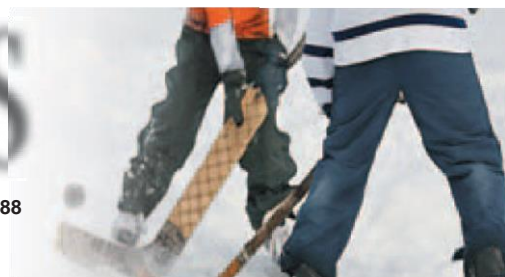


SPORTS

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Disabilities nothing to be scared of as a coach



Tara Chisolm
Training Matters



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What does Michael Phelps, who is the most decorated Olympian of all time, and the child on your indoor soccer team who can't sit still during instruction have in common? They both have hidden disabilities.

Phelps is not the only professional athlete to have been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a learning disorder. Others include current NBA player Chris Kaman and NFL player-turned-TV analyst Terry Bradshaw. ADHD is a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with daily life. It's estimated that 8-10 per cent of professional athletes have ADHD, as compared to 4-5 per cent of the general population of adults. Statistics like this need to be shared with our youth sport coaches to help us all understand that there may be more going on than meets the eye with the so-called problem child on your team.

Youth sport coaches are likely to work with athletes with learning disabilities, fetal alcohol syndrome, speech and language disorders, ADHD and autism spectrum disorder. The biggest trouble that comes from having a child with a hidden disability on your team is that often their conditions are misunderstood as lack of understanding or poor behaviour, or when identified, there is often little support for the volunteer coach to help the athlete to be successful. In my experience as a coach of athletes with hidden and visible disabilities I have been able to learn some strategies that I'd like to share with you.

1. Ask the athlete (and parents): These athletes are the same as everyone else in that we all learn in different ways. So, understanding an athlete as an individual first is arguably the most important step. There is a good chance that the athlete has a preferred way of learning new skills and by talking with the athlete and/or their parents, we can transfer these learning techniques to sport. The parents can be an integral part of this athlete having a successful experience in sport. It is the parents who know their child best and can often give the coaches tips on what the child works on at school, home or therapy so the transition to the sporting environment is an easier one.

2. Adaptations for all: Are you an X's and O's type of coach where everything is drawn on the board? Do you prefer using a loud voice as opposed to a whistle? The biggest skill that I learned when coaching athletes with brain injuries was to provide a variety of options for my athletes to learn a drill. I would often start off at the board for my more technical learners, and then I would move to a verbal explanation while demonstrating the drill for the athletes who were more visual. Also, if needed, I would match one of my assistant coaches up with my athletes who needed more 1-on-1 support to understand the pattern of a drill (kinaesthetic learner). It did not take me long to realize that these techniques were effective for the entire team, and not just my athletes with disabilities.

3. Inclusion is key: This athlete does not want to be labeled as different. No one does. One of the biggest things that I have learned when coaching athletes with disabilities is that they are athletes first. They want to feel successful, challenged and a part of the team. You may have to adjust the way you teach or give that child a specific role on the team, but that does not mean that this child needs to have their own separate program or be segregated from everyone else.

I often tell coaches to focus on the child's strengths and go from there. Does the child seem to have endless energy? Why not put that child in the midfield position in soccer which requires a lot of running? Do they enjoy repetitive movements in a more closed environment? How about joining a swim club? We all have strengths and weaknesses, so why not use the strengths that come along with a hidden disability to an advantage.

For coaches looking for more information on how to include children with hidden disabilities please check out playlikeachampion.nd.edu and theinclusionclub.com.

