

An excerpt from **Coaching for Safety**
A Risk Management Handbook for High School Coaches

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The Risk Management Defensive Game Plan for Coaches



This section lists practical, general strategies for lowering the chance of injuries to your players and chances of claims against you, your school, and school district.

These suggestions are based on research, education and many years of coaching and administrative experience. These considerations are also based on serving as an athletic "expert witness" for the past 35 years.

These athletic risk management ideas have:

- Prevented an injury.
- Prevented litigation when an injury did occur.
- Demonstrated that the coach acted in a reasonable way if and when there was legal action.

These ideas are not new nor are they highly sophisticated. They are a combination of common sense and staying vigilant.

As you review the list, remember these major points:

- You are measured by a standard of care for your profession, not by a standard practice. An example of a standard practice would be to withhold liquids from wrestlers in order to "make weight." That is not the standard of care. The standard of care and your standard practice should be the same.
- Understand your legal duties as a coach. The good news is that a coach's legal duties are also the same duties of a good coach.
- The best defensive game plan is being a competent, caring professional who wants to run a worthwhile program for young people. Any worthwhile athletic program has risk management/safety considerations as a top priority.
- We now live in a very litigious society. (The reason for more lawsuits in America is an interesting topic, but not the focus of this handbook.)

THE GAME PLAN

Make the following part of your defensive game plan to prevent injuries:

1. Athletic risk management is a proactive job. Attend seminars, workshops and continue your education. Join professional groups and subscribe to professional magazines. In short, stay abreast of current information. If you do not stay up with current information, you are failing in your duty of care.
2. Make the issue of safety important. This will motivate and make it important to your players.
3. Recognize a problem or hazard, correct it immediately and/or notify administration.
4. Read and follow the rulebook. Refer to it often.
5. Be knowledgeable in your sport and currently certified by the state association.
6. Have enough qualified coaches for the specific sport.
7. Know and maintain basic emergency care skills.
8. Attempt to utilize additional athletic medical care. This may include a team doctor, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), the local college's sports medicine department, a physical therapy center, and/or certified athletic trainers.
9. Consider having an automatic emergency defibrillator (AED) on the school grounds with qualified users.
10. Have a written emergency plan.
11. Read and follow your school's athletic department handbook.
12. Consider establishing a team handbook.
13. Establish training rules and policies that are in agreement with the directives of the school district. This could be part of your team handbook.
14. Plan all aspects of your program carefully.
15. Have an athletic safety committee comprised of coaches, administrators, maintenance staff, the business manager, the school's legal counsel,

The Risk Management Defensive Game Plan for Coaches, continued

an insurance consultant and medical personnel. Their task is to continually review and implement athletic risk management guidelines. This group would also check, revise and implement general and sport specific checklists. The simple fact of having such a committee establishes program credibility.

16. Utilize and maintain various records and forms for several years including:
 - Pre-participation physical examination
 - Informed consent form
 - Proof of medical insurance
 - Emergency information cards
 - Return to play form
 - Accident and/or incident report form
 - Practice plans, attendance records, and training rules
 - Equipment purchase and inventory records
 - Work orders
 - Records of insurance
 - Completed safety checklists
 - Equipment inspection forms
17. Have a parent information meeting to review the season and the risk and benefits of participation. This is a good time to collect informed consent forms and address issues such as sportsmanship and proper behavior at games.
18. Purchase only from reputable dealers and follow manufacturer's guidelines for installation, maintenance and repairs.
19. Check all equipment and facilities on a regular basis.
20. Avoid using "homemade" equipment.
21. Wait until the new "state of the art" equipment becomes acceptable standard equipment before purchasing it.
22. Consider an out of season conditioning program for athletes not participating in other sports.
23. Seek outside opinions concerning your risk management program. This could be a coach or athletic administrator from another school.
24. Stay in communication with the maintenance department.
25. Understand the legal or basic responsibilities of care for your athletes.
26. A coach understands:
 - That he/she always follows the directions of higher qualified medical personnel.

- The concept of "buffer" or safety zones for practice and games.
- The skill of general and specific supervision, as well as the supervisory technique known as "scanning." The failure to be present or properly supervise is a major reason for claims against athletic programs.
- The concept of NO! No, we won't use that broken backstop. No, we won't practice on that field if it is not safe. No, we won't play with that equipment if it needs repair. Saying "No" is often the most difficult word in coaching.

27. Inform the general public about what you do in regard to safety. Athletic safety public relations are important and too often neglected.
28. Demonstrating you care about your athletes as individuals is the best public relations there is. This includes staying in touch with injured athletes. This is important.
28. Avoid negative terms such as the "nutcracker" or "bell ringer" drill. Do we have to call a conditioning drill a "suicide?"
29. Avoid post injury discussions with anyone but your supervisor. Avoid unnecessary communication. Your task is to initiate first aid and the emergency plan – not give interviews to crowds and the local press.
30. Make accident and incident reports factual and to the point. Don't editorialize.
31. An athlete should not return to play after an injury or illness without a completed "return to play" or other appropriate form signed by a qualified medical professional.
32. Continually remind your athletes of their responsibility for their own safety and the safety of others on the playing field.
33. Walk into every situation and ask yourself, "Have I done all that is reasonable to lower the chance of injury to those in my charge?"

This defensive game plan for coaches accomplishes two important things. It decreases significantly the chance of injury to athletes and also establishes you as a caring and credible professional. This second value will appreciably decrease the chance of claims and complaints against you and your school. That's a win-win situation.

