



# Confidentiality: The key to trust and reputation.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the critical issue of confidentiality in the coach-player relationship. The rewards for coaches who safeguard player confidences are highlighted. The review concludes with a number of practical guidelines for coaches to follow.

**Key words:** Confidentiality, Trust, Reputation, Communication.

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of the coach is under increasing scrutiny as the demands on coaches continue to increase and evolve in an ever-changing sporting environment. As articulated by Bell-Laroche (2008),

*"There is possibly no role in sport that involves more interaction than the role of the coach: they are constantly at the intersection of volunteers, administrators, athletes, parents and officials."*

If this statement is accepted, then it follows one can conclude that communication from, and to, a coach is of critical importance. Information must be shared effectively. Further, given communication is the basis of any relationship of trust and honesty, then information that is 'sensitive', and may be potentially embarrassing or damaging if it falls into the wrong hands, must be protected.



Herein lies the ethical pillar of 'confidentiality' that emphasizes the obligation of a coach to safeguard the confidences and

rights of those with whom he/she might interact in the course of conducting his/her coaching duties. This article reviews several significant issues relating to 'confidentiality' in the coaching setting and, specifically, as it relates to a coach-player relationship.

## WHAT IS 'CONFIDENTIALITY?'

Confidentiality has been defined as "ensuring that information is accessible only to those authorised to have access" (Thornbory, 2008, p.29). As such, a coach's duty of confidentiality can be defined as "one which prevents the holder of confidential information from using it or disclosing it for purposes other than those for which it has been provided, without the consent of the person to whom the duty of confidentiality is owed" (Howard, 2005, p.17).

There are very limited exceptions to a coach's duty not to breach confidentiality (MacAuley & Bartlett, 2000). In rare cases, confidentiality may be breached where:

- Failure to disclose information may expose a player, or a third party, to risk of death or serious harm – here the 'public interest' principle is seen to take highest precedence
- There are statutory obligations or orders of a court or tribunal to do so

For a tennis coach, his/her duty of confidentiality can be found in the International Tennis Federation Code of Ethics for Coaches that states: "The tennis coach will determine, in consultation with students and others, what information is confidential and respect that confidentiality" (point 7). A list of

ethical standards illustrating how the confidentiality principle applies to the activities of a coach is shown in Table 1.

CONFIDENTIALITY STANDARDS
1. Determine, in consultation with player (and others as required), what information is confidential
2. Keep confidential any information about player gained through coaching activities and considered confidential by these players
3. Share confidential information only with the consent of players (or their parents/guardians) or in a way that the player cannot be identified
4. Exercise discretion in recording and communicating information to prevent this information from being interpreted or used to the detriment of player
5. Implement procedures to protect confidential information (e.g., restrict access to confidential records)

**Table 1. Key Standards Applicable to a Coach-Player Relationship. [adapted from Coaching Association of Canada Code of Conduct (n.d.).]**

### WHY IS CONFIDENTIALITY SO IMPORTANT?

With specific reference to a coach-player relationship, the benefits of a coach adhering to confidentiality include:

- Establishes the trust essential for a successful and/or satisfying coach-player relationship – that trust is generally eroded when information obtained within the sanctity of a coach-player relationship is disseminated inappropriately.
- Facilitates players feeling at ease, comfortable and confident in participating in open discussions with their coach.
- Grows, and maintains, the stature and reputation of the coach as a professional of integrity.
- Helps a coach to steer clear of misunderstandings with his/her player(s).
- Helps a coach to avoid, or minimise the risks of, perceptions, complaints or allegations of professional misconduct for breach of confidentiality.

### WHAT INFORMATION IS CONFIDENTIAL?

A multitude of information might be considered confidential including a player's sexual orientation or preferences, his/her record of any misdemeanors or indiscretions, his/her medical record (including injuries and illnesses) and issues in a player's family or playing background. A critical consideration here is what a player perceives or thinks is 'sensitive' (to be kept private) information rather than what information a coach might necessarily deem as such.

### HINTS TO COACHES

Avoiding potential pitfalls, for inappropriate disclosure of information is mostly a matter of common sense and good judgment. Here are some suggested guidelines for coaches

- A good 'rule of thumb' to follow is always to take time to think twice about the potential impact of what you are about to say or write
- Discuss confidentiality (including its limitations) at the beginning of a professional relationship with a player
- Avoid getting personal – restrict asking questions of a player to those which will provide essential information to deliver 'expert' coaching advice. What is not known cannot be disclosed!
- Ask players what information they have provided is 'sensitive' and to be kept confidential. Get written informed consent from players (or their parents/guardian if player is legally deemed 'under age') if such information is required, or sought, by others (e.g., selectors, sport science support personnel, team captains). 'Informed consent' means giving the player complete details about the proposed disclosure of information including risks, benefits and alternatives.
- Be mindful of risks associated with using the communication tools in our 'new information age'. For example, emails, faxes and mobile text messages can be inadvertently sent to unintended others. Similarly, telephone conversations can be overheard, and information left on computer screens accessed, by unintended others. Voice mail messages and messages/comments posted on Facebook and Twitter can find the wrong home. Taking due diligence in all communications is a must!
- Keep accurate and factual records of conversations/meetings etc and secure a safe place to store these records
- If in doubt, get advice!

### CONCLUSIONS

If coaches are genuinely interested in developing and maintaining a sound, healthy and productive professional relationship with players, then coaches must adopt ethical communication practices. Confidentiality is a must. Confidentiality lies at the heart of trust in a coach-player relationship and is a key ingredient of an enviable coaching reputation. As such, confidentiality is about promoting good things for a coach and not only about preventing adverse situations. Safeguarding player confidences can be achieved by all coaches when common sense and good judgment are applied.

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