

Guidelines for effective postgame talks

[Jeff Janssen](#)

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While what you say to your team before a game is important to motivate, focus and inspire players, what you say *after* a game also plays a key role in your team's future success.

I've seen some coaches do an excellent job of refocusing and motivating teams following a close loss, which served to get them mentally ready for the next game. I've also seen some coaches get too emotional and jump all over their players, destroying their confidence and shattering their trust for the rest of the season.

Successful teams understand why they win and lose. This is because successful coaches take advantage of the "teachable moment" following a game to give their players feedback. After a game it is important to help your team process and analyze the game so you can use it to improve in the long run. Be sure to help your team understand why it wins as well as helping it to learn important lessons when it loses.

The key to effective postgame evaluation is to go beyond winning and losing into the quality of your performance or how your team played. You want to help your team focus on the process of winning. Be sure the players understand the controllable, process factors that lead to your team's success. Thus, good coaches have a tendency to look at how well the team played and executed instead of just the final score.

Keeping the importance of the process in mind, there are basically four situations that you would need to address your team following a game:

- Played well and won.
- Played poorly and won.
- Played well and lost.
- Played poorly and lost.

Which situation occurred dictates the general tone and emphasis you want to have with your team. It's critical for me to mention that you as a coach have the best feel for what your team needs following a game. While you should follow your intuition, remember that emotions can be running high — both yours and your players — so be careful not to let your emotions cloud your judgment after a loss. You may want to give a short general statement to the team after the game and then address them the following day. The recommendations below serve as some basic guidelines for you to consider.

Play well and win

After playing well and winning, it is important to remind your team why they won. Be sure to compliment the team for playing well, and you might even want to mention several players by name who had outstanding performances, especially your reserves.

You want your team to walk away with the understanding that when it gives a great effort and has its head in the game, it is capable of playing well. You want the players to realize they have the talent to be successful and should expect future successes as long as they continue to take care of the process. Challenge them to come out during the next week of practice and especially the next game with the same focus, confidence and intensity.

Play poorly and win

After playing poorly and winning, it's important for you as a coach to let the players know that you are concerned. They need to understand that this win was more a result of luck or playing a less talented team than it was because of their effort. They should realize that if they continue to play like this in future games, they almost surely will lose.

These are the times as a coach when you can be hard on your team. The players' confidence will typically be less fragile because they did get a win, but you can constructively criticize them for not taking care of the process.

There is a slight exception to this situation, and that's during tournaments and playoff time. The rule in these situations is typically to survive and advance. Despite the game being ugly and far from your team's best, you do want to let the players know you are satisfied because they found a way to win.

Play well and lose

This scenario is probably one of the toughest for coaches and athletes to swallow. It is also the one where some coaches make mistakes and hurt their team's confidence and focus for subsequent games by only looking at the negative outcome.

Although it is easy to be discouraged because of the loss, it is important that you help your team reflect on the good things it did. You need to let players know you are happy that they executed properly and played well. You also want to give them the impression that if they continue to play the way they did, the odds are they will get the results they want for future games. Hopefully the breaks will go your way next time.

Play poorly and lose

These are typically the times when your team's confidence and motivation are low. Be sure to monitor your team's confidence level following the game. It is likely you will want to sensitively point out that the obvious reason why your team lost is that it did not execute or take care of the process of being successful.

Some teams will outline three to five goals before the game that, if achieved, the team has a great chance of being successful. It is then easy following the game to evaluate your team's success based on these goals. You can pinpoint the specific breakdowns that occurred and assure your team it will work on these areas at practice to improve them by the next game.

The bottom line with postgame evaluations is to process the game, good or bad, so your team can benefit from the experience. For games when your players perform well, they benefit through greater confidence. As a coach, it is important to give them credit when they play well and attribute their success to their effort and ability.

For games when they play poorly, they benefit because what they need to work on becomes exposed. When they lose, you need to give them hope for subsequent games. This hope can come from a belief that with a little more effort or a slight adjustment in the game plan, they will have a better chance of being successful.