



Super Vision

It does not take super vision to supervise athletes. But it does require knowing how to scan, position yourself, and spot red flags.

By Dr. Richard P. Borkowski

Want to know the best way to keep your athletic program out of the courtroom? Teach your coaches how to properly supervise their athletes. The failure to properly supervise a practice, a game, or a locker room is one of the most consistent complaints against coaches and athletic administrators brought forth by plaintiff lawyers.

I addressed the particulars of athletic supervision in this magazine almost a decade ago. It's time for a refresher course.

My college instruction concerning supervision was "be on time for practice and watch the kids." This was not adequate 40 years ago and it certainly is not adequate today. Supervision is not rocket science, but it is a skill and an art that takes practice. Coaches and athletic directors who think that proper supervision simply means being present are wrong. Being present is only the first step.

What Is Adequate?

Today's lawyers are pushing the envelope on what constitutes adequate supervision and, as a result, there is much confusion over it. I have seen lawyers attempt to redefine proper supervision as never allowing anyone to get hurt. But adequate supervision does not mean that an injury never occurs, and the courts have consistently upheld this truth. I have also heard lawyers try to claim that if the coach or teacher did not see the accident, there was improper supervision. This interpretation of the law is not correct either.

So what makes supervision adequate or inadequate? Proper supervision means the coach is actively overseeing his or her entire team, even if his or her eyes are not watching everything that's going on. The coach has a systematic plan of supervision. It also means the coach is readily accessible—and the athletes know it.

Here is how the text *Liability and Safety in Physical Education and Sport* (by

James Hart and Robert Ritson) explains adequate supervision: "The courts, while being very clear about the required duty of teachers and coaches to provide active supervision, have been equally clear in holding that they are not insurers of student safety and that proper supervision does not necessarily require constant and continuous sight of all students by supervising teachers and coaches. The nature of the activities as well as the age, capacity, experience, and number of participants play a role in determining the extent of supervision required."

The literature also defines supervision as being general or specific. General supervision means you are overseeing a game or practice. It is watching students participate in activities they generally know how to perform and have had some level of success at. It is most often used for "low risk activities." An example might be a tennis coach watching matches.

Specific supervision entails having a direct relationship with a participant. It is usually one-on-one instruction, and it is generally used for participants who are beginners or who need specific help. Closely watching one student perform a gymnastic skill for the first time is an example of specific supervision.

The reality of supervision is that coaches must move from general to specific and back again many times during any given practice. The art of doing this involves knowing where to position yourself and being able to regularly look up from specific supervision to perform general supervision.

When working one-on-one with an athlete, the coach must place the athlete in such a position that as many of the other players as possible are in that coach's line of sight. The coach should stand so that the individual is directly in front of him or her and the rest of the team is in the broader viewing range (generally called "back to the wall" supervision).

Richard P. Borkowski, EdD, CMAA, is a sport safety consultant based in Narberth, Pa. The former Director of Physical Education and Athletics at the Episcopal Academy in Merion, Pa., his most recent book is titled Coaching for Safety, A Risk Management Handbook for High School Coaches, published by ESD112.



The Science of Scanning

Most athletic supervision falls into the category of what lifeguards call "scanning." However, I have yet to hear a coaching program address this simple technique. Scanning is the habit of looking at your area of supervision in an organized pattern. Teach young coaches this technique and this attitude. Make your coaches practice it. It's simple and will become natural in a short time.

Coaches can scan effectively by using a variety of techniques. For example, they can observe the area from right to left, then left to right. The next time, they can scan the area in circular patterns or divide the room into blocks of activity. Varying the rotation pattern will keep their minds in tune for spotting safety issues.

Where should the coach position him- or herself? Wherever they can have the best view of all the participants. They should try standing in several different places and see which area has the best sight line. If equipment blocks the view, the coach should move it or reposition him- or herself. It also works well for a coach to rotate where they are standing, walking through, in, and around the activity.

A year ago, when doing an evaluation, I watched a wrestling coach supervise his athletes from the center of the mat. He was doing a good job supervising half of his team. But his back was to the other half, which is not good supervision. If the coach had moved himself to the edge of the mat, he would have been able to observe all of his wrestlers.

The best quote I have read about scanning comes from George Graham's *Teaching Children Physical Education, Becoming a Master Teacher*: "They [master teachers] have developed the habit of constantly sweeping the teaching area with their eyes, even when they are providing feedback to an individual, so that they are always aware of what the children are doing. In the beginning it is a good idea for teachers to consciously scan a class. Most find it easier to scan from side to side, taking eight to 10 seconds to find out what the children are doing. With practice this becomes automatic."

Best Practices

Adequate supervision also means being aware of potential safety problems and knowing how to avoid them. Below

are some basic red flags to look for and good practices to abide by. (You can read my past articles for more details on these points.)

Spot facility problems before practice by using the "up, down, and around" process, which means checking the area above you, at eye level, and then at floor level. As you walk through and scan the area, ask yourself, "Is there a hazard? Can it be removed? If not, can I adjust or alter the activity area to remove the hazard? If not, can I adjust the activity? If I cannot adjust the activity, can I move it to another area?" If a coach cannot do any of the above, he or she should not run the activity. Supervising a good lacrosse drill on a field full of holes is not good supervision.

If you have to move to a different practice site (such as moving a soccer practice to an indoor gym in bad weather), carefully review the new location before starting practice. Understand that you may have a new set of supervision problems such as walls, windows, and doors.

Choose safe activities over those that may be fun but risky. I once watched something called "Rambo Ball Soccer."

The idea was to kick as many balls as possible into the goal. There were 10 or more balls in play and no rules except that no one could use their hands. There were no boundaries and lots of athletes moving in lots of different directions with many balls flying. That's an example of a game no one should play or supervise.

Know the activity you are supervising. No matter how great his supervision is on the gridiron, the hall-of-fame football coach may not be the best person to substitute for the swimming coach.

Communicate clearly, which means thoroughly explaining your expectations for behavior to all your athletes. The

athletes need to know you are present and will accept no horseplay. This also means wearing a whistle or having strong vocal chords.

Don't become distracted from your team if another situation arises. If a student comes to you to talk about the homework you assigned in history class, tell her she'll need to wait until practice is over. If the interruption is an emergency, have the person face you as you face and watch the players.

Have an emergency plan in place that is thorough and frequently reviewed. Who administers first aid? Who goes for help? Are emergency phone numbers on hand?

Supervision is not watching every player, every moment, in every possible situation. This cannot be done. Good supervision is that which prevents a foreseeable and unreasonable risk of harm to a participant by consistently using a controlled, planned method of observation and help.

TWO BIG QUESTIONS

If supervision means being able to scan an area and see your whole team, what do you do about sports in which participants practice in separate areas, such as track and field? Ideally, you have enough assistant coaches to cover every practice area. If not, rotating from group to group is a reasonable tactic, especially if you follow the other suggestions in the mainbar of this article.

Another big question revolves around the coach's duty to supervise players off the field or court. It's important for coaches to know that their supervisory duties are not over until their athletes have left the locker room. There should be a system where at least one coach or monitor remains until the locker room is empty.

When a team travels overnight, planning the supervision is very important. Make sure you have an itinerary, informed consent signed by parents, and written rules of behavior. Ensure enough coverage by including parents or additional faculty members if necessary.

Dr. Borkowski's previous articles in Athletic Management can be accessed by searching "Borkowski" in our archives at: www.AthleticSearch.com.