

MY ATHLETE SEEMS DISENGAGED

Before you call it a motivation problem, figure out what's getting in the way.

WHAT TO DO

Disengagement is something you observe. It isn't an explanation. The easy conclusion is "they don't care," but before you address the behavior, figure out the barrier.

1 DON'T CONFUSE "WON'T" WITH "CAN'T"

An athlete who isn't participating may be choosing not to engage, may be prevented from engaging, or may not understand what they're supposed to do. Those can look identical from the sideline. That's why the first step isn't punishment. It's diagnosis.

Coaching principle: figure out which one you're looking at before you respond to it.

2 ASK: DO THEY KNOW WHAT TO DO?

Sometimes disengagement is actually confusion. Before assuming a lack of motivation, check whether the task was ever made clear.

INSTEAD OF "Are you paying attention?"

TRY "Show me what you're supposed to do."

What they show you tells you more than what they say.

3 CHANGE THE ENVIRONMENT FIRST

An athlete may look disengaged because they're struggling to access the instruction, not because they lack motivation. Consider noise, group size, and distance from the coach.

TRY Move closer. Demonstrate. Give a shorter instruction. Reduce distractions. Then see what happens.

Coaching principle: try changing the environment before you change the athlete.

4 BREAK OUT THE FIRST STEP

Disengagement can look like avoidance when a task feels too complicated, too new, or too failure-prone. Isolating the first piece gives the athlete a way in.

INSTEAD OF "You need to try harder."

TRY "Let's just work on the first part."

Breaking out the first step doesn't lower the standard. It gives the athlete a way to reach it.

5 CHANGE THE LANGUAGE, NOT THE ATHLETE

A quick before and after for phrases that mislabel a barrier as a motivation problem.

INSTEAD OF "You don't care."

TRY "Show me what you're supposed to be doing."

Also works for: "Pay attention" → "Here's the one thing I need you to focus on."

CHANGE ONE VARIABLE

SHORTEN Shorten the instruction. Then observe.

DEMONSTRATE Show them the skill. Then observe.

MOVE CLOSER Cut the distance and distractions.

BREAK IT DOWN Split the task into smaller pieces.

DIAGNOSE BEFORE YOU RESPOND

When an athlete seems disengaged, ask:

Can they do it?

SKILL ISSUE

Do they understand it?

INSTRUCTION ISSUE

Can they access it?

ACCOMMODATION ISSUE

Understanding the barrier doesn't mean lowering the standard. Same expectation, better access.

QUICK COACH CHECKLIST

- ☐ Do they know what they're supposed to do?
- ☐ Did I explain and demonstrate it clearly?
- ☐ Is something in the environment distracting them?
- ☐ Have I given them time to process?
- ☐ Does this happen in a predictable pattern?

"Disengaged" describes what you see. **It doesn't explain why you're seeing it.**