see past the coach telling them what they do wrong in order to fix the problem (Black & Weiss, 1992). The messages can also act as a counter to the positive relationship that the coach should be attempting to create (Amorose & Weiss, 1998). A coach needs to understand how to give feedback in a manner that will allow the athlete to know that he or she is doing something wrong, or that they need to work harder, without running the risk of negative affect on behalf of the athlete (Amorose & Weiss, 1998). An established immediate relationship can help avoid a negative situation (Amorose & Weiss, 1998). Creating a sense of immediacy through the use of positive feedback within the coach-athlete relationship will allow the coach to be the leader they need to be while still creating a situation where the athlete is comfortable seeking further guidance, or feedback, from his or her coach (Amorose & Weiss, 1998). Negative feedback is not necessarily negative communication, but more criticism of the athlete's performance, which could be damaging sans the immediacy within the coach-athlete dyad (Amorose & Weiss, 1998).

Though the negative feedback is often critical in that it is meant to correct athlete behavior, it is also part of establishing an immediate relationship if the athlete understands that the messages are intended to help them, thereby

creating the perception that the coach wants the athlete to succeed and therefore is giving the corrective messages to help the athlete and not hurt him or her (Amorose & Weiss, 1998). When giving negative feedback, the nonverbal messages are important for helping the athlete understand that the coach is, in fact, looking out for the athlete's best interests (Black & Weiss, 1992). If the nonverbal communication of the coach is too aggressive while delivering corrective messages, the immediacy can be lost and lead to a negative reaction from the athlete (Black & Weiss, 1992). This is where the behaviors such as a hand on an athlete's shoulder, a calm tone of voice, or eye contact can perpetuate the perception of immediacy within the conversation. The immediate behavior can also create a sense of motivation on the part of the athlete to make the suggested corrections and increase his or her perceived competence level (Black & Weiss, 1992). This in turn can help with the next aspect of the coach-athlete relationship, which is efficacy.

IMMEDIACY AND ATHLETE PERFORMANCES

Traveling back to Dillon, Texas for a moment, we arrive on a Thursday night before one of many “big games” the team always seems to prepare for. After quarterback Jason Street goes down in the first game of the season, the inexperienced Matt Searson is looked towards to lead the Panthers on their drive towards the state championship. Where Street had talent, experience, and confidence, Searson has doubt, fear, and is extremely shy and soft spoken. Not exactly traits that would help him lead one of the top football teams in the state. Where Street knew Coach Taylor from his time playing youth football, Searson only knew Coach as his new coach, essentially establishing a lack of immediacy. Understanding the need for a quarterback to know his coach trusts him, and the efficacy that can come from this trust, Coach seeks Matt out the night before the game to let the young man know that he understands his fear and frustration, but that he has faith in him to lead the team. In the scene, Coach Taylor tells Matt that he understands the pressures that have been thrust upon him, but that his team believes in him as do his coaches. He lets him know he is proud of Matt for handling the situation so well and that on Friday night, he trusts Matt can be successful if the young man can trust himself.

Trust between a coach and his or her athlete is crucial to creating a positive team environment. If coaches want their athletes to keep playing and improving, it is important that the coaches are able to establish a trust in the athlete's skills through the trust that the feedback that they are giving, and the manner in which they are giving it, are in the best interest of the athletes on the team (Chelladurai,



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1984; Kassing & Infante, 1999; Rocca et al., 1998; Turman, 2003; Turman, 2005 Westre & Weiss, 1991).

SELF-EFFICACY IN SPORT

In his original work on self-efficacy, Bandura (1977) defined **self-efficacy** as a performance-based outcome that influences an individual's sense of ability or skill. In sports, self-efficacy will usually influence an athlete's choice of sport participation, the level of effort they expend, the level of persistence, and the level of attained achievement (Weigand & Stockman, 2000). Sport-based self-efficacy is often measured by examining the number of tasks players are expected to successfully complete as part of a specific task, whether or not an athlete has assurances that he or she will succeed in executing the task assigned, and the number of skills or sport areas an athlete in which perceives that he or she is knowledgeably skilled (Weigand & Stockman, 2000). Athletes can develop this sense on their own; however, in a team sport setting, coaches and teammates are crucial to the development of perceived efficacy. The influence of coaches and fellow teammates is only as strong as the trust that an athlete has with these individuals. Because trust is created through the development of an immediate relationship, it can be argued that the concepts of immediacy and self-efficacy are intricately linked.

BRINGING IT TOGETHER

Beyond immediacy, an individual's self-efficacy is influenced by accomplishments based on individual performance, messages based on verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, psychological states, as well as emotional arousal (Bandura 1977; 1997). Though all factors have strong influences on one's sense of efficacy, in athletics, verbal persuasion has been forced to be one of the primary methods available to coaches to help build self-efficacy, as well as **team efficacy** among their fellow athletes (Vargas-Tonsing et al., 2004). **Verbal persuasion**, or positive informational feedback (Bandura, 1977; 1997), has been found to benefit athletic performance as it increases an athlete's perception of his or her own skill level, as well as the perception of the ability of his or her team (Vargas-Tonsing & Bartholemew, 2006). The perceived higher skill level, influenced through verbal persuasion, usually translates to better performance outcomes, thereby increasing individual and team success (Vargas-Tonsing & Bartholemew, 2006). In a study comparing the effects of strategy-based pre-game speeches to emotion-based speeches, or verbally persuasive speeches, Vargas-Tonsing & Bartholemew (2006) found the latter to be more effective for creating higher levels of athlete reported self-efficacy prior to an imagined sporting event. Though emotion can be an effective motivator, the information given via the feedback at the root of verbal persuasion helped athletes understand the focus of the game scenario, and their role in it, thereby increasing self-efficacy.

Performance accomplishments are connected to the sense of accomplishment, or lack thereof, as a result of one either achieving or not achieving the

Team efficacy the belief that a team has the skill to complete a given task together.

Verbal persuasion positive informational feedback.

desired result of a set goal (Feltz & Lirgg, 1998). For example, if an individual seeks to accomplish three tasks before the end of the day, and all three tasks are completed in the allotted time, this individual will have a higher sense of efficacy than the individual who is unable to complete all three tasks. In sports, setting team goals, and helping athletes regulate their own goal setting, is an important aspect of a coach's duties. As the leader of the team, the coach needs to understand that one particular team is not capable of achieving at the same level of another; each team is unique and team goals need to be set accordingly. Not recognizing this coaching need can cause problems for achieving team success, as continuously not achieving team goals can damage the potential for building self and team efficacy (Feltz & Lirgg, 1998).

Vicarious experiences can be defined as a process of modeling of experiences to benefit, and perhaps motivate, individuals' future behaviors (Bandura, 1977; 1997). Coaches are often able to provide these experiences for athletes by showing them film of a big game or championship celebration to give them a goal to work to complete. In the Disney movie *Miracle*, Coach Herb Brooks showed his team videos of the Soviet National Team scoring multiple goals and beating the National Hockey League All-Star team prior to the USA-USSR pre-Olympic match-up. Though it is not uncommon for a team to watch films of the opponent to learn the other team's tendencies, this film session was also used to show the members of Team USA exactly what they were facing in the fast-paced, high-powered offense of the Soviet National Team. This team played with a speed and precision that the USA would not have experienced previously, and the concern for Brooks was that, if the first time they saw the Soviet offense was in a game situation, the team efficacy would drop substantially as a result of the lack of preparation and expectations that the team would experience (Calio, 1980). The 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid was being billed as a political showdown as much as an athletic showdown, and Brooks needed every technique available to make sure his team was ready to take the ice. Vicarious experiences can work as a motivator to attain a specific goal or to avoid a specific outcome; in this situation Brooks wanted his team to do both.

Two forms of modeling include live modeling and symbolic modeling. **Live modeling** involves an individual providing an example of what he or she is seeking from others. So in sports, a coach may show videos of how plays are executed correctly, or take a lesser skilled team to watch a higher skilled team play. For example, taking a freshman basketball team to watch a top-ranked varsity team play to see how the game "looks" when a team plays at a higher level and is able to work together. It is not uncommon to see youth teams at high school tournaments

Vicarious experience
a process of modeling of experiences to benefit, and perhaps motivate, individuals' future behaviors.

Live modeling involves an individual providing an example of what he or she is seeking from others.



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or championship games as a means for a coach to get his team excited about playing and pushing towards the future. High school sports, cheerleading, and dance teams often host clinics during their playing/performance season as a means to gather interest in the team for future students. These are usually during the season, usually the same day the team will perform, so the children who attend the clinic are able to watch the team in action after the clinic. For the youth teams who attend, this is a means of live modeling during the clinic and live performance.

Symbolic modeling
using motivational methods such as visualization to help them achieve the tasks they have before them.

Counterfactual
Regret motivational messages that look to invoke regret about past experiences.

Anticipatory
Regret motivational messages that express the possibility of regret about future actions.

Symbolic modeling requires individuals to use motivational methods such as visualization to help them achieve the tasks they have before them (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Coaches will sometimes require players to have a mental walk through where visualization is the focus of the practice session. Fighters often use shadow boxing as a way to warm up and to visualize a fight before they walk out to the ring. Other symbolic modeling methods such as regret messages have been used in sports to help motivate positive team performances. **Regret messages** are messages that express the possibility of an athlete feeling regret due to performing or not performing specific behaviors (Turman, 2005). There are two types of regret messages, counterfactual and anticipatory, that can be used in pre-game, half-time, or post-game speeches (Turman, 2005). **Counterfactual regret messages** are those that look to invoke regret about past experiences (Turman, 2005). For example, if a team is playing in the finals of the state playoffs, and had lost the game the year before, the coach could remind the team about how it felt to lose the year before, and remind them of what they need to do different to not feel those negative emotions again. Essentially, not to feel the same regret as they did the year before. **Anticipatory regret messages** express the possibility of regret about future actions (Turman, 2005). For example, messages that speak of the “next 48 minutes for the next 48 years of your life” are considered anticipatory regret messages.

The final aspect of self-efficacy is **emotional arousal**, which is interested in explaining how emotions such as excitement, fear, or nervousness can influence the behavior of individuals during certain events (Bandura, 1977; 1997). In sports, control of an athlete’s emotional arousal is usually the focus of a coach’s pre-game routine from warm-ups to speeches. When coaching the Florida Gators to multiple BCS National Championship wins, Urban Meyer had the team engage in the same pre-game routine that started the evening before every home and away game. This routine started the night before the game in the team hotel where the players and coaches attended a meeting, then dinner, more meetings, then more food (Martin, 2008). The purpose of this routine was to make sure that the players were focusing on the team from Friday night until after the game was finished on Saturday. This helped steady the emotions, either based on excitement or nerves, of players regardless of the opponent or possible impact of the game. Coach Meyer knew that every opponent was a threat no matter what their rank, conference, or experience level. He wanted his team to play every game with the same intensity as the one before or the one after, so keeping a routine allowed for the focus to stay the same no matter what the name was on the other team’s jersey (Martin, 2008). Because emotions can influence the athlete’s

performance during a game, a coach needs to take care to help keep his or her athletes' emotional arousal at the optimal level to help produce the desired outcome (Martin, 2008).

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR SPORT COMMUNICATION

To be able to convey a sense of ability to play and an enjoyment of a sport is both the easiest and one of the most difficult tasks a coach, parent, or mentor can undertake. This is because the dual components of immediacy and efficacy must work together in order to build physical strength, understanding of the game, and the mental toughness that is necessary for athletic success at different levels of play. The ability to cultivate an understanding of sport includes the need to criticize the actions of the athlete. This includes critiques of both positive and negative behaviors. For example, if athletes are doing a drill correctly, the coach will obviously have positive feedback for the team. If the team is executing the drill, but not very well, the coach will have to give negative feedback by way of corrections to show the team how to improve their performance on the drill. Combining the two messages will help to counter the negative effects of the corrections, if necessary.

The feedback that is sent can help with the growth of self-efficacy, coaching efficacy, and team efficacy; however, without the sense of immediacy, it could hurt the overall relationship between the sender and receiver in the communication. The presence of immediacy is not an absolute deal maker as the players begin to understand the role of the coach, and the communication that is needed to improve and move to the next level. Some athletes just want to know what is necessary to win, and can take the relationships that are formed on the team as the emotional support they need to continue to play. For example, the members of the “Miracle on Ice” 1980 Men’s US Olympic Hockey Team did not have an immediate relationship with head coach Herb Brooks, but they completed the greatest upset in Olympic history when they beat the Soviet National Team in their semi-final match up (Witnify, 2014). These men played Division I men’s hockey at some of the best colleges in the nation. They did not need a friend in their coach; they needed a leader who could show them how to win. Brooks was that leader, and they respected the situation as it was. However, as athletes are just starting in amateur sports, immediacy is an important tool for all those involved in the growth of the new athlete (Witnify, 2014). This is where communication and sports need to merge to create the most favorable situation for both the coach and the athlete.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How important has the coach-athlete relationship been in your personal experience?
2. Can vicarious experiences help build self-efficacy?
3. Though there is danger in the use of regret messages, how can they be regulated for positive use?

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