

Coaches

Make the Difference



MADDTM
SPORTS

IMPAIRED DRIVING ENDS HERE.

**Your Guide to Preventing Substance
Use And Promoting Mental Wellness
Among Youth Athletes**

How to Use This Guide:

Because coaches play a powerful role in shaping youth behavior and team culture, this pocket guide is designed to be flexible, practical, and easy to use.

You do not need to read this guide from beginning to end to benefit from it. Instead, use it in the way that best fits your role, your season, and your athletes.

You may choose to:

- Start with the sections most relevant to you.
- Jump ahead to tools or examples you can use right away.
- Return to sections as situations arise throughout the season.

This guide is meant to support you, not overwhelm you. Use what fits, skip what doesn't, and return to it when new challenges or opportunities come up.

You don't have to be an expert to make a difference. Your consistency, care, and leadership are what matter most.

60%
of high school students
play sports—your reach
is significant.

What's Inside

<i>The Power of Your Influence</i>	03
<i>Building a Strong Team Culture</i>	05
<i>Creating Accountability through Peer Support</i>	09
<i>Communication That Works</i>	15
<i>Recognizing Warning Signs</i>	23
<i>Creating Healthy Alternatives</i>	29
<i>Partnering With Parents</i>	35
<i>Bringing It All Together</i>	41

The Power of Your Influence

You are more than just a coach. You're a mentor, role model, and most importantly, a trusted adult. Research shows that youth connected to caring adults are less likely to engage in risky behaviors like underage substance use.

Legendary coach Pat Summitt once wisely noted, "A coach will impact more people in one year than the average person will in an entire lifetime." The impact you have on young people makes the effort worth it.

You may not realize it, but your influence can change a young person's life forever.

Why This Matters:

Participation in sports is a protective factor in early adolescence, but research shows that in high school, some team

environments can increase risk for alcohol use, particularly in contact sports or teams with strong social traditions. Underage drinking is not the only concern; we also know that cannabis use among athletes is on the rise and of concern for many.

Coaches play a key role in maintaining positive norms. **Consistent, clear, and caring communication is one of the most powerful prevention tools.**

Coaching Through the Ages

Adolescent and pre-teen athletes are highly influenced by adults and are still forming habits around identity, rules, and belonging. Clear expectations, simple language, and frequent reinforcement are especially effective.

As athletes get older, peer influence increases and risk-taking becomes more common. Coaches play a critical role in reinforcing expectations, addressing social pressures, and modeling leadership when athletes begin navigating parties, independence, and driving.



Building a Strong Team Culture

Research in youth sports consistently shows that when athletes feel a strong sense of belonging and pride in their team identity, they are more likely to align their behavior with the team's values.

COACH TIP:

Revisit your team values throughout the season. Specifically, before tournaments, during mid-season check-ins, celebratory seasons like homecoming or playoffs and when facing challenges. Celebrate athletes who live the team's values!

Studies by Bruner and colleagues (2014, 2022) found that athletes who identify positively with their team (feeling emotionally connected and proud to represent it) demonstrate higher levels of cooperation, respect, and accountability, and are less likely to engage in risky or antisocial behaviors.

This dynamic is known as **social identity theory**, and it suggests that people naturally conform to the norms of the groups they value most. When a team's culture emphasizes respect, responsibility, and substance free living, those expectations become part of how players see themselves, not just as individuals but as representatives of something bigger.



Coaching Through the Ages

When working with younger athletes:

- Focus on group identity, routine, and belonging.
- Keep language simple and concrete.
- Activities work best when they are short, visual, and repeated often.

As your athletes enter high school, emphasize leadership, accountability, and ownership. Older athletes respond well when expectations are tied to performance, team reputation, and being a role model for younger players.

Coaches can harness this influence by intentionally shaping a positive team culture grounded in shared values, then reinforcing those values through consistent language, leadership, and rituals that celebrate what it means to be part of the team.

Culture-Building Strategies:

- Establish substance non-use as a team goal, just like any other athletic objective.
- Define what success looks like in terms of team behavior and choices.
- Be mindful of your reactions when you overhear talk of substance use among athletes.
- Communicate values about healthy choices.
- Model healthy ways to handle stress, celebrate victories, and process losses.
- Be conscious of what you post and support on social media. Your athletes are watching.

Parent Connection

At the start of the season, remind families:

“Our goal is to support your child’s growth, safety, and success. When coaches and parents send the same message, athletes do better.”

This helps establish shared responsibility from the beginning.

Team Values Exercise: Building Your Team Identity

Use the following exercise to help your team co-create a shared identity and list of values that promote positive, protective, and substance-free norms. (Estimated time: 30 mins)

ACTION	INSTRUCTIONS & SAMPLE
Introduction & Alignment (2 mins)	Introduce the activity: “We’re going to do an exercise to build our team identity and define what kind of team we want to be. We’ll commit to values that support trust, hard work, growth, and safety.”
Brainstorm Values (5 mins)	On a whiteboard or flip chart, ask: “What words best describe teams you respect? What values make a team special?” Collect 6-10 words (ex. hard work, respect, discipline, trust, integrity, honesty, commitment).
Group Clustering & Selection (5 mins)	Using sticky notes or a show of hands, vote for the top 3-5 core values as a team. Ex. “We’ll be known for: respect, accountability, & support.”
Define each value together (5-10 mins)	For each chosen value, ask: “What does this mean on our team? What behaviors reflect it? What would it look like to violate it?” Capture in short bullet definitions around 1-2 lines each.
Apply each of these to a substance-free commitment (5 mins)	For each value, ask: “How would this value guide our words or actions around alcohol, cannabis or other risky behaviors?” Ex. “Accountability means holding teammates to substance-free commitments.” “Support means you ask for help if you face pressure and never ride with an impaired driver.”
Create an identity statement or tagline (5 mins)	Ask: “Given our values, how do we want others to see our team?” Draft a short identity statement. Ex. “We are the (team name): disciplined, united, and strengthened by respect and accountability for ourselves and others.”
Commitment & Display (3 mins)	Have all athletes, including the captains, sign or verbally affirm the values and identity. Post the values and identity statements in the locker room, practice areas, team social media, etc.



Athletes listen to their teammates as much as (or sometimes more than) they listen to you. Peer relationships are one of the most powerful influences on adolescent behavior and mental health. Research shows that peer-led norms, especially when those norms reinforce responsibility, empathy, and safety, can significantly reduce substance use and risk-taking behaviors. Studies also show that peer belonging and support act as protective factors against anxiety, depression, and isolation (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Varga & Liddle, 2021). When athletes feel seen and supported by teammates, they're more likely to make healthy choices and less likely to engage in behaviors that threaten their physical or emotional wellbeing.

Coaching Through the Ages

With pre-teen athletes, peer support works best when it is structured and coach-led. Group-based activities and frequent check-ins help younger athletes feel safe and supported.

As athletes age, they are more responsive to peer leadership and autonomy. Captains, team leaders, and small accountability groups can reinforce expectations and model healthy choices.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:

Adolescents are most likely to mirror the behaviors of peers they admire and identify with (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). When positive, substance-free norms are reinforced by peers, especially team captains and influential players, those behaviors quickly become “how we do things here.”

Build a Peer-to-Peer Support Model

Coaches can intentionally create ways for their athletes to check in, encourage, and look out for one another. These structures can be simple or formal depending on team size and culture. Explore the following peer support structures.



Model 1: Formal

Peer Captains or Culture Leaders

- Designate a small leadership group (potentially 2-4 athletes) trained to model healthy habits and act as point people for teammate support.
- Provide a brief training on active listening, confidentiality, and safe responses (“If you’re worried about a teammate, talk with me or another adult you trust.”)
- Assign each leader a small group of athletes to check in with regularly.

Model 2: Semi-Formal

Accountability Partners — “Team Buddy System”

- Pair teammates into “support partners”.
- Each pair commits to looking out for one another, academically, emotionally, and socially.
- Encourage quick daily or weekly check-ins (“How are you doing this week? Anything you need?”).

How To: Launch a Team Buddy System

Take 10 minutes in a preseason meeting and:

Pair Up

Have athletes pair with someone they don’t know well.

Ask & Share

Each pair answers two questions:

What’s something that helps you handle pressure?

What’s one way a teammate could help when you’re stressed or tempted to make a risky choice?

Agree

Each pair commits to one simple check-in per week. Whether text, DM, phone call, or in-person; the format doesn’t matter, consistency does.

Coach Follow-Up

Once a month, remind the team of the buddy system and spotlight positive examples.

Ex. “I heard that when a few people were invited to a party with alcohol, your group decided to hang out somewhere else instead. That shows real leadership and commitment to our values.” Or “One of you noticed a teammate seemed off and encouraged them to talk with a coach instead of keeping it inside. That kind of courage and compassion defines this team.”

Model 3: Informal

Team-Wide Culture of Care

- Incorporate “check-in circles” at the start of practice once a week (lasting between 2-5 mins).
- Use prompts like “What’s one thing you’re proud of this week?” or “What’s one thing you’re working through?”
- Keep the focus on support, not performance.
- Praise examples of teammates stepping up for one another.

Coaches Role: How to Model & Reinforce in a Culture of Care



Name It:

At the start of the season, introduce peer support as a core team value: “We win by having each other’s backs on the field, in class, and in life. No one stands alone on this team.”

Model It:

Share personal examples of asking for or offering support. Acknowledge vulnerability as a strength.

Reinforce it:

Publicly praise examples of peer leadership (“I saw how Jordan checked in on Sam after that tough drill, that’s real leadership.”). Encourage captains to notice and celebrate this behavior in huddles. Include “Peer Support Champions” as part of end of season awards or recognitions.

Take Away

When coaches empower athletes to look out for one another, they strengthen both prevention and belonging. A team where everyone feels connected and supported is not only safer, its stronger, more cohesive, and more resilient.

Create a Team Code of Excellence:

Instead of using blanket “zero-tolerance” messaging, share language with behavioral clarity and consistency messaging. Create a Team Code of Excellence that everyone signs: athletes, parents, and captains.

Parent Connection

Let parents know that accountability is about growth, not punishment.

“We focus on teaching responsibility and decision-making, not just enforcing rules. Your support at home helps reinforce that message.”

This helps parents understand your approach and builds trust.

Sample Code of Excellence

Expectations: No alcohol, cannabis, nicotine, or misuse of prescription drugs.

Team Unity: No attending parties where substances might be present.

Safety: Never ride with an impaired driver. Call a parent, trusted adult, or coach for a safe ride: no questions asked that night.

Leadership: Captains model non-use and speak up when peers are at risk.

Accountability: Tiered consequences that focus on behavior change (Behavior specific rules tied to playing time will influence decision-making more effectively than punishment, like extra running or drills.)

Good Samaritan Clause: No penalties for seeking help or medical attention.

Communication That Works

Athletes need information that respects their intelligence and connects to what they actually care about: performance, respect, belonging, and control.

Research shows that adolescents are more responsive to factual, relevant information delivered by trusted adults than to scare tactics. They listen best when coaches speak directly, confidently, and without judgement (Steinberg, 2014; SAMHSA, 2022).

When you combine facts with empathy and reinforcement of team values, you can shift team culture and strengthen protective factors for both mental health and substance-free living. In turn, you will be helping to shape stronger athletes and healthier teens and young adults.



Effective Communication Strategies:

Notice and respond thoughtfully.

If you overhear substance-related talk, respond calmly and with curiosity, not shame.

“

“I heard alcohol in that plan, what’s the team’s substance-free version?” This response redirects the conversation while reinforcing expectations.

Provide specific info about performance.

Teens respond best to why it matters to them right now. Explain how substances directly impact their sport:

- Alcohol: impairs motor coordination, reaction time, and hydration; decreases aerobic capacity up to 72 hours post-use; blunts muscle recovery by up to 20% (NIAAA, 2023).
- Cannabis: reduces focus, tracking ability, and coordination; slows reaction time; increases risk for injuries and driving impairment (CDC, 2024).
- Nicotine & Vaping: decrease lung capacity and blood oxygen, undermining endurance (CDC, 2023).

Effective Communication Strategies:

Discuss recovery science.

Athletes respect evidence. Explain that alcohol interrupts protein synthesis, REM sleep, and hydration balance, all of which are critical to growth and performance.



“You can’t out train chemistry. Alcohol literally stops your muscles from rebuilding overnight.”

Additional insights from NIAAA, NSCA, CDC, NIDA, National Sleep Foundation, and the Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research:



Alcohol & Performance:

- Alcohol reduces muscle recovery and glycogen resynthesis by 30-40%
- It increases dehydration and delays healing from injuries.
- It affects motor control for up to 72 hours post-use.



Cannabis & Coordination:

- THC slows brain communication pathways involved in timing and decision making.
- Regular use impairs learning, reaction time, and sleep which are critical for peak performance.
- Driving/operating equipment within 24 hours doubles crash risk.



Sleep, Recovery and Substance Free Gains

- Alcohol and THC disrupt REM Cycles, which are when muscle and memory consolidate.
- Substance-free sleep increases recovery speed, immune function, and mental resilience.



Address real social pressures.

Ask open questions that invite reflection:



“When you’ve been at a party or a hangout, what’s the hardest part about saying no?” Listen without judgement, then role play short refusal or exit lines the team can use together, (“I’ve got practice early.” Or “We’ve got playoffs coming up.”).

Challenge myths with facts.

- Use normative feedback (showing what’s truly typical) to correct misperceptions that “everyone’s doing it.”
- Most teens don’t drink or use cannabis. (CDC YRBS 2023).
- You don’t need alcohol to celebrate. The best athletes in the world stay sober during competition seasons.

Recognize and celebrate healthy choices.

Catch athletes doing the right thing, because what gets noticed, gets repeated. Praise effort and integrity as much as performance.



“I appreciate how you all chose to hang out substance-free after the game, that’s real commitment to the team’s goals.”

Share stress management strategies that actually work.

Normalize stress as part of athletics, then teach evidence-based coping strategies:

- Deep Breathing/Box Breathing for pre-game anxiety
- Active recovery (walks, stretching) after losses
- Talking with a teammate, coach, parent, trusted adult, or counselor when things feel heavy
- Short mindfulness or gratitude routines

15-Minute Team Exercise: Reset & Refocus

Use this 15 minute exercise to teach athletes quick, evidence-based stress management tools that they can use before competitions, during stressful moments, or in everyday life while also reinforcing the team's culture of support and composure.

Timing: Pre-practice, pre-game, or during a team meeting

What You'll Need:

- A quiet space (locker room, gym, or field huddle will do!)
- Stopwatch or phone timer
- Optional: soft background music, ambient noise or crowd noise

1

Coach Framing

2 mins

Coach explains: "Stress isn't the enemy. It's a part of being an athlete. What matters is how we manage it. The best teams don't avoid pressure; they reset, refocus, and move forward together. We're going to practice a few quick tools that can help you perform your best under pressure."

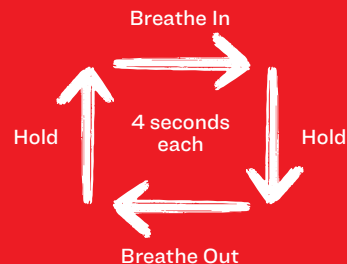
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Box Breathing Drill

4 mins

Coach leads: "We're going to slow things down using box breathing. We will do 4 counts inhale, 4 counts hold, and 4 counts exhale." Practice that together for 3-4 rounds. Allow the team to close their eyes if they feel comfortable and plant their feet wherever they are. Narrate for them, "Inhale through the nose 2, 3, 4; hold 2, 3, 4; exhale through the mouth 2, 3, 4."

Coach closes with: "That's all it takes to reset your nervous system. You can use this anytime, like before a free throw, kickoff, or a conversation."



3

Pre-Game/Practice Power Gratitude

4 mins

Coach explains: "Before we take the field, think of one person who helped you get to this place. Maybe that's a parent, sibling, teacher, past coach, or friend. Picture them being proud of you right now." Pause for 10 seconds.

Coach closes: "That pride, that support, its fuel. Take it with you out there."

4

Peer Check-In

3 mins

Have athletes pair up (or use your existing buddy system.) Each athlete answers two quick questions:

- "What is one thing that fires you up today?"
- "What's one thing that's been stressing you out this week?"

Partners respond with "I got your back."

Coach closes: "Every athlete here has someone who's got their back. That's what makes us stronger than stress."

5

Team Reset Cue

2 mins

End by creating a team-wide reset cue like a short phrase, gesture, or breath they can use together during tense moments. Ex: Team word: "Breathe." Gesture: Fist over heart (symbolizing calm and focus.) Phrase: "Right here, right now." Practice it once as a group.

Coach Message: "This is our anchor. Anytime you feel tense, use it. When one of us resets, we all reset."



Self-care is important!

When we become stressed out, our body releases very powerful hormones, such as cortisol, which impact decision making, communication, and response time – important skills on the field!



After the next competition or challenging practice, ask: “Who used the breathing or reset cue? How did it help?” Celebrate examples to normalize using coping tools as a marker of maturity and leadership.

Why it Works:

- **Physiological regulation:** Box breathing lowers heart rate and activates the parasympathetic nervous system.
- **Social Support:** Visualizing social support before competition lowers cortisol and improves performance under pressure. (Cohen & Wills, 1985; NCAA Sport Psychology, 2022)
- **Social Connection:** Peer check-ins normalize stress and build belonging. This is a proven protective factor against risky coping behaviors like using alcohol and other drugs.
- **Behavioral Cueing:** The reset ritual anchors self-regulation to team identity and can be used mid-game, during conflict both on and off the field.

Conversation Tracks

These short, research-based statements make conversations easy, consistent, and powerful:

Kick Off Message

“We play clean because performance, safety, and respect matter here. Most teens don’t drink or use cannabis, and on this team, we keep it that way. If you ever end up in a tough spot, call a parent, trusted adult, or me, no judgement, just support.”

Game Week Reminder

“Clear heads make sharp plays. Alcohol or cannabis stunts your speed and reaction time for days. Compete clean, your body will thank you.”

Post-Game or Celebration Reminder

“Our community is watching how we carry ourselves after a win. Let’s show what leadership looks like, celebrate with respect, stay substance-free, and represent this team with pride.”

When a Player Opens Up

“Thanks for telling me. That takes courage. Let’s figure out what support you need together.”

“Let’s celebrate the right way; together, safe and substance-free. Our choices tonight reflect the kind of team we are: focused, disciplined, and proud to represent this program.”



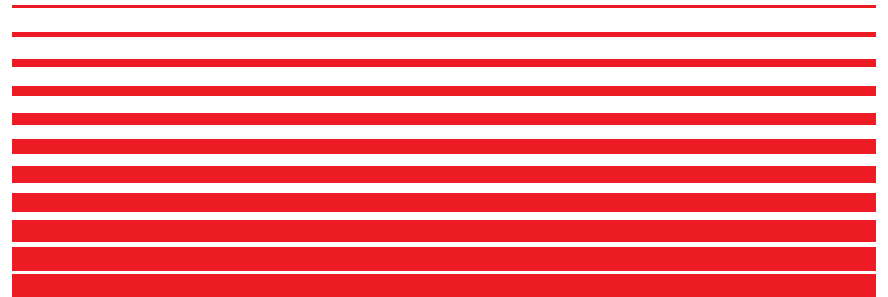
Recognizing

Warning Signs

Coaches are often the first ones to notice when something changes. Because athletes spend hours each week in practice and competition, you're in a powerful position to spot early signs of distress or risky behavior before problems escalate. Many athletes won't come forward on their own, but your calm, caring attention can open the door to a lifesaving conversation.

Early recognition and response can protect athletes' health, academic standing, safety, and overall well-being.

While in middle school, team sport participation is a protective factor against underage drinking. As students age, team sports begin to turn from protection to risk when it comes to alcohol usage.



SIGNS TO WATCH FOR

Look for sustained changes in behavior, performance, or appearance. A single bad day isn't cause for alarm, but consistent patterns are.



Physical or Performance Changes:

- Unexplained drops in performance, reaction time, or stamina
- Coordination changes, slower recovery, or frequent minor injuries
- Bloodshot eyes, unusual odors, or persistent fatigue



Behavioral or Attendance Red Flags:

- Repeat absences or late arrivals
- Increased unreliability or forgotten commitments
- Withdrawal from teammates or loss of enthusiasm

Drinking alcohol or using other substances makes it more difficult for athletes to learn from practice and games. It stops them from turning what they do and see into better skills and smarter play.

Coaches matter! Your athletes will look to you as a model for their behavior and development, and will be less likely to engage in substance use or other risky behaviors if you encourage them to make healthier choices for their body and mind!



Academic or Off-Field Indicators:

- Reports of failing grades or skipping class
- Teachers or parents noting changes in attitude or engagement



Emotional or Social Changes:

- Shift in friend groups or engaging with new, risk-oriented peers
- Disturbing or concerning social media posts
- Noticeable mood swings, irritability, or flat affect
- Sudden loss of motivation, passion, or focus

Best Practice:

Document patterns, not hunches. A few short notes (dates, behavior, conversations) can help you spot trends and respond appropriately.

RESPONDING EFFECTIVELY

Approach privately and with care.

- Choose a quiet moment after practice or in your office.
- Your tone should be calm, nonjudgmental, and caring.
- Ex. Script: “I’ve noticed you seem a little off lately. You’re missing practices, quieter than usual, and your focus seems off. Is everything ok?”

Focus on behaviors, not accusations.

- Stick with what you’ve observed. This keeps the conversation safe and focused on concern, not blame.
- Ex. Script: “I’ve noticed you’ve been tired and late a few times this week,” instead of “I think you’ve been using something.”

Athletes who use substances show decreased energy, endurance, and strength over time.

Listen first.

- Allow for silence. Show empathy through body language and tone. You don’t need all of the answers. Just being a consistent, caring presence matters.

Know your role and boundaries: You’re not a counselor, but you are a connector.

- Be aware of school or organizational referral procedures.
- Know who the school counselor, athletic trainer, nurse, or mental health point person is.
- In most states, coaches are mandated reporters when student’s safety is at risk (including substance use that endangers health or wellbeing). Seek guidance from your internal contacts on how to follow their procedures.

Balance confidentiality and safety.

- Respect privacy whenever possible, but never promise secrecy about safety issues.
- Ex. Script: “I care about you and want to make sure you’re safe. I might need to share this with someone who can help.”



Follow up.

- After making a referral or connecting the athlete to support, check in.
- Follow-ups show trust, consistency, and care which are three of the strongest protective factors against risky behaviors.
- Ex. Script: “How did that meeting go? I’m glad you talked to someone. I’m still here if you need anything.”

Recognizing warning signs isn’t about punishment. It’s about prevention and connection. Your calm presence, genuine curiosity, and follow-through can make the difference between an athlete spiraling in silence or reaching out for help. Every small, compassionate step strengthens the safety net that keeps young people healthy, connected, and substance-free.



Creating Healthy Alternatives

Athletes don't just need competition, they need connection, belonging, and celebration. When teams intentionally create positive, substance-free ways to meet those needs, they reduce the appeal of risky behaviors. Research from SAMHSA and the CDC shows that teens who feel connected to their peers, coaches, and school are significantly less likely to use alcohol, cannabis, or other substances. Healthy rituals and shared experiences satisfy the same social needs — fun, identity, and belonging — that often lead young people toward risk; but without the negative consequences.

When a coach creates safe spaces to celebrate, reflect, and grow, they teach athletes that **meaningful connection and excitement can exist without substances.**



Coaching Through the Ages

With adolescent sports, activities should emphasize fun, structure, and inclusion. Group-based activities work best.

Examples:

- Short, structured team activities (team cheers, warm-up routines, end-of-practice huddles)
- Group challenges that emphasize participation over performance

As athletes grow into pre-teen and teen athletes, the focus switches to leadership opportunities, autonomy, and meaningful responsibility. Athletes benefit from being involved in planning and decision-making.

Examples:

- Allowing team leaders to help plan activities or team events
- Giving athletes ownership of warm-ups, drills, or team traditions

TEAM TRADITIONS THAT WORK:



Team Meals that Build Community:

Regular team meals, especially after practices or competitions, strengthen relationships, promote inclusion and provide structure after high-stress moments.

- Rotate who helps plan or host.
- Keep it fun and simple: taco nights, breakfast for dinner, or potlucks.
- Invite parents to participate through healthy food contributions.
- Incorporate gratitude moments (“one highlight, one thank you”)

Why it works: Shared meals satisfy the need for belonging and celebration while modeling healthy recovery habits (hydration, nutrition, decompression).



Service Projects that Develop Perspective:

Choose a local cause to support, like youth clinics, community clean-ups, food banks, a MADD Power of You(th) activity or a pet shelter.

- Connect it to your team identity: “We serve off the field because we stand for integrity on it.”
- Frame it as leadership, not obligation.
- Let athletes lead the planning or reflection.

Why it works: Community service fosters empathy, gratitude, and purpose. These are all protective factors against risky behavior and burnout. (Search Institute, 2023)



Alternative Competitions or Challenges:

Inject friendly competition into the off-field experience.

- Organize intrasquad skill challenges, trivia, obstacle courses, or tournaments.
- Create seasonal challenges around wellness goals (sleep tracking, hydration logs, mindfulness minutes).
- Reward with experiences, not prizes: team movie night, “choose the next drill” day, or early practice release.

Why it works: Competition releases dopamine and fulfills athletes need for excitement and mastery without involving substances.



Healthy Post-Game Rituals that Create Lasting Memories:

Replace parties with celebrations that keep the energy but not the risk. “Let’s celebrate the win the healthy way. Together, safe and proud of how we play and live.”

- Ice cream runs, dance-offs, karaoke nights, or themed spirit dinners.
- Team “Player of the Game” traditions where teammates highlight effort, leadership, or kindness.
- Victory playlist ritual: a team-curated list that plays after every win.

Why it works: Positive, consistent rituals form emotional memories that bond teams and reinforce non-use as the cultural norm.



Team Reflection Sessions that Build Emotional Intelligence:

Create a rhythm of short, guided reflection after major games, practices or events. Use a 5-minute circle at the end of practice or a team journaling prompt for quiet reflection.

Potential Prompts:

- “What was one moment you felt proud of the team?”
- “What did you learn about handling pressure?”
- “Who showed leadership today, and how?”

Why it works: Reflection strengthens self-awareness and empathy. These are two key emotional intelligence skills that buffer against impulsive and risky decisions.

Student athletes who remain substance-free show better long-term outcomes in academics and beyond.

Every tradition you create becomes a cultural blueprint. When celebration, bonding, and belonging happen in healthy, intentional, and inclusive ways, athletes learn that joy and connection don't require substances. They come to experience that it comes from shared purpose, growth, and pride in the team identity you've built together.

The best prevention doesn't look like a lecture. It looks like a team having fun in a healthy way.

Alec Flores

Oct. 20, 2005 — Oct. 7, 2019



On the morning of Monday, October 7, 2019, Alec Flores, a 13-year-old 8th-grader, left home through the garage to walk to school. Dressed in khaki pants, a baby blue short-sleeved t-shirt, and checkered slip-on Vans, Alec had his burgundy backpack slung over his shoulder, ready for the day ahead.

A few minutes into his walk, a driver veered off the side of the road into the bike lane, hitting Alec from behind, without even attempting to brake or stop. Alec flew about 80 feet and landed near a brick wall. The driver, with her three young children in the car, briefly stopped about 100 yards away before fleeing the scene.

Several people rushed to help Alec, including a nurse who had just dropped her kids off at school. She performed CPR on Alec — who was lying crumpled, bloody, not breathing, and with no heartbeat — until help arrived. Another parent stopped and called 911. Authorities quickly arrived on site and used a photo taken by a parent to identify the address of the driver who hit Alec. They proceeded to the driver's home, where they observed her arriving with her children in the car, displaying signs of intoxication. The police then arrested her.

In the meantime, Alec was life-flighted to a nearby trauma center where he never regained consciousness and died later that day.

Alec was a wrestler, a football player, a swimmer, and a garage weightlifter. His personality and energy could fill any space he entered.

The next day, the driver who killed Alec was released on bail and remained free until she was convicted of murder and four additional charges. She was taken into custody nearly two years later.



Partnering With

Parents

Prevention is strongest when coaches and parents deliver consistent messages and shared expectations. Research from MADD's *Power of Parents* program shows that when parents have clear, ongoing conversations about alcohol and other drugs, teens are up to **80% less likely to drink before the age of 21.**

Coaches are uniquely positioned to amplify those conversations by reinforcing the same messages on the field that parents share at home. Working together creates a united front where athletes hear: "Your parents and your coaches are on the same team when it comes to your safety and success."

COACH TIP:

—
Begin the meeting with a clear statement like: "Our goal this season is to create a team culture that values performance, safety, and integrity. We know that when parents and coaches reinforce the same expectations, it keeps our athletes safer and stronger."

BUILDING STRONG PARTNERSHIPS:

Hold a Pre-Season Parent Meeting (and Make it Meaningful)

- Schedule a mandatory pre-season parent meeting focused on your team's values, expectations, and commitment to substance-free play.
- Use this time to introduce MADD's *Power of Parents* and walk parents through key conversation starters.
- Provide both parents and athletes with a Team Code of Excellence to review and sign together.
- Emphasize shared goals: protecting performance, health, and team reputation.

Provide Parents with Tools to Talk at Home

- Send home MADD's *Power of Parents* Handbook or provide the downloadable link: available for [middle school](#) and [high school](#) ages.
- Encourage parents to use the conversation scripts to discuss alcohol, cannabis, other drugs, and driving safety. Including always wearing your seatbelt and never riding with an impaired driver.
- Encourage parents to establish family agreements that mirror the team's Code of Excellence.
- Tell parents to have these conversations before weekend games or planned celebrations.

Why it matters: Teens are more likely to make safe decisions when they know expectations are clear and non-negotiable across both home and team environments.

COACH TIP:

Partner with parent volunteers to form a celebration committee that helps organize safe, fun, substance-free events throughout the season.

Create Clear Communication Channels

- Collect parent contact information for quick updates.
- Designate one assistant coach or team parent as the communication liaison.
- Send periodic "Parent Partnership" updates. These can be short reminders about team values, upcoming events, and positive examples of athletes living those values.

Example Update:

We're proud of how our team represented our program at last week's service event. These are the kinds of moments that make our culture strong and substance-free.

Coordinate Consistent Messaging

- Use the same prevention language as parents: emphasize choice, leadership, and protection; not punishment.
- Highlight the link between substance-free habits and peak performance.
- Revisit values mid-season with both parents and players.

Example Update:

Just a quick reminder: our team commitment to play clean and lead well is still in full force as we head into tournament season. Thanks for reinforcing that at home. It makes all the difference!



Develop Safe Celebration Plans

- Work with parents early to set up supervised, substance-free celebrations for end of season or post-event games.
- Establish clear expectations for who will host, who will supervise, and what's allowed.
- Share MADD's info about social host ordinances and local laws that make it illegal for adults to allow underage substance use, even at home.
- Encourage a "if in doubt, leave it out" mindset when planning.

Encourage Parent Monitoring and Connection

Remind parents that monitoring is protection, not control.

Encourage them to:

- Know their teens' plans: who, where, and how they're getting home.
- Follow their teens' social media for context clues about stress, new friend groups, or risky environments.
- Notice and talk early about warning signs (ex. secrecy, fatigue, withdrawal, or attitude changes.)

Share that parents who maintain open, warm, and consistent communication, not fear-based or punitive approaches, have teens who are far less likely to use substances.

Invite Partners to Reinforce the Message

- Invite MADD to present a brief *Power of Parents* or *Power of You(th)* session at your parent meeting or mid-season event.
- Include local law enforcement/school resource officers, school counselors, or mental health advocates as part of a "Safe Season" panel.
- Frame it as equipping families, not policing them.

Sample Invitation:

This year, we're proud to partner with MADD to help families strengthen communication around substance use prevention. Their free *Power of Parents* resources give parents and caring adults practical tools to keep teens safe and performing at their best.

Partnership with parents is prevention in action. When you align your expectations, language, and follow-up with what parents are saying at home, you are helping to shape a circle of protection around your athletes.

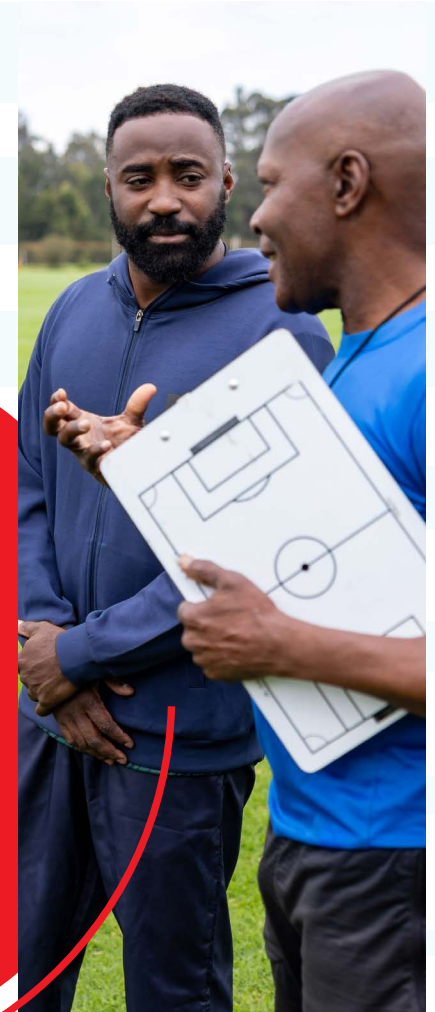
The message becomes clear and powerful: "Our team celebrates hard work, not risky choices. We play clean, live strong, and look out for each other. On and off the field."

Parent Connection

Set a clear, collaborative tone:

"We see parents as partners in this work. When we communicate early and often, it creates the best environment for our athletes to succeed."

Encourage families to reach out with questions or concerns before small issues become bigger ones.





You are not just building a team. You're helping to build a legacy: empowering the generation that will end impaired driving for good.

***Bringing
It All***

Together

Every practice, every game, and every conversation shapes more than an athlete's performance. It shapes who they become.

As a coach, your words carry weight; your example sets the standard, and your influence extends far beyond the scoreboard. **By creating a culture of safety, respect, and connection, you're protecting something far greater than a win. You are protecting lives, futures, and the power of possibility.**

This work matters. Because long after the last whistle blows, what your athletes will remember most isn't the score or the big win. They will remember how you made them feel, the values that you lived out loud, and the safe space you created for them to grow.

For additional tools and resources to support you, your athletes, and their parents, visit:

madd.org/maddsports

madd.org/powerofparents

MADD SPORTS COACHES' GUIDE



MADD's mission is to end drunk and drugged driving, support the victims of these violent crimes, and prevent underage drinking and other drug use.

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