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## Does Any Good Come From a Coach that Yells? Reflective Experiences from Former Athletes

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**Abstract**

Yelling in society is a common occurrence. Parents yell at their children, bosses yell at their employees and coaches yell at their athletes. Yet, in many cases the yelling coach exhibits unkind, loud in nature, and very personal statements. The purpose of this study was to better understand former athlete’s perspectives regarding their thoughts and experiences of their coaches yelling at them. For this study yelling will imply saying loud, unkind, personal comments towards the athlete. For this study 124 former athletes were surveyed regarding their experiences with a yelling coach. Generally, it was found that the former athletes did not like or appreciate their coaches yelling at them. In many cases the coaches lost credibility with the former athletes. The implications of this study were that coaches should try a self-controlled, calm approach with their athletes.

24

## Introduction

25 For those that have participated in a sport, there is a good chance that the coach  
26 has yelled during games and in practices at them. A couple of examples of a coach  
27 yelling would be giving instructions, such as placing a player for a strategic reason,  
28 giving encouragement, saying something like, “That was a great block.” Instructing a  
29 player to run a certain play. For example, “Run the number one inbounds play.” These  
30 types of examples of a coach yelling are common during a game or in practice. Yet,  
31 there is another side of a coach yelling that does take place. The other type of yelling  
32 coach’s use is unkind, loud, derogatory, and personal statements. Of these two types of a  
33 coach yelling, the later has been found to be ineffective with athletes. Martin, Rocca,  
34 Cayanus and Weber (2009) have stated, to date, researchers have not identified a  
35 relationship of context where verbal aggression is related to any positive outcomes or  
36 consequences (pg. 230).

37 When reviewing the literature dealing with coaches yelling, the phrase verbal  
38 aggression or verbal abuse is commonly used. Alexandra, Stefanous, and Vassilis (2015)  
39 have stated that when a coach is verbally aggressive their ‘attacks’ are expressed through  
40 various forms such as character attacks, competence attacks, physical appearance attacks,  
41 teasing, ridicule, threats, swearing and profanity. Along these lines Mazer, Barnes,  
42 Grevious, and Boger (2013) found that when a coach is verbally aggressive it hurts a  
43 person’s self-concept, the person is embarrassed, feel inadequate and in some cases  
44 depressed. Also, when coaches yell it negatively affects the climate in the gymnasium or  
45 playing field. And finally, athletes consider verbally aggressive coaches as less credible.  
46 With these negative results of a coach that yells at their athletes, studies have found other

47 negative consequences. Alexandra, Stefanous and Vissilis (2015) examined how  
48 coaches' verbal aggressiveness, as perceived by the teen basketball players relating to  
49 their intrinsic-extrinsic motivation. For this study 180 Greek male and female teen  
50 basketball players were surveyed in regards to their coaches verbal aggressiveness. It  
51 was found that verbally aggressive basketball coaches negatively affected the player's  
52 intrinsic motivation. Because of this finding the researchers felt that the basketball  
53 players self-determined types of motivation would also be negatively affected. Thus also  
54 affecting the player's levels of performance and their lifelong involvement. Another  
55 study looked at coaches that aggressively yelled while coaching elite child athletes  
56 (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). One slight difference with this study was a coach's verbal  
57 aggressiveness towards athletes was couched as emotional abuse. Twelve elite child  
58 athletes were interviewed regarding their experiences with their coaches. Shouting was  
59 the main behavior the coaches exhibited while coaching. Examples of emotional abuse  
60 the elite child athletes expressed were, "when she shouts it is very personal. I don't like  
61 it and I can't train properly, it puts me off because it scares me when this happens."  
62 Another athlete stated, "I think being humiliated is so horrible and the pain of that I think  
63 I'll always remember." One other athlete stated how much he disliked the emotional  
64 abuse, yet he stated that no one seems to question these coach's behavior, these behaviors  
65 are accepted as part of the sport and experience.

66 Besides the academic research that has been conducted, there are articles in  
67 popular periodicals that address coaches yelling and the negative aspects that come from  
68 it. For example, Wickersham (2010) stated that yelling can be an emotional release; yet  
69 it can exact a physical toll, like high blood pressure to a lack of energy. Arrington (1992)

70 said, “We all know that yelling at family, friends, and co-workers is not effective  
71 communication and yet its use persists in coaching.” The author continued in stating that  
72 yelling is less effective among females and youth of both genders, than among teenage  
73 males. Studies dealing with coaches that yell have referenced, elite child athletes,  
74 teenage basketball players and professional athletes. Coaches yelling has also been  
75 portrayed in popular culture and motion pictures. Kerr, Stirling, and Bandy (2016)  
76 examined film portrayals of coach/athlete interactions in sport movies, with a focus on  
77 emotional abuse within the coach/athlete relationship. After viewing 19 films, the  
78 researchers concluded that emotionally abusive coaching practices are frequently  
79 portrayed in sport films. Some of the specific findings from the viewing of these movies  
80 were that bystanders were present and observed a coach being emotionally abusive  
81 without intervening. Also, yelling would take place with negative comments laced in the  
82 yelling at the athlete. The researchers summarized that these examples are considered as  
83 normal or that it is common in the coach/athlete interactions.

84 To further the research of coaches yelling and its effects on athletes, investigating  
85 past athlete’s experiences with coaches that yell may be beneficial for coaching educators  
86 and future coaches. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand better individual’s  
87 perspectives regarding their thoughts and experiences of their coaches yelling at them.  
88 For this study when the word yelled is used, it is referencing a coach that would use  
89 unkind, loud, personal and derogatory comments that were abusive and not appropriate.

## 90 **Methods**

### 91 **Participants**

92 Participants for this study were 124 undergraduate students at a private university  
93 in the intermountain west. The sample consisted of 71 males and 53 females.

94 Participants ages ranged from 18 to 36 years.

#### 95 **Instrumentation**

96 Through a review of literature, an instrument could not be identified specific to  
97 coaches yelling. Therefore, for this study, an 11-question survey instrument was  
98 developed (see Table 1). The survey consisted of one yes/no question, three yes/no with  
99 open-ended follow-up questions, six open-ended questions and one likert scale question.  
100 To establish content validity, we had college-aged students, not involved in this study,  
101 review the survey questions for clarity and understanding. For reliability, the instrument  
102 was further pilot-tested on college-aged students who did not participate in the  
103 subsequent study.

#### 104 **Procedures**

105 Convenience sampling was employed to collect response data for this study. The  
106 researchers contacted 10 physical activity class instructors at the university and explained  
107 the study and instrumentation. After the instructors agreed to have their class participate  
108 in the study, researchers attended each physical activity class and systematically  
109 administered and collected the survey. Before survey administration, researchers  
110 explained the survey, asking for volunteers that had a coach that yelled at them to  
111 participate before volunteers signed informed consent forms. Students were assured their  
112 voluntary decision to participate or not participate in the study would not affect their  
113 grade in class or class standing. Completion of survey explanation, administration and  
114 document return took approximately 15 minutes.

## 115 **Data Analysis**

116           The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the Statistical Package for  
117 the Social Science (SPSS) 24.0 program. Percentages were used to reflect the  
118 participant's responses for each item being analyzed. The other method of data analysis  
119 was referencing qualitative analysis, the researchers read and reread the data until  
120 common themes became evident for each survey question (Mueller & Skamp, 2003)

## 121 **Results**

122           Descriptive statistics were used to better understand how college-aged students  
123 felt when their athletic coach yelled at them.

## 124 **Quantitative Analysis**

125           Question 1 asked the participants that when their coach yelled at them, did it  
126 improve their performance. It was reported that 56% of the males felt that their  
127 performance improved. Yet, 60% of the females felt it did not improve their  
128 performance. Question 3 states, "Did your coach yell at all of your teammates, or did  
129 he/she yell just at you?" Both male (66%) and female (51%) participants reported that  
130 their coach yelled at everyone on the team. For question 4, which states, "When the  
131 coach yelled, did it affect the coach's credibility in your eyes?" For this survey question  
132 54% of the males felt it did not affect their credibility. While 59% of the females, it also  
133 affected the coach's credibility in their eyes. Question 5 asked the participants if their  
134 coach yelled at them in practices, games or both (practices & games). For both the males  
135 (63%) and females (59%), their coaches yelled at them in both practices and games. For  
136 question 8 it states, "When your coach yelled at you, was there any profanity  
137 accompanying the yelling?" A majority of both males (58%) and females (72%) reported

138 that when the coach yelled there was no profanity. And question 10 asked the  
139 participants if profanity was used while the coach yelled did it affect your performance.  
140 Here again both males (70%) and females (85%) felt that their performance did not  
141 improve when their coach profaned and yelled.

## 142 **Qualitative Analysis**

143 Additional data results comprised of short-answer response from the participants.  
144 The thematic analysis and findings reported below comprise eight question. The  
145 following outlines the qualitative responses from the participants for this study.  
146 Participants were asked (Question 1) when their coach yelled at them, if it improved the  
147 performance. A similar question (Question 10) asked the participants if yelling with  
148 profanity improved their performance. For question 1 one student stated, “I tried harder”,  
149 and “I think he was trying to pump me up.” Yet, other students stated, “it made me  
150 stubborn and I wanted to do the opposite”, and “my performance definitely did not  
151 improve.” For question 10 such statements as “it freaked me out”, “killed my  
152 confidence”, and “ruined my focus during the game.” Question 2 asked the participants  
153 how they felt when the coach yelled at them. One participant said, “affected my  
154 confidence and made me apprehensive.” Another participant said, “I felt less and felt like  
155 a constant disappointment.” Also, for many participant’s responses such words were  
156 used to describe how the coach made them feel. For example, the felt “angry”, “I wanted  
157 to cry”, “frustrated”, and “stressed”. The participants were asked (Question 4) when the  
158 coach yelled, did it affect the coach’s credibility in their eyes. One participant stated, “I  
159 wouldn’t trust her with anything.” Another participant stated, “He sounded



160 unprofessional and less knowledgeable in the sport.” And finally, one participant said, “I  
161 couldn’t believe it that he couldn’t control his temper. It was embarrassing.”

162 Participants were asked (Question 6) how the participant’s parents felt about the  
163 coach yelling at their child. A few of the participants stated, “My parents yell harder than  
164 the coach”, “they were OK with it”, and “Good for me to get a tough skin.” Yet, many of  
165 the participants felt differently. For example, the participants stated, “They (parents) did  
166 not think it was appropriate”, “did not approve”, “My dad was so mad, he blew up at him  
167 (coach)”, and “My dad was so upset, he looked for ways to get a new coach.” For  
168 question 7 the participants were asked how the coach’s yelling affected the climate  
169 during practice, games and in the locker room. Participant statements were, “It put a  
170 damper on things”, “Made a pretty toxic environment”, “No unity. No team building  
171 happened. There was nothing constructive or helpful from coach”, and “The team made  
172 fun of the coach all the time.” Question 9 asked the participants how they felt when the  
173 coach’s profanity was directed at them. Such statements were, “I laughed. I thought he  
174 was pathetic”, “It made me lose respect for him”, and “I felt upset. Those words are  
175 usually strong and demeaning.” And finally, for question 11 participants were asked to  
176 recall a bad experience with their coach. Many of the participant’s statements are fairly  
177 graphic. Thus, a few less graphic statements are, “He yelled at the whole team at  
178 halftime and told us we were a bunch of ‘blank’ idiots”, “While he was yelling, he  
179 pushed me with two hands on my shoulders and said ‘come on’. All the other players  
180 were terrified”, and “he called us ‘little girls’.”

181 **Discussion**

182           The purpose of this study was to understand better individual’s perspectives  
183 regarding their thoughts and experiences of their coaches yelling at them. Results  
184 indicate that the participants generally did not like or feel being yelled at was good or  
185 appropriate. For question 1 males and females differed on when a coach yelled at them  
186 did their performance improve. The male participants (56%) felt that it did not improve  
187 the performance. Whereas the females felt (60%) when the coach yelled it improved  
188 their performance. However, Arrington (1992) don’t concur with the findings in this  
189 study. Arrington found that females did not play better when their coach yelled at them.  
190 More specifically, they felt less effective. Participant responses to this question were,  
191 “He was helping me see my errors”, “No, it made me want to punch him”, and “As I got  
192 older the more she yelled the more I was defiant.” Question 2 looked at how the athlete  
193 felt when they were yelled at. Participants responses for this survey question were  
194 summed up with one word responses. For example, “Angry”, “mad”, “fearful”, and  
195 “disappointed.” In the literature, Gervis and Dunn (2004) studied the emotional abuse  
196 elite child athletes were exposed to. These elite child athletes “felt stupid,” “worthless,”  
197 “lacking confidence,” “depressed,” “fearful,” and “hurt.” These are not the kind of  
198 emotions any athlete should feel as they participate in their sport. Question 4 on the  
199 survey dealt with a coach’s credibility that yelled. For the males in this study, 59% felt it  
200 affected the credibility. Whereas, for the females, 54% felt it did not affect the coach’s  
201 credibility. Once again, participants statement to this survey question shed light on how  
202 they felt. One participant stated, “My coach was also a leader in my community. That  
203 did not help his standing.” One participant stated, “I’ve been to many wrestling  
204 tournaments, and my teammates were always noticing the coach’s that yelled and were



228 use unkind words or statements that are personal, the athlete will perform better. The  
229 results of this study just add to the literature that coach's that yell is going to improve the  
230 athlete's performance, that parent's do not appreciate hearing their child being singled  
231 out and embarrassed, and that their yelling is not making the athletes experience  
232 enjoyable. Parker et al. (2012) found athletes from the Generation Z wanted coaches to  
233 be "nice", to "stay calm", and "yelling does not make the situation better." These types  
234 of suggestions from Generation Z athletes have given, may sound unrealistic. Yet, the  
235 athletes have stated they would "work harder", "have more respect" for their coaches  
236 when they stay calm and controlled their emotions. Jeff Hartings, a former offensive  
237 lineman for the Pittsburgh Steelers, appropriately stated, "You have to coach like you  
238 have 53 sons in the locker room. Would you scream and yell at your son all day  
239 (Kennedy, 2004)? It is hoped that implications from this study will provide coaches with  
240 something to think about when it comes to yelling at their athletes.

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274 Table 1 Coaches Yelling Survey

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277 Gender: Male \_\_\_ Female \_\_\_

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279 Age: 18-25 \_\_\_ 26-30 \_\_\_ 31-35 \_\_\_ 36 and older \_\_\_

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281 The following survey questions will ask you regarding your experiences with  
282 coaches that yelled at you during you time on athletic teams. For the purpose of this  
283 study, yelling is defined as directing unkind, loud, personal comments to the  
284 individual. Some questions will ask you to circle your answer and other questions  
285 will ask you to write a brief explanation. Thank you for your participation with this  
286 survey.

287

288

289 1. When your coach yelled at you, did it improve you performance? Please explain  
290 your answer.

291

292 YES NO

293

294

295 2. How did it make you feel when your coach yelled at you?

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297

298 3. Did your coach yell at all of your teammates, or did he/she yell at you?

299

300

301 4. When the coach yelled, did it affect the coach's credibility in your eyes? Please  
302 explain your answer.

303

304 YES NO

305

306

307 5. Would the coach yell at you in practices, games or both?

308

309 Practices Games Both

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312 6. How did your parents feel about your coach yelling at you? Please explain your  
313 answer.

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319 7. How did the coaches yelling affect the climate during practice, games and locker  
320 room?

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324 8. When your coach yelled at you, was there any profanity accompanying the  
325 yelling?

326

327 Yes

No

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330 9. How did you feel when you heard your coach using profanity that was directed to  
331 you? Please explain your response.

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335 10. When profanity was used during the yelling episode, did your performance  
336 improve? Please explain your answer.

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338 Yes

No

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343 11. From your recollections of coaches yelling at you, what was the worst example  
344 of your coach yelling at you (what they said, how they said it, words used when  
345 yelling at you). Please explain your answer.

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