

STATE OF THE STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCE



2023-2024 REPORT



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**"I AM SO UNBELIEVABLY
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STUDENT-ATHLETE QUOTE FROM
THE COACHING EFFECT SURVEY

Creating a positive student-athlete experience; it's what athletic directors, club directors and coaches in our research said was most important. And according to parents of athletes, coaching behaviors that create a positive experience is most important to them as well. These three stakeholder groups represent the research we will share in this year's State of the Student Athlete report.

Hold on... did I just mention parents? Really? Yup. Consider that in 2019, according to renowned author and economist Michael Lewis, US parents forked over approximately \$15 billion in fees – you read correctly, **\$15 billion** – to fund their kid's participation in youth sports. And when these parents spend thousands of dollars a year, they become emotionally involved. They want a voice. We would be remiss not to acknowledge that their behaviors don't just impact the experience of their athlete, but of the coaches and administrators as well.

In this report, you will read Ecsell's new research on coaching's effect on the athlete experience. You'll also read the impact that ADs and club directors have on their coaches, and lastly, we will provide research on what parents want most for their athletes.

Why research all these stakeholders? Because they are inextricably linked to the student-athlete's experience. If coaches don't like how they are treated by their respective AD or club administrator, it negatively impacts the coach's experience, which trickles down to athletes. How coaches coach athletes impacts the experience of athletes, and the experience of athletes has an effect on the experience of parents. The experience of parents then impacts the experience of the administrators, coaches, and athletes. It comes full circle - always. These stakeholders are woven together in the same athletic quilt.

So, please consider the following if you want to create a more positive student-athlete experience...

Athletic and club directors:

Provide the leadership needed to create a culture that leads with love, not fear. The demands on your time can be unreasonable, but never forget your ultimate role is to coach coaches so they provide the best possible athlete experience.

Coaches:

The athletes need and want you in their lives. And if lucky enough to be on your team, they trust you will build them up, not tear them down. You have the ability to make their time with you memorable for one of two reasons – please choose the right one.

Parents:

I was one of you. I was not perfect. I became too emotionally involved at times. We need to create our boundaries so others don't need to do it for us. Before the next season starts, write down your role as the parent of an athlete (think of it as your "parent of an athlete mission statement") and refer to it regularly.

A positive athlete experience means athletes are growing – growing their emotional intelligence, their mental resilience, their ability to overcome challenges and adversity, and their capacity to play within a team environment. And I've never met a stakeholder who didn't want all that for their student-athletes.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Eckstrom".

Bill Eckstrom
CEO, Ecsell Sports

ABOUT THIS REPORT

In pursuit of a world where every student-athlete can thrive under the guidance of exceptional coaches, Ecsell Sports compiles a comprehensive, annual analysis of the student-athlete experience.

Leveraging an extensive database of coaching performance research, the 2023-2024 report delves into **three vital relationship domains** within athletic programs: the coach-to-athlete relationship, the athletic director-to-coaching staff relationship, and the parent-to-athletic program relationship. These relationships are examined through the lens of **six behavioral coaching themes**, with each theme serving as an essential element of the overall student-athlete experience.

This paper illuminates the multifaceted dynamics that shape the full student-athlete journey, offering a 360-degree perspective on how coaches, athletic directors, and parents collectively influence the success and well-being of student-athletes.

The findings and recommendations within this report aim to help athletic programs create an environment where every student-athlete can flourish, and every coach can inspire greatness.



THE SIX COACHING THEMES

These six behavioral coaching themes compose the student-athlete experience. They are used in the Coaching Effect Survey to measure athletic programs and identify exactly what coaches and other leaders are doing well and where they need to improve.



CONNECTION

Building relationships of trust with student-athletes.



PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Constructing an environment that allows student-athletes to be their own true self without fear of negative consequences.



STRUCTURE

Establishing an organized, consistent, and predictable team environment.



CHALLENGE

Creating unique growth opportunities for each student-athlete that moves them out of their comfort zone.



SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Advancing competence and technique so student-athletes perform to the best of their ability.



COMMUNICATION

Effectively sharing information, strategies, and expectations with student-athletes.

“HE IS A GREAT COACH WHO EXPLAINS EVERYTHING HE IS SAYING. HE BUILDS A STRONG RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS PLAYERS, ALLOWING US TO FEEL COMFORTABLE AROUND HIM. HE MAKES THE SPORT FUN BY HAVING A SENSE OF HUMOR. HE IS THE BEST COACH I HAVE EVER HAD AND I AM VERY THANKFUL TO BE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE ONE OF HIS PLAYERS.”

STUDENT-ATHLETE QUOTE FROM
THE COACHING EFFECT SURVEY

THE COACH-TO-STUDENT-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

The coach-to-student-athlete relationship is at the heart of the student-athlete experience, influencing not only athletic performance but also the overall well-being of student-athletes both on and off the field. Ecsell Sports' extensive research provides valuable insights into this crucial dynamic, highlighting disparities between high-performing coaches and those who receive lower ratings, while also sharing exactly what sets exceptional coaches apart.



THE COACH-TO-STUDENT-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

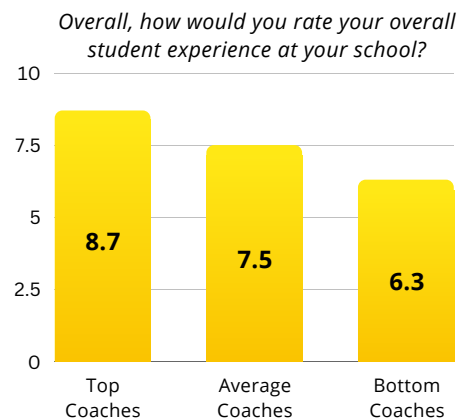
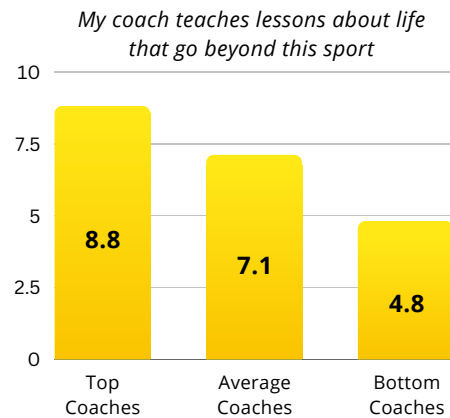
THE INFLUENCE OF HIGH-PERFORMING COACHES TRANSCENDS SPORTS

The exploration of coach ratings reveals multifaceted insights into the student-athlete experience, providing a comprehensive view on the impact coaches wield on their athletes. By considering multiple key rating dimensions (what Ecsell Sports calls “Key Indicator Scores”), we gain a deeper understanding of what defines a top coach.

Beyond athletic achievements, the best coaches exhibit a strong **ability to nurture skills and impart lessons** that transcend sports. The high ratings of top-performing coaches in this category underscores their proficiency in instilling life skills and enduring values in their athletes.

Student-athletes' assessments of their **overall student experience** at their school are also closely tied to the coaching they receive. High-performing coaches contribute positively to the overall student experience, fostering a more enriching educational journey.

In contrast, bottom-rated coaches lag significantly in these areas, with their athletes granting them an average rating of just 4.8 and 6.3, respectively. This disparity accentuates the need for a coaching approach that embraces a more holistic perspective, one that empowers students not only as athletes, but as individuals on their own unique paths of growth and development.



THE COACH-TO-STUDENT-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

ATTRIBUTES OF TOP COACHES

To discern what sets top coaches apart, we delve into the behaviors and qualities that correlate strongly with the highest coach ratings, illuminating key areas of focus for coaches to improve their performance. By understanding and emulating these qualities, coaches can have a greater positive impact and help each student-athlete thrive.

SURVEY DATA AT A GLANCE

- 29 different states
- 64 different sports
- 13,541 student-athletes
- 838 coaches given feedback

1. "My coach makes playing this sport fun."

Top coaches excel at making the sport enjoyable for their athletes. Student-athletes led by top-rated coaches are **12x** more likely to report that their coach makes playing the sport fun. When coaches prioritize the enjoyment of the sport, their athletes are nearly **3.7x** more likely to have a positive student-athlete experience.

2. "I know I'm a better player because of this coach."

Exceptional coaches are **10x** more likely to be recognized for helping their athletes feel like better players. When coaches are effective at enhancing their athletes' skills, these athletes are **3.5x** more likely to report a positive student-athlete experience.

3. "I trust my coach."

Trust is a cornerstone of the coach-student athlete relationship. Top coaches are **12x** more likely to be trusted by their athletes. When coaches establish a high level of trust, these athletes are **3.7x** more likely to have a positive student-athlete experience.



**"MY COACH IS IRREPLACEABLE.
HE IS SOMEONE WHO
RESEMBLES EXACTLY WHAT IT
IS TO BE A COACH. HE
MOTIVATES US IN SPORTS, BUT
MOST IMPORTANTLY HE
INFLUENCES THE STUDENTS'
LIVES. HE SHAPES US INTO
BETTER HUMAN BEINGS."**

STUDENT-ATHLETE QUOTE FROM
THE COACHING EFFECT SURVEY

THE ATHLETIC-DIRECTOR-TO- COACHING-STAFF RELATIONSHIP

Just as student-athletes benefit from skilled coaching, coaches themselves require guidance and development to continuously perform well. In this section, we turn our attention to the relationship between Athletic Directors and Club Directors (which we will refer to as ADs) and coaching staff, exploring the impact of ADs on the student-athlete experience through the development of their coaching teams.



THE ATHLETIC-DIRECTOR-TO-COACHING-STAFF RELATIONSHIP

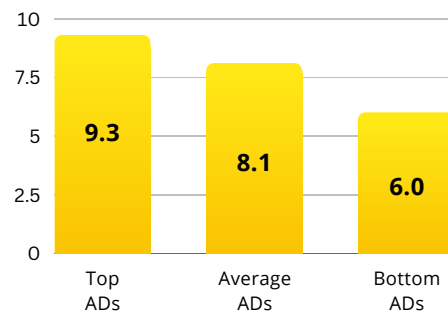
HOW AD LEADERSHIP AFFECTS THE STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCE

The ripple effect that school administration or club leadership create at their organizations has a direct effect on student-athletes. Coaching staff not only deserve, but require the same level of attention to their growth and development as the student-athletes themselves.

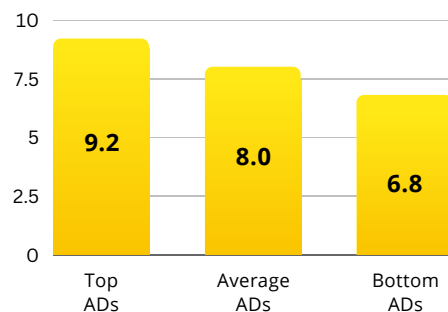
The best ADs and club directors receive strong scores across all three Key Indicators, collectively reflecting a holistically positive work environment conducive to coaching excellence. Coaches that work with top-scoring ADs report **high satisfaction in their current roles and a desire to remain at their school**, indicative of a stable culture and lower turnover. Most importantly, when coaching staff feel supported by AD leadership, they are better equipped to serve as impactful leaders in their own right for each of their student-athletes.

Conversely, bottom-rated ADs exhibit room for growth in creating a positive coaching atmosphere, as made clear by their performance in all three Key Indicators. Their low scores reveal a culture that doesn't properly support coaches in their roles, **resulting in unhappy staff and poor retention rates**. This creates a trickle-down effect that prevents coaches from being able to offer their best when working with student-athletes. Coaches cannot thrive as coaches if they are not receiving strong coaching themselves.

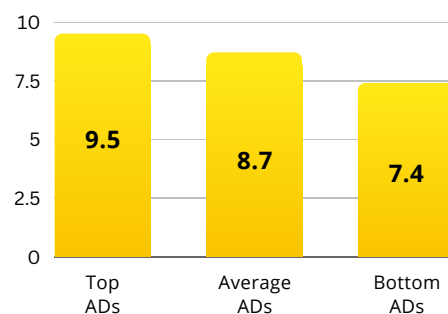
How likely are you to recommend this school to your friends or colleagues as a great place to work?



All things considered, how happy are you with your current work situation?



I see myself working at this school in a year.



THE ATHLETIC-DIRECTOR-TO-COACHING-STAFF RELATIONSHIP

ATTRIBUTES OF TOP ADS

To understand what distinguishes top-rated ADs and Club Directors, we examine the behaviors and qualities that correlate with their high ratings. These behaviors provide valuable insights into areas of focus for ADs seeking to grow and develop their coaching staff and, consequently, positively impact the student-athlete experience.

1. "This administrator makes this school a fun place to work."

The best ADs are **26.3x** more likely to make their school a fun place to coach than other ADs, emphasizing the strong culture they foster. And, these top ADs employ coaches that are **4x** more likely to experience job satisfaction, and **3.6x** more likely to commit to staying in their role for at least another year.

2. "I always feel supported by this administrator."

Coaches are **25.4x** more likely to report consistent support when they are under the guidance of a high-performing AD. Coaches working with supportive ADs also report **4.7x** greater likelihood of being content at their school, and are **3.5x** more likely to be retained in their current coaching roles.

3. "This administrator helps build my confidence."

Top ADs are **19.4x** more likely to build confidence in their coaching staff, highlighting their capacity to empower and motivate. Coaches working with these ADs also experience higher job satisfaction, with a **4.7x** greater likelihood of happiness at work and **3.8x** greater likelihood to commit to their roles.



“MY COACH HAS ALWAYS HAD SUCH AN AMAZING RELATIONSHIP WITH ME. HE HAS HELPED ME THROUGH EVERY SPORTS SEASON IN MY THREE YEARS HERE. I FEEL LIKE HE REALLY UNDERSTANDS ME AS A PERSON AND AS AN ATHLETE. HE PUSHES ME TO BE BETTER. HE IS TRULY ONE OF MY FAVORITE COACHES I HAVE EVER HAD.”

STUDENT-ATHLETE QUOTE FROM
THE COACHING EFFECT SURVEY

THE PARENT-TO-ATHLETIC-PROGRAM RELATIONSHIP

Parents' influence and interaction with athletic programs is becoming more significant, with trends in spending increasing each year to fund their participation. They are not just spectators; they are active participants deeply committed to the well-being and development of their student-athletes. In this section, we explore the parent-to-program relationship, sharing what parents value most in coaches and where they feel dissatisfied.



THE PARENT-TO-ATHLETIC-PROGRAM RELATIONSHIP

Parents have clear expectations when it comes to the athletic programs that their student-athletes are a part of. These are the three behaviors and qualities that they value the most (and conversely, the least) in their kid's coaches:

WHAT PARENTS VALUE MOST

1. "The coach cares about my student-athlete as a person."

Parents want coaches who genuinely care about the well-being and success of their kids beyond their capacity as athletes.

2. "The coach is a good role model for my student-athlete."

Parents recognize the influential role coaches play in shaping their kids' character, and they want coaches who instill values and behaviors that extend beyond the playing field.

3. "The coach holds all team members equally accountable."

Parents expect coaches to hold every team member to the same standards, creating an environment of trust and equity within the team.



WHAT PARENTS VALUE LEAST

1. "The coach engages with parents."

While parents care about their student-athlete's coaches, they are less focused on direct engagement, suggesting that they view the bond between coach and athlete as the priority.

2. "The coach makes sure my student-athlete has playing time."

Parents are less concerned with the amount of playing time their kid receives, indicating a greater emphasis on the overall experience rather than just on-field performance.

3. "The coach leads the team to wins."

While winning is appreciated, parents don't see it as a top coaching element. Instead, they value coaches who guide the character development and overall growth of their kids.



"MY COACH IS LIKE A MOM TO ME. SHE IS VERY LOVING AND CARING ABOUT HER TEAM, SHE WANTS THE BEST FOR EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US AND THAT'S WHAT I LOVE THE MOST ABOUT HER. SHE NEVER LETS US WALK WITH OUR HEADS DOWN. WE ARE WINNERS IN HER BOOK."

STUDENT-ATHLETE QUOTE FROM
THE COACHING EFFECT SURVEY

CONCLUSION

The objective of this report has been to shed light on the nuanced dynamics that shape the full student-athlete experience, offering a complete perspective on the collective influence of coaches, athletic directors, and parents.

Whether the impact of your program is excellent, poor, or somewhere in the middle, this current state is nearly irrelevant. What matters is a **desire to improve** and beginning that journey today. Programs need not wipe the slate clean; all it takes to start building a best-in-class experience for your student-athletes is **small, incremental change.**

Finally, a parting exercise for ADs, club directors, and coaches who are reading this report. Please write down and ask yourself the following question:

[What does it feel like to be coached by me?](#)



**YOU'VE GOT TO BE IN
THE GAME TO WIN IT.**

Ecsell Sports helps athletic directors, coaches and club directors quantify the impact that they have on the experience of their athletes using one of the largest databases of coaching and leadership performance research in the world.

[CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE](#)