

PLAYER RELATIONSHIPS: FROM COMPARISON TO CONNECTION

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

Friends play a particularly important role in adolescents' social lives. During this stage, relationships with peers and recognition from others are central to the development of identity, social skills, and self-esteem. Having friends to confide in or share concerns with also nurtures a sense of safety and social support.

Team sports can provide a valuable context for building peer networks and fostering collaboration, support, and teamwork. However, in a competitive environment, some young people may feel inferior if they do not perform as well as their peers, which can affect their self-esteem, well-being, and relationships.

While friendships are foundational to a sense of acceptance and belonging during adolescence, in competitive sports they can quickly become influenced by individual results and strained by competition. To foster a sense of belonging and healthy relationships, team spirit and collaboration must take precedence over comparison and rivalry.

Student-athletes' experiences: insights from the field

- **Comparison and internal competition:** In many sports, players learn early on to compare themselves to one another. One person's success can feel like another's failure. This dynamic creates an underlying tension where players constantly measure themselves—even among teammates.
- **Erosion of connection:** This comparison weakens trust and the sense of belonging. Players may hesitate to celebrate others' success for fear of highlighting their own shortcomings. Collective enjoyment fades behind a quiet pressure not to be "the worst."
- **Team spirit:** Promoting healthy relationships among players means restoring the true meaning of the word team. It means recognizing that an athlete's value is not defined solely by their position or playing time, but also by their collaboration skills and the quality of the relationships they build with others.



CONCRETE ACTION

Create a teammate recognition ritual.

- At the end of the week, invite each player to name a quality, attitude, or positive action they observed in a teammate.
- This can be done in a group circle or anonymously using a recognition box.
- The goal is to shift from comparison to recognition: learning to see others' value without feeling diminished.
- By repeating this ritual, the team learns to celebrate collective success and build a culture where trust replaces rivalry.

