

NSSIA SUP Coaching Foundation - Supplemental

Introduction

This module will cover team and individual coaching issues associated with a Stand Up Paddle coach. SUP coaching in the team environment is closer to traditional coaching than surf coaching is. This is due to the fact that SUP athletes can regularly practice together and often compete in a race-like environment like track and field athletes. Additionally, races are often in flat water rather than the situation that exists with surfers at the beach.

Building a SUP Program

Most coaches start their new seasons with an idea on how their program should be built and maintained. A coach needs a strong foundation to succeed. Factors for building a strong foundation include recruiting, faculty and parent support as much as physical and mental development. Above all this is the fact that SUP boards are expensive and organized fundraising will likely be required.

If you lived in a beach town with great surfers, recruiting for a surf team would be easy. However, recruiting athletes for a new sport, particularly when the athletes need to buy their own equipment, including wetsuits in colder climates, represents an entirely different problem. The coach must find ways to make SUP more desirable than other sports available to potential athletes. One of the ways this can be done is to highlight the outdoors nature and beauty of the sport when not in competition. Provide free lessons and invite potential team members to practices. Also encourage them to consider how the skills they develop can be leveraged into surfing at exotic locations. If possible, plan a trip to the beach for team members as a motivation to bring in more talent.

The faculty and administration must be involved and behind the program. The coach should assure them that team members are students first and that the team can win without putting the athlete's academics in jeopardy. Getting the teachers and administration on the coach's side will go a long ways in building a strong athletic and academic foundation. Understand that this also means the coach will follow-through with that commitment and work with these athletes to ensure their grades don't falter. That means lay down the law up front.

Parent involvement and commitment is almost as important as athlete commitment. Parents influence their children tremendously whether they realize it or not. Holding a meeting with parents and athletes at the beginning of the season, explaining the rules and goals for the team will go a long ways in the development of the team. Another item is that the sport is family inclusive so parents and others may want to participate. Finally, remember that parents want the good grades just as much or more than the faculty and administration does.

Developing a SUP Coaching Philosophy

A coach can be many things to many different people. A coach is a mentor, a teacher, a role model and sometimes a friend. Most of all a coach must be a positive influence. While the goals of developing character, ethics, fair play, team

spirit, and yes, winning are still the same. SUP coaching has a little different focus than the regular surf team focus. This is because the competitive aspects of SUP racing are geared more towards endurance and balance rather than style, wave selection, and surf conditions. If your SUP team competes in SUP surfing events, you will have the surfing type issues to deal with, but as a SUP racing coach, you must strive to make practices fun and effective rather than boring, and monotonous. A coach with a background in SUP racing will have an easier time making this happen than a coach with a non-racing background.

Many coaches do not believe in the value of developing a coaching philosophy. They do not realize how a philosophy can have an impact on their daily coaching procedures and strategy. However, a coach's philosophy is actually a very practical matter. In fact, every coach, aware of it or not, follows certain principles based on their own playing experience.

A number of things go into developing a SUP coaching philosophy. Combining all your experiences as a competitor, observer, student, and your own personality will provide a foundation for developing a coaching philosophy. After that, it's your implementation over an extended period of time that will help you achieve success. Much of this has to do with becoming a good communicator as you learn to successfully interact with your athletes. Another has to do with developing empathy. Empathy is being aware of the feelings and emotions of your athletes. Coaches who are empathetic listen to their athletes and try to understand what is going on in their lives outside of athletics.

So what is a coaching philosophy? Philosophy systematically examines the basic concepts and underlying principles of a particular sphere of knowledge. As a SUP coach, this means you should start off by selecting the goals you plan to develop in your athletes during the season and then break these down into fundamental drills and procedures to use in your practices, plus the team and sportsmanship concepts in your competitions and interactions that will produce the desired results in your athletes.

Remember finally that most coaches, especially on the high school level, have to develop the talent they have on hand. There may be some years in which the athletes may not possess the ability or skill to fit into your philosophy. You cannot change the athletes you have overnight, but you can alter your approach in how they are taught.

Great coaches are great communicators and teachers, usually by example.

Breaking this concept down gives you the following:

- Teaching athletes SUP skills including paddling techniques. Note that SUP can attract novice athletes because of the easy learning curve. Extra precautions may be necessary.
- Teaching athletes how to compete within the team concept
- Teaching athletes how to make good decisions
- Teaching athletes not to be afraid to fail
- Teaching athletes character values
- Teaching athletes to be successful as players and people

- Teach by providing explicit instructions, expectations, goals, ideas, and feelings

Combining the philosophy aspects gives you the following:

- Your team needs a clear idea of what they're expected to do and how they're expected to do it
- Goal setting is a major part of motivation, empowerment and commitment. A good idea is to write your goals down and also have your athletes write their goals down so you and they can review them.
- Provide knowledge, information, and feedback through stats for each athlete
- Verbal communications such as "Our team will be successful by working harder and competing harder than anyone else"
- Instill the team concept by practicing and competing together, racing unselfishly and having the characteristics of a family
- Ensuring you don't indicate that any specific individual is more important than the entire team
- Apologize to the whole team if you don't make good decisions

Motivating SUP Competitors

Sport psychologists have learned that two of the most important needs of younger athletes are the need to have fun and the need to feel worthy. When these athletes are having fun they appear to be challenged, excited, stimulated, and focused. They express feelings of enjoyment, satisfaction, and enthusiasm. SUP motivation for fun can come from simple things like stressing the cross training aspects for other sports to environmental awareness through training sessions that take place in picturesque settings.

Athletes also have a need to feel competent, worthy, and positive about themselves. All sports can be threatening to young athletes because they often equate achievement with self-worth. To them winning is to be a success among their peers and to lose is to be a failure. This attitude often causes tremendous anxiety in younger athletes.

Social evaluation and expectations of others are also major causes of anxiety. Athletes become anxious when they are uncertain about whether or not they can meet the expectations of their coaches, parents, peers, or even themselves. The more uncertainty athletes have, and the more important they perceive the outcome to be, the greater their feelings of anxiety.

The very nature of sports involves an extensive evaluation of the skills of the participants. Any situation involving social evaluation of abilities that a youngster considers important can be threatening if he anticipates failing or receiving negative evaluations. Most youngsters in traditional team environments place great value on athletic competence and are particularly sensitive to appraisal of their abilities by others. Mistakes and errors which are a natural part of the learning process can be misinterpreted as failure or incompetence. These competitive pressures can result in youngsters setting unrealistic standards of near-perfect execution, which virtually assures they will fail.

As a coach, you must help your athletes meet their needs to have fun by structuring their sport experience so it challenges and excites without being threatening. Motivated athletes have a strong desire to master skills and demonstrate their competence. Similarly, you can help athletes meet their need to feel worthy by creating situations where everyone can experience some degree of success. The continual process of achieving incremental goals that are challenging, yet attainable, provides motivation. When athletes experience a taste of success, it reinforces their feelings of mastery, competence, pride, and self-worth. This in turn stimulates their desire to pursue new levels of personal achievement.

Helping SUP Athletes Reach for Their Best

Let your athletes know it is all right to make mistakes, particularly in their training and during races. The SUP coach must create a supportive atmosphere in which athletes view making and correcting mistakes as a natural part of the learning process. Teach your athletes that one of the things that separate champions from average athletes is the ability to let go of a mistake quickly and refocus on what needs to be done next.

Another item is credibility. As a SUP coach, you must be credible in the eyes of your athletes in order to communicate with them. Your credibility is the perception of the trustworthiness your charges have of what you say and do. To establish and maintain it with your athletes, you must be knowledgeable about SUP, enthusiastic about coaching, and consistent and positive in the way you deal with each athlete on your team, the young recruits or the older stars.

Treat each athlete with respect, listen to their issues, and give feedback and constructive criticism in a non-personal and instructive manner. A positive approach is characterized by the liberal use of praise, encouragement, and positive reinforcement. Constant criticism, sarcasm, or yelling at your athletes will increase their anxiety over making mistakes, decrease their senses of self-worth, and discourage them from continued participation. Remember to praise deserving efforts, not just final outcomes.

Attitude is the key to success. Let your athletes know that all champions expect to do well. They believe they will succeed and they recognize the important role that hard work and sacrifice plays in the quest for athletic excellence. Champions focus on goals and how to achieve them. They don't surrender their goals easily. They identify their areas of weakness and work hard to eliminate them. If you can impress on your athletes that they are never losers when they give their best effort, you endow them with a precious gift that will see them through many of life's most difficult endeavors.

Planning for the Season

Planning often involves an initial assessment of each team member's skill level and then creating an individual plan to help each improve their performance during the season. Sometimes a coach can use the athletes self motivation or internal race offs to improve individual performances, but the majority of the time it's the enthusiasm of the coach that spills over to the athletes and gets them motivated. A coach

should always perform a self evaluation to see if what they preach is what they practice.

Improving Athletic Performance with Conditioning

Racing performances are traditionally improved with nutrition, muscle, endurance, focus, and sometimes mentally. Proper nutrition, including both food and sports drinks, will provide the fuel for the athlete's body in competition. This subject, along with muscle building and endurance conditioning are covered in detail in other sections of this manual. It should be noted that muscle endurance is by far the most important part of conditioning. The goal is strength to body weight, similar to that of a rock climber. Extra core conditioning in SUP is extremely important as well.

Focus and Visualization

Elite racers are aware of the extent to which mental focus dictates performance. Mental focus is a major part of SUP competition because maintaining your technique as close to perfect as possible through the entire race is the goal. Mentally creating a detailed scenario full of vivid, multi-sensory cues is a tried and true method for reducing stress and anxiety and will make it more likely that the athlete will be comfortable during competition. This process usually lasts between 30-90 minutes in most races.

Since mental preparation ahead of time is vital to success it normally requires pondering ways to ensure success against opponents. The key lies in training one's mind to remain calm in stressful situations in order to bypass the body's default reaction to retort with the primal survival fight or flight response. Activities involving mind/body integration, such as yoga and martial arts, have long-proven to be effective in harnessing control over stress responses. Training can actually cause the body to elicit a "relaxation response" which lowers oxygen intake, increases nitrogen oxide output, and can permanently alter an individual's genetic makeup.

Related to mental conditioning, you sometimes hear athletes claim that their job is 20% physical and 80% mental. Often superstar athletes are not the tallest, fastest, or the strongest, but they do have the mental focus and drive necessary to force themselves into beating out their competition. An athlete should start with strong mental conditioning before they ever step onto their board. Although a gamble, coaches can sometimes instill the mental toughness into their athletes by forcing them to work hard during their practices. Another means is to select certain team members as leaders for parts of the season. Leadership often instills the focus to try harder.

Centering Techniques

One approach to improve focus is called centering. This involves initially focusing on your rate of breathing and maintaining a slow, steady pace. Breathe in through the nose, and feel the air fill your lungs. Exhale through your mouth. It may also help to have a key word to repeat that helps you refocus on what you want to do. For example, 'relax,' or 'steady.'

To develop centering automatically during the stress of competition or training takes practice. Use your training sessions to try various centering techniques and find the best one for you. Refocus and get 'centered' at every break, rest period or when there is a pause in the action.

Another visualization technique to help focus is to keep the competitor focused in the present. This help get rid of excess baggage the competitor carries about performance anxiety, expectations, or 'what-ifs.' By developing an automatic relaxation response, it will change how the competitor feels about what they are doing. Less stress will help the athlete get into their rhythm quicker, and as a result, have more success.

Video Equipment for Visualizations

Regardless of the type of SUP racing performed; flatwater or Ocean, watching how the individual strokes and maneuvers their board will provide a significant tool to improving their ability. Visualization can point out such flaws as general stroking, stooping, angling their paddle or too far back on stroke release and return, looking down at the board, etc. Try to use a camera with a good telephoto for best results, particularly if you are doing open ocean training.

Prepare Your Team for SUP Competitions

The following are suggested guidelines in preparing your team for their competitions.

- The coach needs to make sure the team takes in plenty of fluids and eats properly before each event.
- Help your team members pick the proper equipment: Boards, paddles, wetsuits, shoes, etc.
- Teach proper breathing to your paddlers. Deep breathes with air coming in through the nose and out through the mouth will deliver the needed oxygen for sustained endurance.
- Provide last minute paddling tips based on conditions. This is part of your race strategy. In team scoring with no individual scoring, you might suggest to have your best conditioned athlete move out quickly in a long race to try to force your opponents into burning up their strength while your own faster but less conditioned athletes hold back to conserve strength for the final sprint at the end. If a relay, you could use your fastest paddler as your anchor. Also great pivot turns around the buoy is a huge time saver and can great increase a lead or catch a competitor. These are just some suggestions a coach will discover once he or she gets to know their team members and, of course, their competition.
- At the start of the race is one of the most crucial times to keep your team together and focused. It can be extremely hard to reel people in.
- During the competition, the coach should encourage and cheer on paddlers.
- The coach should also keep track of the pace of various team members.

Daily Training for SUP Teams

- Start with dynamic stretches and warm-ups before any training. Use joint rotations, neck mobility, shoulder circles, arm swings, side bends and lunges. Follow suggestions in the NSSIA manual conditioning section.
- Provide the team with the route they should paddle. Starting the season, paddle shorter distances for the first week or two and then paddle slightly longer distances than the scheduled races. Start with steady endurance paddles, and work into interval training or sprint training.
- Keep track of the times of each team member.
- Cool down the team with static stretches such as chest and side bends after the workout.
- Determine whether or not you will allow co-ed paddling. Young men usually need to practice for longer races and need a faster pace than young women.
- Set up the path or points the team will need to paddle for practices and training. For SUP flat water training, use a starting location convenient for everyone to reach.

College Level Coaching

There will be a major environmental shift moving from the ranks of youth to adult or college level competitions. Becoming a college level SUP coach requires an understanding of team dynamics as well as the ability to motivate individual competitors.

One way to understand the complex nature of advanced athletes is to either compete, or at least be involved with open level competitions. What you learn at the pro ranks can easily be transferred to the college ranks.

Understand the level of physical fitness required. College SUP racers need to have endurance, as most races will be long and often in adverse weather or with currents. However, it's not all endurance as flexibility, balance and agility makes paddling easier.