



## Using Veteran Players as Mentors

A team culture that emphasizes inclusion, connection, collaboration, and support can create a positive, developmental sport experience for all players. The most effective teams are those in which team members embrace, contribute to, and own the team's culture. A mentor program empowers team veterans, creates opportunities for stronger relationships among players, and can help prevent issues that erode team chemistry such as cliques, individual agendas, and status gaps based on talent. Follow the tips below to establish an effective mentor program on your team:

### 1. Get Veteran Players on Board

- Carefully select players that would make sense in a mentorship role - the best mentors are those who both embrace and embody the team culture regardless of talent level.
  - Look for players who
    - Embrace your coaching philosophy and tactical system
    - Are mindful and supportive of their teammates
    - Display integrity and treat others with dignity
    - Consistently put in high effort
    - Focus on growth and development
- Be open about the criteria for becoming a mentor - so those who are not selected have a goal to work on for the following year. Conduct one-on-one conversations with any player that needs an explanation and give them specific areas to improve upon.

### 2. Develop a Set of Expectations

- Having a clear and simple set of guidelines for what you expect mentors to do is essential. Here are some examples:
  - Check-in with your mentee; listen to understand their perspective
  - Provide positive encouragement to your mentee
  - “Pick up” a mentee when they seem down or discouraged
  - Explain what is expected of them in practice
  - Give them tips about what to expect before big competitions
  - Connect with them about subjects beyond just sports - get to know who they are and what they like
- Make it clear to mentors that they can always come to you if something comes up with their mentee that they don't know how to handle.



### 3. Assign a Mentor to Each Younger Player

- Make sure that each younger player has the opportunity to connect with a mentor - this may mean having one mentor double up on mentees.
- Stress to mentors their role is to help support the mentee so the team can be successful - especially if a mentee ends up with a starting role over more veteran players. Regardless of playing time, mentors are there to provide support.

### 4. Provide Time & Structure for Mentoring

- Be intentional about establishing opportunities for mentors and mentees to connect. Start off the season by explaining to the entire team what the culture is and how the mentor program develops a strong culture that will allow the team to feel more connected and perform better.
- Host a team-bonding event - an opportunity for players to connect outside of the sport. During this event, set aside specific time for mentors and mentees to connect one-one-one to learn more about each other.
- Make mentoring a part of your practices by regularly prompting mentors and mentees to work together and connect.
- Involve mentors in leadership activities during practices/games, such as leading stretches or helping explain new drills, tactics, or strategies that you want newer players to become familiar with.
- Encourage mentors to connect with their mentees outside of sports space.
- Remind mentors to help mentees learn from and rebound from mistakes, celebrate maximum effort during practices and games, provide encouragement whenever possible, and help them feel like they belong.

### 5. Check In Regularly with Mentors and Mentees

- During the season, regularly check in with both mentors and mentees to monitor how things are going. It's important to receive this feedback and make any adjustments if necessary to ensure all players still feel safe and that they belong with the team. Some questions to consider:
  - What is something new you learned about your mentee/mentor this week?
  - What do you have in common?
  - How are you different? How do you celebrate those differences?
  - What's been the best/most fun part about this relationship?
  - What's been the hardest part?
- Honor and appreciate mentors for their time and support at the end of the season.
- Give mentors the opportunity to share their thoughts and feedback on the mentorship program and their hopes for the future of the team.