

COACHING GUIDE

5 TIPS FOR WORKING WITH ATHLETES WITH AUTISM

UNDERSTANDING AUTISM

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disability. It can affect how a person communicates, interacts, learns, processes information, responds to sensory input, and adapts to changes in routines or environments.

It is a spectrum.

That means autism can look very different from one athlete to another. Some athletes may need significant support, while others may need very little. There is no single “autistic athlete” profile. The strengths, challenges, communication styles, and support needs of each athlete are different.

BY THE NUMBERS

1 IN 31

U.S. kids have been diagnosed with autism.

Source: CDC Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network. The estimate is based on 16 U.S. communities.

5 TIPS FOR COACHES

- 1 Be clear and specific.**
Say exactly what you mean.
Avoid vague directions like:
“Get ready.” “Do it better.”
Give the athlete a clear action they can understand and execute.
- 2 Show, don't just tell.**
Demonstrate the drill, skill, or technique.
A visual example can make an instruction much easier to understand than a long verbal explanation.
Show it. Then rep it.
- 3 Prepare for changes.**
Whenever possible, give the athlete a heads-up when practice, drills, routines, or expectations are going to change.
Unexpected changes can make transitions more difficult.
“We're doing something different today. Here's what to expect.”
- 4 Understand sensory overload.**
Noise, crowds, lights, physical contact, or other environmental factors can become overwhelming.
If an athlete becomes overloaded, focus on helping them reset rather than assuming they're being difficult.
Regulate first. Coach second.
- 5 Learn the athlete.**
Autism looks different from athlete to athlete.
Ask the athlete and their family:
What works? What doesn't? What helps?
Don't assume one strategy will work for everyone.

REMEMBER

The goal isn't to coach an athlete differently because they have autism.
The goal is to understand what helps that athlete access your coaching.

ACCOMMODATIONS TO THE FIELD

Every athlete learns differently. Every athlete deserves great coaching.