



“Compete-Learn-Honor[®]”: A psychological and sports science evidence-based approach to coaching and player development

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the research that supports “Compete-Learn-Honor,” a psychological and sport science evidence-based coaching philosophy and player development approach to promoting emotional and physical safety, fun, and growth as a person and player. Compete-Learn-Honor (CLH) focuses on the mental-emotional game but enables task- and mastery-oriented rather than ego-oriented integration of all six general tennis performance components for periodization identified by the U.S. Professional Tennis Association: Physical, technical, tactical, strategic, mental, and environmental. The article describes how CLH is implemented, and reviews how CLH is rooted in the science of positive psychology and of creating a task- and mastery-oriented player development climate in sport that focuses on support for basic ABC needs of human motivation—autonomy, belonging, and competence, all of which has been shown to promote better athlete well-being and performance.

Key words: coaching philosophy, mental strength, mental skills, character development, player well-being

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INTRODUCTION

A core challenge for coaches at all levels, and particularly for coaches of juniors in the rapid growth phases of middle childhood and adolescence, is how to guide athletes to increased sport competence and performance success while also strengthening their mental and social-emotional health. A coach whose athlete wins tournaments but who is unhappy, anxious, and burned-out has not succeeded. Sports participation can have either positive or negative effects (Whitley et al., 2021), and the coach-athlete relationship has been identified as a key to producing positive outcomes, especially the degree to which coaches intentionally integrate life skills and character development opportunities which satisfy broad human needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000) into their coaching (e.g., Camire et al., 2012; Gould & Carson, 2008).

One approach for creating such a need-satisfying player “learning in development” environment in sports (O’Sullivan et al., 2021) is “Compete-Learn-Honor” (CLH—Scales, 2019; 2020; 2023), which prioritizes effort, continuous growth, and behaving with high character on and off the court over win-lose results. It is a psychological and sport science evidence-based coaching philosophy and player development approach to promoting emotional and physical safety, fun, and growth as a person and player.

Originating in tennis, a coach using the CLH approach intentionally incorporates discussion and activities for building 27 tennis-relevant life skills and character habits into all practices and individual lessons and into season or

long-term player development plans (Table 1 lists the 27 habits and definitions). Compete-Learn-Honor focuses on the mental-emotional game, but in so doing also enables task- and mastery-oriented rather than ego-oriented integration of all six general tennis performance components for periodization identified by the U.S. Professional Tennis Association: Physical, technical, tactical, strategic, mental, and environmental (USPTA, 2022). In addition to describing CLH, this article presents some specific exercises and activities coaches can easily integrate, homework athletes can do, etc. to build these mental-emotional habits.

METHODS

The core methodology of CLH is cognitive reframing, most especially helping players redefine success away from a traditional binary of winning or losing, to the more developmental definition of improving as a person and a player by Competing (Give 100% effort at all times), Learning (Be an open, curious, humble learner), and Honoring (By how you act, bring credit to self, everyone else including opponents, and the game). CLH further elaborates what this means by positioning Honor as the foundation for Learning, and all Competitive development, as expressed in these expanded definitions below. Coach-player discussions, posters, videos, worksheets, and other activities (some described below) expand players’ understanding of what each of the three CLH pillars means. Specifically, at the start of the season, players do a CLH self-assessment in which they rate themselves on how well they meet these descriptions (rated as a strength, ok but inconsistent, and definitely needs work):

- **HONOR:** I am consistently respectful to all (opponents, teammates, coaches, officials, etc.), use positive self-talk and body language, never give up, don't make excuses, and enjoy playing my sport whether I win or lose.
- **LEARN:** I am striving to learn more about my sport, on and off the playing field. I am humble about my own skills. I take notes and study them. I set improvement as a goal more than winning. I look at my games and matches as a chance to learn, whether I win or lose.
- **COMPETE:** I give my full effort in practices, lessons, games, and matches. I prepare by proper conditioning, correct breathing, and having a game plan and routines. I enjoy the battle and solving the puzzle of a sports contest. I keep my focus on right now when I'm playing.

CLH was developed for the Junior Varsity and Varsity high school tennis player and due to cognitive reframing being at the center of it is therefore most relevant to use with middle school students up through high performance juniors and adult recreational players who have the cognitive abilities to reflect, discuss, and actively practice these principles with a team and on their own so they become habits. However, CLH also is fully consistent with and applicable to the USTA's American Development Model and Net Generation's coverage of character for younger children. For example, the Net Generation Coach's Curriculum (USTA, 2017) includes even at the red ball stage coverage of CLH concepts such as respect for others, the importance of giving one's best effort, kindness and cooperation, following rules, and making good choices, and builds on these at orange and green ball levels to include respect for opponents, teamwork, taking responsibility, being resilient, and goal setting. Similar and related CLH concepts can thus be introduced at those developmental stages to supplement the Net Generation character progressions and lay the groundwork for deeper CLH development at older levels of junior play.

Every day in practice, large laminated posters with one of the 27 CLH habits on them are hung on the tennis fence. After warm-up, players sit in a semi-circle, read the habit aloud, and then discuss in their own words what this habit means to them. The coach summarizes the key points and lessons for both on and off court life, and the habit is reinforced throughout practices and matches all season.

Brief, inexpensively made, 1-2-minute iPhone videos of the coach encapsulating the meaning and application of each habit have been created and are recommended for players to view on a YouTube channel and a website dedicated to CLH (www.competelearnhonor.com). More than three dozen worksheets and activities for individuals and the team have been developed that also are used to introduce and build these CLH habits (Scales, 2023).

Building players' feelings of autonomy, belonging, and competence is a critical aim of CLH. Therefore, when freezing play during practice, or in permitted coaching during matches, the coach sometimes does give directive suggestions for improved effectiveness in all facets of play (e.g., technical, tactical, strategic, mental). But primarily a CLH coach tries to emphasize asking questions of the student-athletes or prompting them to reflect ("tell me the story of the match so far," how can you use your tennis strengths in this situation?"), so that athletes have voice, and are empowered to identify problems and choose their own solutions more than the coach imposing them.

All of these methods are meant to help players lessen the degree to which they are focusing on and ego-involved in the outcome of play—winning or losing—and jumping to judgments about their worth as human beings based on whether they win or lose. The CLH methods are meant to help them focus instead on task and mastery by loving and honoring the game, eagerly learning, and approaching play more objectively as a continuing series of problems or puzzles to enjoy trying to solve.

Several of the 27 CLH principles are listed in the following, and sample activities described for how to promote them. These activities are elaborated in Scales (2023) and several illustrative worksheets used in CLH training are included in Figure 1 of this article.

Honor: Love the Game More Than How You Perform

Sample CLH Activities/Worksheets:

*Complete What I Love About Playing Tennis worksheet, adapted from Lauer et al. (2010).

*Use the positive reasons why you play tennis to construct a between-points routine that enables execution of the "4Rs" in the time between points: Key words and body actions that help you to Respond positively, Relax, Refocus on the next point, and be Ready to play.

*Complete the Excuses List (favorite excuses heard of or personally use) to throw away into the "Excuse Box" (literally a cardboard box at the entrance to the tennis court) so you as a person and player take responsibility for what happens.

Learn: Humility Allows You to Learn

Sample CLH Activities/Worksheets:

*Complete Tennis Skills Self-Assessment

*Complete Goals and Obstacles Worksheet

*Complete Learning From Losses Worksheets

*Use Match Notes Worksheet for post-match summary and learning

*Conduct Fake Post-Match Interview (respond in a respectful and mastery-oriented way to the question "Did you win?") to frame all outcomes, whether a win or a loss, as learning opportunities.

Compete: Love the Battle and Solve the Puzzle

Sample CLH Activities/Worksheets:

*Complete 3 Essential Tools worksheet (Game Plan, Serve + 1 and Return + 1 plays, a 4R's between-points routine)

*Complete What Am I Working On Today Worksheet before practices and matches, to stay focused on a learning and improvement focus rather than a win-lose outcome focus.

Table 1
The Compete-Learn-Honor habits.

CLH Habit	Definition
HONOR	
1: Respect All	Respecting ourselves, our teammates, coaches, opponents, officials, family, school, community, and the game we play. Building everyone up and being a great supportive teammate. Treating every player as equally valuable and cared about, regardless of their skill level or ranking, or other differences.
2: Love The Game More Than How You Perform	Loving the game and the process of improving more than how we do at it, recognizing that the game is bigger than we are. Giving every benefit of the doubt to our opponent, playing by both the letter and spirit of the game’s rules and codes of conduct regardless of the effect on winning and losing.
3: Do Not Strive For Victory: Strive For Gracefulness, Balance, Patience, Clarity	Focusing on movement, being unrushed, having a plan.
4: Use Positive Self-Talk and Show Positive Body Language	Using positive self-talk and physically projecting an attitude of confidence (not cockiness).
5: Never Give Up	Maintaining belief that there is always a chance to play better and improve, even in a loss, or additionally get lucky and win.
6: No Excuses	Taking responsibility for how we play, and not making excuses or blaming other people or factors.
7: Give Your All	Committing to high energy and full focus, and giving attention to detail.
LEARN	
8: Lose Your “Self”: Humility Allows You To Learn	Being open, curious, and humble learners. Coach being enthusiastic about partnering with parents and helping parents learn why coaches do what they do, so parents grow in their interest in and appreciation of the game their child is playing.
9: Mental Toughness Isn’t Given—It’s Developed	Feeling you can always get better as long as you put in the work.
10: Adjust-Adapt-Survive	Being flexible and adaptable as circumstances change.
11: Learn One New Thing Every Time On The Court	Creating a personal and team continuous improvement culture; treating self and others as lifelong learners, from coaches and parents to experienced players and those brand new to the game.
12: Take Notes And Then Study The Notes	Reflecting on practice and competition experiences.
13: Improving Is A Better Goal Than Winning	Focusing on growth process more than outcome.
14: Mistakes Are Necessary To Improve	Creating a personal mindset and team culture where it’s emotionally and physically safe to try new skills and not succeed at first.
15: Play The Ball, Not The Opponent	Ignoring rank and reputation of opponent without failing to notice and manage their strengths and weaknesses.
16: Always Change A Losing Game—Never Change A Winning Game	Being able & willing to adjust behavior on the basis of new data coming from competitive play.
COMPETE	
17: Think During Practice—Feel During The Match	Using progressions, repetitions, and accumulated rehearsal of breaking complex behaviors into smaller segments in order to play instinctively in competition.
18: Physical Fitness Leads To Mental Toughness	Taking care of mental and physical health through exercise, proper nutrition, and adequate rest.
19: Proper Breathing Leads To A Relaxed Body And A Clear Mind	Using proper athletic breathing techniques to improve attitude and performance.
20: Love The Battle And Solve The Puzzle	Enjoying the process of preparation and competition, and pitting skills and wits against an opponent, versus only having fun if win.
21: Have A Game Plan And Routines	Having a systematic approach to play based on analysis of self and opponent’s strengths and weaknesses.
22: Have A Purpose And A Target For Every Stroke	Having an overall strategy and specific tactics for different situations.
23: Expect The Ball To Come Back And Expect A Tough Shot	Assuming the opponent is as good as you and will work as hard as you in competition.
24: What Matters Is Right Now, This Point, This Shot	Staying in the present moment, neither over-thinking the last point/play nor projecting outcome thoughts onto points that haven’t even been played yet.
25: All Points Are Big Points	Considering every moment of a contest to be a potential turning point
26: Use Time Effectively	Taking time away from opponent and giving to self, within the letter and spirit of the rules.
27: Combat Stress By Being Humble, Smiling, Moving, Drinking Water, And Having A Plan	Having competition-doable strategies for lowering feelings of tension, nerves, and stress.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT PLAYING TENNIS/PICKLEBALL?

Worksheet

Worksheet modified from USTA Mental Drills and Skills Handbook, Worksheet 6-1

By Larry Lauer, Daniel Gould, Paul Lubbers, & Mark Kovacs, Eds. (2010). USTA Mental Skills and Drills Handbook. Monterey, CA: Coaches Choice.

Instructions: The purpose of this exercise is to help you develop motivating cue words, phrases, and images. To create these, you first need to remember WHY you play tennis or pickleball. What drives you to compete? So, respond to this question, keeping in mind your personal reasons for playing tennis or pickleball.

Why do you play tennis or pickleball? What do you love about playing tennis or pickleball? (Think about why you started playing tennis or pickleball, the aspects of the game you enjoy, and your long-term goals, such as, I enjoy competing against others.)

Now highlight all the personally meaningful cue words, phrases, or images in your answer.

Re-read this before practices and matches.

And use those words in-between points (your 3 or 4R's routine) to keep yourself positive and focused on what you love about playing, no matter what else is going on!

Figure 1. Sample CLH Activities and Worksheets (Scales, 2023).

RESULTS

Emerging qualitative and quantitative data suggest the usefulness of the CLH approach. For example, an initial study with 262 middle and high school student-athletes from across the U.S. and representing more than one dozen team and individual sports, including tennis, found strong support for the impact of CLH: Logistic regression analysis showed that student-athletes who described their team climate as high in the principles of Compete-Learn-Honor reported significantly greater odds of having social-emotional competence (14 times more), strong relationships with their coach (30 times more), confidence in their coach (46 times more), deriving a sense of purpose and meaning from their sport (2 ½ times more), and strongly intending to continue playing their sport (3 times more; Scales et al., 2023) than student-athletes who didn't have high levels of a CLH team climate. The latter outcome, intent to continue playing, is especially promising given that national data show as much as 70% of young people quit their sport by the age of 13, largely because they are no longer having fun, due to having poor relationships with their coach and/or too much emphasis on winning (Aspen Institute, 2019).

Qualitatively, the experience of CLH principles being used with the #1 player on a college women's tennis team is illustrative of its effectiveness. The player was performing below her expectations and being deeply critical of even her effective play, to the point where she was frequently upset, hitting her leg in anger with her racquet, and having little fun playing. One CLH activity, Judo-ing Negative Words to Positive, was used to intervene in this cycle. The player used her phone to keep track of several days' worth of words and body language she used after points in her practice matches. The consultant then helped her identify patterns of words and body language that were "ineffective" and "unproductive," using those words to describe her play instead of "bad," or "good." Then together the student-athlete and consultant constructed words and

body actions that would be more effective. Just starting to say the word "okay" after each point as a sign of acceptance that the point was over and to move on was a simple step that helped the player react more neutrally to points, whether won or lost, and better observe how they had been won or lost. The player also agreed to set a goal of at least 50% of the time, not hitting herself with her racquet but missing her leg on purpose, to remind her that she had control and autonomy over this behavior. Within several weeks her demeanor had become so calm in words and actions and her enjoyment so much increased that she shared that her teammates thought she was winning all the time, when in fact she was winning matches more than before but like most players, still losing a lot of points and games, but now taking it less personally and observing it more objectively. Similar examples have been seen frequently at the high school level, some of which are related in Scales (2019).

DISCUSSION/LITERATURE

Motivation and Self-Determination Theory

It is well established in the psychological and sport science research that athletes who prioritize winning over development and improvement generally enjoy their sport less, are more depressed and anxious, more worried about making mistakes, less satisfied, and perform worse than athletes who are task- and mastery-oriented, who want to win and compete to win but who are not consumed by the outcome (Bean et al., 2014; Cronin, 2015; Houlberg et al., 2018). Likewise, coaches who create a task- and mastery-oriented player development climate that focuses on support for basic ABC needs of human motivation—autonomy, belonging, and competence—have athletes who work harder, are more persistent in the face of challenge and disappointment, more open to learning through mistakes, psychologically and social-

emotionally healthier, enjoy playing more, and perform better than athletes who have coaches that focus on winning as the outcome and who use controlling coaching strategies that thwart those needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence (Mallet & Cote, 2006, Rocci et al. 2020; Small et al., 2011; Whitley et al., 2021).

The CLH approach is well-aligned with such studies and with psychological and sport science theories of learning, motivation, and development. For example, it directly reflects Gould and Carson's (2008) model for coaching life skills through sports. In that model, a well-articulated coaching philosophy, the coach's relationship skills, competence, and accessibility interact with athletes' existing personal and external assets to enable both direct (e.g., opportunities for leadership, setting clear and consistent rules) and indirect strategies (e.g., being a role model for desired values and behaviors) that affect athletes' identity formation, perceived competence, locus of control, self-worth, and autonomy (Camire, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012).

The CLH approach also well reflects Cote's Development Framework for Sport, Duda's taxonomy (Bean, Fortier, Post, & Chima, 2014) that integrates both Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Achievement Goal Theory (AGT), USTA's American Development Model (ADM; Davies, Allen, & Roetert, 2021), and Houlberg and Sholefield's (2020) Developmental Model of Elite Athletes. CLH embodies these theories and frameworks in the following ways:

1. It is intended to create an empowering, respectful, mastery-oriented context (per AGT) that is
2. Fun, positive, engaging, and inclusive rather than focusing on wins and losses (per ADM)
3. And in which the teaching of life skills to student-athletes is intentional (Gould & Carson, 2008) and meant to
4. Promote the "ABC's" articulated in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) of Autonomy (choice, control, engaging in intrinsic interests), Belonging (positive relatedness to others), and Competence (being skilled at things that have value to self and valued others), while
5. Helping athletes connect personal and social values to playing, which enables development of a narrative of larger purpose than just performance (Houlberg & Sholefield, 2020).

The research on sports and the ABCs of self-determination theory shows that:

"...when coaches, parents, or fellow players become controlling or critical (which is often potentiated by their own ego-involvement in winning) they can undermine feelings of competence and autonomy that are the foundations of sustained motivation. Players will report that the game is no longer fun as a reason for dropout, but this will in turn be explained by the absence of feelings of autonomy and competence" (Ryan et al., 2009, p.111).

The more autonomy support within a positive coach-athlete relationship an athlete feels, the evidence shows that the more they are likely to hang in there and persevere when facing those challenges and obstacles, to actually perform better, and to enjoy it all more (e.g., Camire et al., 2012; Cronin, 2015). And when coaches support autonomy through encouragement, positive feedback, and helping their athletes pursue intrinsic goals that come from their heart—what we

have called "sparks" (Benson & Scales, 2009)—more than external rewards, then athletes have more emotional and physical energy, and compete better (Ryan et al., 2009). That relationship-centered autonomy support is a central feature that Compete-Learn-Honor is intended to promote—working together in healthy relationships with a community of others, from coaches, students, and parents to teammates and opponents, to find and grow that deeply personal spark and larger purpose for playing the sport, in our case, tennis.

Studies of high-achievers both in and outside of sports show (e.g., Houlberg et al., 2018; Loehr, 2012; Ryan et al., 2009) that extrinsic goals (such as winning, or recognition), even if reached, rarely leave the athlete feeling satisfied unless they also have these more deeply personal, intrinsic goals underlying their effort and participation (such as attaining personal bests, improving, loving the battle, contributing to team effort).

Life Skills and Character Development

Sports are often seen as a vehicle for developing key life skills and character strengths, but as Theokas et al. (2008) well described, "there is nothing about sport itself that is magical... (p. 72) and "there is nothing about a ball...that teaches life skills" (p. 78). In addition to being rooted in the above psychological and sport science research and theory on motivation and self-determination, the 27 CLH habits also are potential pathways for helping coaches be intentional about promoting developmentally impactful relationships with their athletes, and athletes' life skills and character development through sports.

For example, pioneering performance psychologist Dr. Jim Loehr (2012) divides character strengths into two broad classes: Performance (strengths that govern our relationship with ourselves) and Moral (strengths that govern our relationships with others). He describes how performance strengths help us succeed by society's scorecard, but that moral strengths help us succeed as human beings. Performance character strengths include effort investment, perseverance, determination, confidence, focus, and competitiveness. Moral character strengths include respect and care for others, humility, fairness, generosity, and honor. Peterson and Seligman (2004) also identified similar character strengths that their research showed to be broadly universal across societies and cultures, including love of learning, persistence, love, teamwork, modesty, gratitude, and hope. Finally, the United States Tennis Association Player Development program (USTA, 2022) defines 7 Values and 12 Skills of a True Champion, including the values of being engaged, confident, resilient, professional, respectful, determined, and tough, and the skills of self-awareness, focus, goal setting & striving, disciplined self-talk, visualization/imagery, confidence, resilience, stress & energy management, relaxation & breathing, communication, leadership, and time management, prioritization, and organization.

Each of the 27 CLH habits is grounded in and meant to strengthen one or more of these performance and moral life skills and character strengths. Applying Loehr's (2012) language, the CLH habits are meant to enhance performance character while being rooted in developing moral character. For example, the very first CLH habit, under the pillar of Honor, is Respect All. If coaches and players are truly Respecting All, then that implies that the coach and players are treating every player as equally valuable and cared about, regardless of their

skill level or ranking, or other differences in background. If everyone is being treated as equally valuable, then this should enhance a learning and player development climate of caring, trust, belonging, teamwork, and humility, among other life skills and character strengths.

Research has shown that when coaches create a climate focused on task mastery, support for meeting athletes' autonomy, belonging, and competence needs, and explicit attention to these kinds of life skills and character strengths, players have better mental and social-emotional health and are more likely to perform at personal best levels. For example, Gould et al. (2012) found that when coaches built positive rapport with their athletes and were intentional about teaching how sport lessons are related to broader life, their athletes had better emotional regulation, cognitive skills for managing competition, and prosocial norms in relating to others, including opponents. Gearity (2012) also concluded in reviewing the research that winning coaches focus on developing the psychological skills and well-being of their athletes, and that poor coaches fail to intentionally teach and facilitate mental, life, and character skills. Gould and Carson (2010) also found that highly effective high school coaches in terms of winning records were highly motivated to win, but also made the "personal development of their players a top priority" (p. 301). Crucially, they had a well thought out coaching philosophy, clear expectations, were skilled at building relationships, and integrated teaching of life skills into "everything they did as coaches" (p. 302).

The 27 habits within the three pillars of Compete-Learn-Honor provide a way for coaches to systematically and simply integrate a task and mastery approach to player development, in ways that meet players' basic motivational needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence, and that explicitly connect and integrate development as a person and a player through their core emphasis on growing life skills and character strengths both on and off the court.

CONCLUSION

The initial quantitative study examining the association of a CLH team climate with positive sport outcomes among middle and high school student-athletes (Scales et al., 2023) showed that CLH, as expected, was associated with better social-emotional strengths, relationships with and confidence in the coach, meaning and purpose derived from their sport, and intention to keep playing their sport. Future research is needed to build on this study and examine this plausible theory of change for CLH suggested by the broader literature and initial study: That if coaches systematically use CLH and players systematically apply it, then players will be more likely to feel safe, have fun, feel healthy mentally, socially, emotionally, and physically, improve their consistency and performance level in tennis, and want to stay active in tennis more so than players who are not exposed to a systematic CLH approach.

Even as that needed research is undertaken, however, coaches, other sport psychology practitioners, and researchers deciding to use the CLH approach can feel confident that both the initial quantitative results and theory and research in human motivation, character development, and sport participation provide substantial scientific validity for the mental-emotional principles and habits that define those three pillars of Compete, Learn, and Honor.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

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