

# STATE OF THE STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCE



# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCE

BY BILL ECKSTROM

Our team at Ecsell Sports heard it from many athletic directors and coaches: Passion for student-athlete development reaches beyond wins and losses. It is more significant than courts and fields. So how do we prepare student-athletes for life beyond high school? How do we equip student-athletes with the skills and mindset to be the best versions of themselves and be prepared to succeed in life's journey?

To this end, a group of forward-thinking ADs asked us to help. They knew the only way to grasp if the student-athlete experience is good/bad or improving/declining is to understand what creates it and then measure it.

So, Ecsell Sports did the following:

- We held focus groups with ADs, coaches, and student-athletes
- We followed coaches during practices and documented their actions and words
- We surveyed over 2,000 student-athletes about their experiences with their coaches
- We gathered and analyzed over 1,000 comments from student-athletes about their coaches

What we learned about a coach's impact on student-athletes did not surprise us as our team at the Ecsell Institute had been studying the impact leaders have on teams for over a decade. Yet what we hoped to discover—and what we uncovered—is we can measure a coach's influence beyond wins and losses. And it all starts with understanding the student-athlete experience, which is defined as follows:

*Through the eyes of the student-athlete, their coach builds a trust-based relationship, and provides a psychologically safe team environment that challenges each student — physically and mentally — to create growth in their respective sport.*

*"Ask me in 20 years and we'll see how successful these players are. Then I'll be able to tell you if I succeeded as a coach."*

- Piggy Lambert, Men's Basketball Coach,  
Purdue University (John Wooden's collegiate coach)



To keep this information to ourselves will not help all stakeholders in the athletic world. So, in the spirit of this State of the Student-Athlete Experience report, and in every future annual report, our goal is to bring awareness to ADs, coaches, student-athletes and parents. For example, awareness of how student-athletes respond to coaches; awareness of the impact psychological safety has on the growth of student-athletes; awareness of the need for coaches to create trust-based relationships, and more.

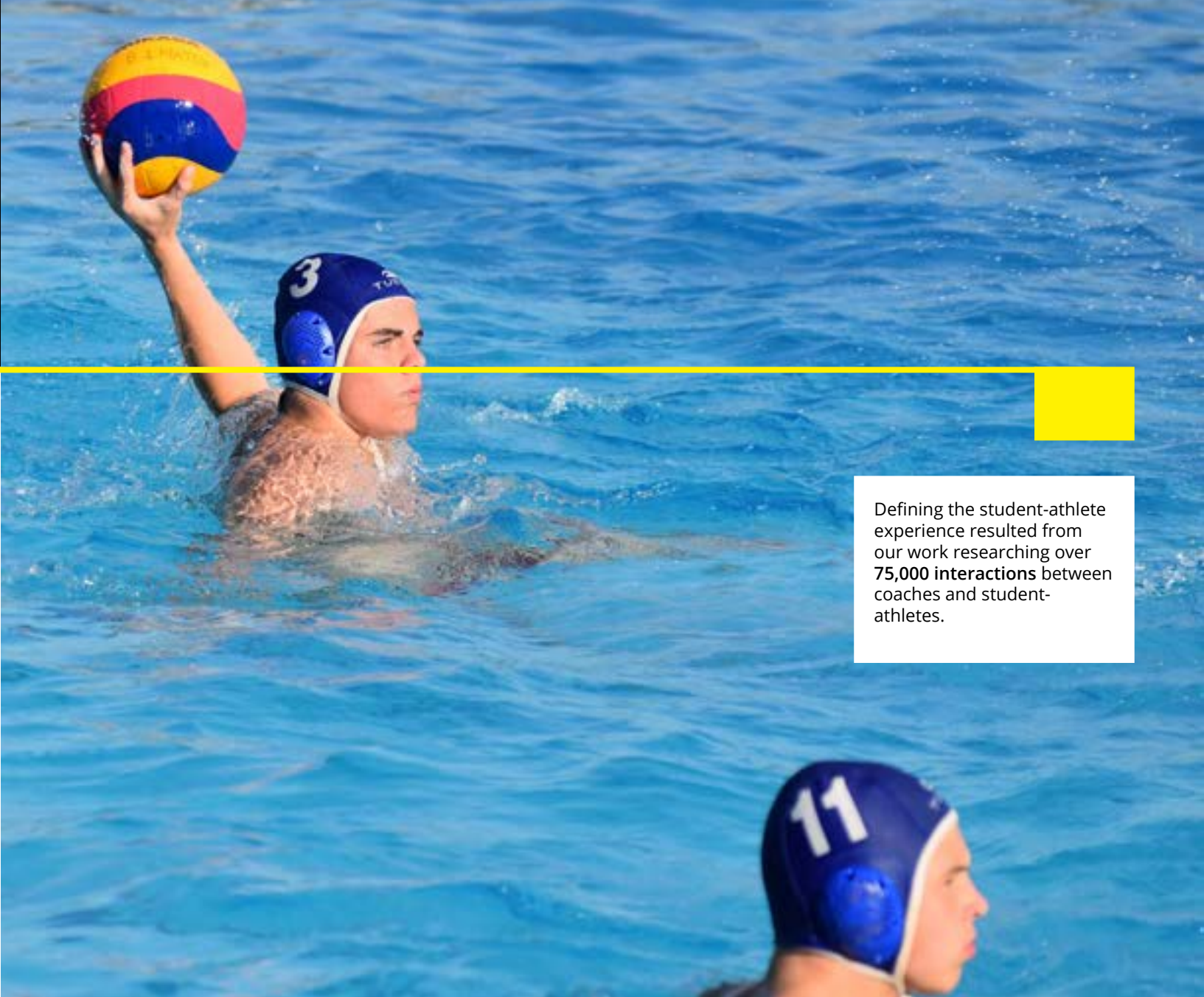
While our results can be shown in various ways (which our research colleagues will expand upon in the following pages), we find most powerful student-athletes' open-ended comments. Below are responses from the student-athletes of coaches who, according to our data, are top-rated coaches. These are coaches whose impact reaches beyond their respective sport:

- "My coach has made me a better player and person. She is such a good role model and is someone whom I look up to."
- "She makes sure everyone on the team feels important. If she notices something is wrong, she goes out of her way to comfort us or to talk to us about it."
- "He's a great person and the main reason I went out for basketball this year. I love the dude."
- "He is the best person I could imagine to lead this football program to success as a team and as men after high school."

I'll bet if Coach Lambert read this feedback, he'd thank all of you for the positive impact you are making in the future lives of your student-athletes.



Bill Eckstrom is the founder and CEO of Ecsell Institute, Ecsell Sports, and Ecsell Education. He is coauthor of the best-selling book, *The Coaching Effect*, a renowned speaker, TEDx Presenter (Why Comfort Will Ruin Your Life) and regarded as the foremost authority on metric-based coaching.



Defining the student-athlete experience resulted from our work researching over **75,000 interactions** between coaches and student-athletes.





# ABOUT ECSELL SPORTS RESEARCH

BY STACIA JORGENSEN & WILL ECKSTROM JR.

Over the past two years, in addition to other research, Ecsell Sports has surveyed over 2,000 student-athletes to empirically understand how coaching impacts the student-athlete experience. Athletes from 18 different high school-level sports participated in this research and we measured their experiences with over 60 coaches. This robust examination into the area that we believe most greatly impacts the student-athlete experience – the coach – provides us with over 74,000 invaluable and measurable data points that provide insights into the vital role of the coach.

This research has identified six main themes, or particular areas of coaching behaviors and interactions, that profoundly impact the student-athlete experience. These include:

## CONNECTION

The Connection Theme captures how coaches interact personally with student-athletes in practices and games. Coaches who are strong in this theme seek ways to connect with each student-athlete in an individualized way that fosters respect, engagement, and trust.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

The Psychological Safety Theme offers insights into how effectively the coach has created a supportive and healthy student-athlete environment. These environments encourage student-athletes to be their authentic selves without fear of negative consequences for their mistakes, play, or opinions.

## COMMUNICATION

The Communication Theme measures the coach's capacity to effectively share information, strategies, and expectations with their student-athletes. This theme also measures how well coaches listen to their student-athletes and their efficacy of using technology as a communication tool.

## STRUCTURE

The Structure Theme gives a snapshot of the organization, consistency, and predictability of a coach's behavior. Coaches who are strong in this theme create a framework for their team that encourages individual player goal setting, stability, and accountability.

## SKILL DEVELOPMENT

The Skill Development Theme measures the execution of instructional interactions between the student-athlete and the coach. Areas assessed center on a coach's capacity to advance the competency and technique of student-athletes to help them perform to the best of their ability.

## CHALLENGE

The Challenge Theme highlights the fostering of a growth environment where the coach pushes student-athletes beyond expected or previous levels of performance. This theme additionally reveals a coach's capacity to shape an elite mindset. Elements associated with the Challenge Theme include asserting and encouraging individuals outside their physical and mental comfort zones while being mindful of student-athlete stress and managing individual expectations.

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The Ecsell Sports Coaching Effect Survey asks student-athletes their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with their coach through an anonymous online survey where five questions are asked for each of these themes. Additionally, student-athletes are asked more over-arching questions, including their overall rating of their coach's coaching skills; their overall satisfaction with their student-athlete experience at their school; and their perception of their coach's impact on their growth as an individual and in ways that extend beyond their sport.

Finally, three open-ended questions are part of the survey. These questions provide the student-athlete the opportunity to share, in their own words, what their coach does best, where their coach could improve their coaching skills, and any other information that is important to them in the context of their experience as a student-athlete. As one AD succinctly stated regarding the survey, "My student-athletes now have a safe voice."

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Stacia Jorgensen is the Executive Director of Research for the Ecsell Institute. She has over 25 years of experience in data collection, survey design and data analysis. Stacia's goal is to help Ecsell's coaches discover actionable insights surrounding coaching effectiveness that allow them to achieve the highest levels of performance.

William Eckstrom is the director of Research & Analytics. He brings his psychology background and experience with youth development to Ecsell Sports. William seeks to empower every student-athlete grow as an individual, both on and off the field.



## PROVIDING RESULTS

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All participating coaches receive a report detailing their anonymous student-athlete responses to the survey. We also provide coaches a score (1-100) for each theme that is based on positive responses to questions within the respective theme and an overall coaching score that averages all themes, again on a scale of 1-100. The obvious, critical benefit to these reports is the data-driven starting point it provides each coach for their own skill improvement: It is their proverbial coaching game film.

The following pages are filled with data and insights. Some you will expect to see, some will surprise you, and some will challenge your thoughts. Ultimately, we hope this report serves as a catalyst for coaching improvement because we learned a long time ago: Nothing elevates performance more than coaching!





## DIGGING DEEP INTO THE THEMES

The following insights provide a look into how coaches impact each of the six behavioral themes.

**50%**

Half (50%) of student-athletes strongly agree that their coach cares about them as a person.

**53%**

Just more than half of coaches measured are considered “top-rated” based on student-athlete ratings.

**12%**

The lowest theme score recorded is 12%, the highest is 97%.

**95%**

The highest-rated coach in our research scored a 95% (subjectively, her teams always seem to over-achieve).

**69%**

The average overall coaching score is a 69%.



## CONNECTION THEME

The depth and quality of respect, engagement, and trust between a coach and their student-athletes.

- Close to three-fourths (74%) of student-athletes believe their coach makes them feel like an important part of the team. Conversely, one-fourth do not feel like an important part of the team.
- Half (50%) of student-athletes strongly agree that their coach cares about them as a person.
- 91% of student-athletes who indicate their coach is top-rated, report their coach builds their confidence; while only 15% who have a low-rated coach report the same.
- 94% of student-athletes with a top-rated coach indicate their coach makes playing the sport fun; while only 16% who have a low-rated coach report the same.
- The average coach's score on the Connection Theme is **72%**.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY THEME

A coach's ability to construct an environment that allows student-athletes to be their authentic self without fear of negative consequences.

- About half (53%) of student-athletes are afraid to make a mistake in front of their coach.
- 46% of student-athletes believe their coach overreacts, thereby lessening psychological safety.
- 96% of top-rated coaches ensure teammates treat each other respectfully compared to about half (52%) of low-rated coaches.
- 57% of student-athletes believe it is easy to talk about difficult issues or problems with their coach while, conversely, 43% do not.
- The average coach's score on the Psychological Safety Theme is **66%**.

+

"I have become a better player but not just at the game but with my teammates and as a person. He cares a lot as a coach and as a person."

-

"She picks favorites. It's extremely obvious she could not care less that I am on the team."

+

"He has made me feel confident about sports again after bad coaches made me feel worthless."

-

"I feel like if I make one mistake I will be looked down upon."



## COMMUNICATION THEME

A coach's capacity to effectively share information, strategies, and expectations with their student-athletes.

- Only a little over one-third (39%) strongly agree that instructions given by their coach are easy to understand.
- Higher-rated coaches are reported to be better at providing instructions that are easier to understand (97%) when compared to lower-rated coaches (51%)
- 30% of student-athletes report their coach has embarrassed them in front of teammates.
- 42% of male student-athletes report their coach using bad or inappropriate language compared to just 17% of female student-athletes.
- Top-rated coaches are more likely to take time to answer student-athlete questions (94%) than lower-rated coaches (10%).
- The average coach's score on the Communication Theme is **78%**.

+ "Coach is really good about giving individual and group feedback. He communicates really well to the team and parents."

- "The only thing coach could improve on would be more direct feedback. She always gives feedback but it isn't directly to the person so it can be confusing if you can't tell if it is you or not. She doesn't want to come off as mean but I think direct answers are the best way to become better."





Ecsell Sports builds on Ecsell Institute's decade-long research studies and expertise on human growth and performance. We apply the same systematic research process and rigorous data analyses from the board room to the locker room.





+ My coach does a really good job running organized practices. I always feel like he gives all of his effort and time into this team and we are the best we can be because of him."

- "I think that if we had more practices and there was a specific outline of everything we do to make sure we are having efficient practices that would be the cherry on top of everything."

## STRUCTURE THEME

The execution of activities by a coach that create an organized, consistent, and predictable team environment.

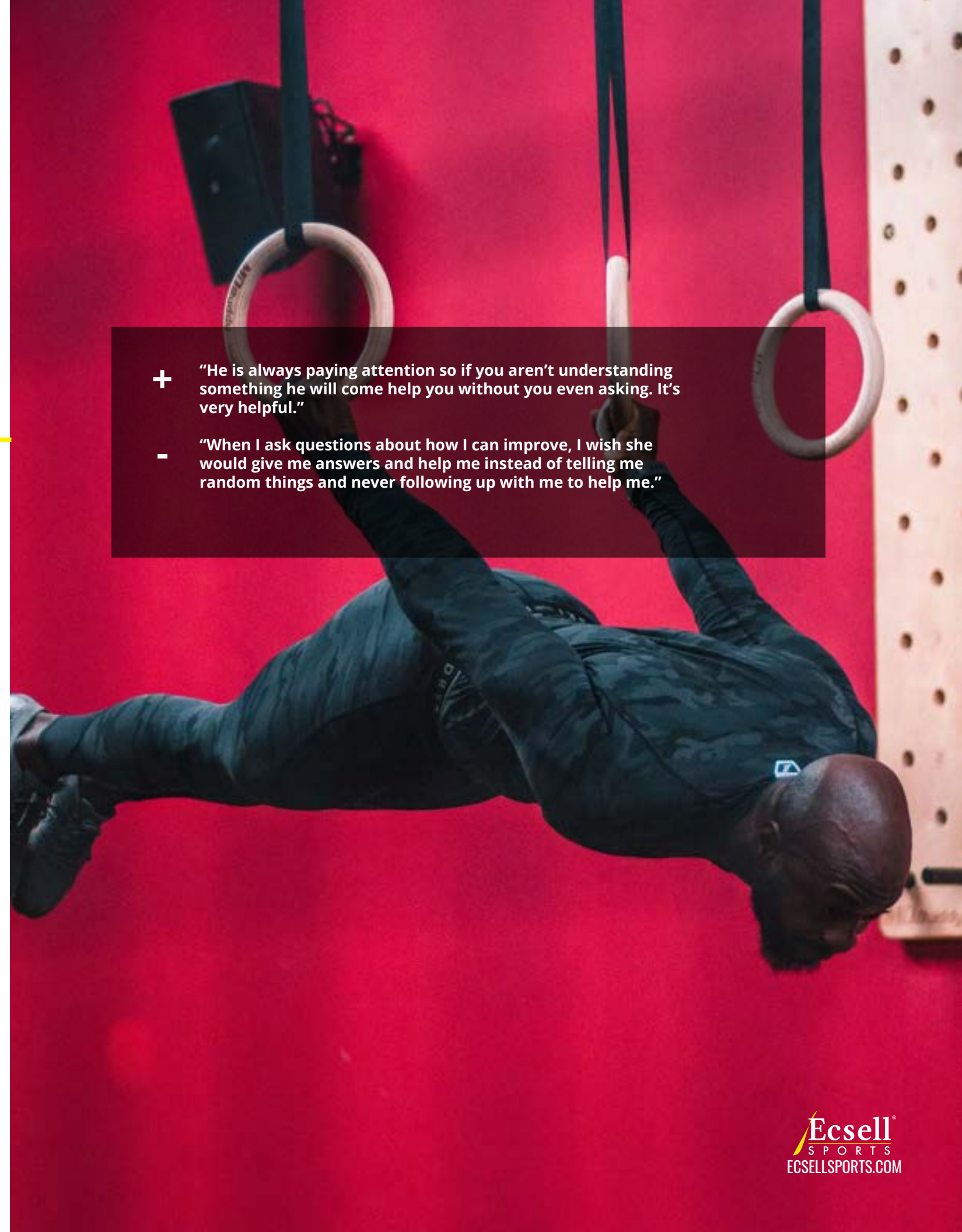
- About two-thirds (65%) of student-athletes have set a personal goal for the season with their coach.
- 81% of top-rated coaches work with their student-athletes to create a goal for the season compared to only 30% lower rated coaches.
- More than three-fourths (77%) of coaches are reported to do what they say they will do. Likewise, 23% of coaches are reported to not do what they say they will do.
- 95% of top-rated coaches provide clear rules to follow as compared to only 69% of lower-rated coaches.
- The average coach's score on the Structure Theme is 79%. This is the theme in which coaches had their highest average score.



## SKILL DEVELOPMENT THEME

A coach's capacity to advance the competency and technique of student-athletes to help them perform to the best of their ability.

- Over half (53%) of student-athletes receive individual instruction from their coach each practice, likewise 47% of them receive no individual instruction.
- Only 30% of student-athletes strongly agree that their coach has told them specifically what to work on to improve how they perform.
- 86% of student-athletes say their coach lets them know when they do something well.
- There is a very strong relationship between a student-athlete whose coach tells them when they do something well and believing their coach cares about them as a person, not just an athlete.
- The average coach's score on the Skill Development theme is **67%**.



+

"He is always paying attention so if you aren't understanding something he will come help you without you even asking. It's very helpful."

-

"When I ask questions about how I can improve, I wish she would give me answers and help me instead of telling me random things and never following up with me to help me."



## CHALLENGE THEME

The fostering of a growth environment where the coach pushes student-athletes beyond expected or previous levels of performance.

- Almost three-quarters (73%) of student-athletes DO believe they are better at their sport because of their coach.
- 48% strongly agree that their coach talks about the importance of mindset or attitude.
- Nearly all top-rated coaches push their student-athletes to perform at a higher level (98%) compared to only about half of lower-rated coaches (55%).
- Higher-rated coaches design more challenging practices than do lower-rated coaches – 73% versus 33%, respectively.
- The average coach's score in the Challenge Theme is **64%**. This is the theme in which coaches had their lowest average score.

+ "I appreciate how hard you work us because it helps us get better and I think we could make it to state with this team."

- Make practices more challenging so that games can be made easier. Find ways to coach players differently because some people get shut down and don't appreciate hard coaching but some players need hard coaching."



# SUMMARY

All coaches have an impact on their student-athletes. Whether this impact is excellent, poor, or somewhere in the middle can be improved through the effort and intentionality of the respective coach. And coaching is a heavily nuanced, fast-paced, and multi-faceted talent. It's not always easy to understand the impact a coach is making. This is why we are sharing this report.

Ecsell Sports, our partner schools, ADs, coaches, and the student-athletes themselves have all benefitted from this work. Below are a few additional insights we have gained from this research:

ADs want to be more transformational than managerial. They are searching for ways to help their coaches impact the student-athlete experience in a positive way.

During focus groups with ADs and coaches, they made it infinitely clear that providing a positive student-athlete experience was their #1 priority.

Student-athletes are eager to share their experiences with their coach and take the opportunity seriously.

There are very few behavioral differences in individuals who lead a successful business team versus one who coaches a successful athletic team. Statistically, (53%) one is just as likely to have a good manager at work as a student-athlete is to have a good coach.

Subjectively, a big challenge ADs and coaches face is not that they don't care about the student-athlete or their overall experience, it is showing that they care.

Ecsell Sports is a work in progress. As more schools, ADs, and coaches sign-on for our assistance, we will add even more robust data to this report for the next academic year. In future reports, we will begin to identify trends and get more specific with data on each sport we measure.

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

*What does it feel like to be coached by you?*

Coachingly  
The Ecsell Sports Team

*"I believe in hope. I believe in 'Believe.'"*

- Coach Ted Lasso





## YOU'VE GOT TO BE IN THE GAME TO WIN IT!



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