3 Key tips to coaching today’s athlete

*It’s tough to relate to players that live in a whole different world. Or is it? How to relate to your players in 3 easy steps.*

In other words, how to better understand the players growing up in a world that is totally different than the one most of us coaches grew up in.

Coaching any sport is a relating business. The more you can relate to, and connect with your players, the better coach you’ll be.

What makes it difficult to relate to players from an entirely different generation is that your perspectives are different; theirs are current and fresh and ever-changing, while ours are old and stale and in the past. Players are thinking in the future while coaches are thinking in the past.

To help bridge that viewpoint-gap, here’s a quick look at 3 keys that will help you do a much better job of coaching kids these days – since those are the only kids you’ll ever be coaching:

1. **Understand –** Understanding means you know as much as you can about the subject. It doesn’t imply judgment or comparisons, but simply knowing as much as you can. Times constantly change and the more we can *really* understand the player standing in front of us ***today*** instead of comparing them to ourselves back in our day, the better job we’ll do of coaching them:
   * Their brains are still developing, while ours are finished.
   * Their computer files live in the air, while ours live on our computer.
   * Their attention span is only 6-8 seconds, while ours is longer.
   * They’re the first generation that doesn’t need adults for their information.
   * They’ve been raised on softball drills, and we were raised playing softball.
   * They’re spending all their time on their phone, but they don’t want us to. Kids ALWAYS want our attention, and they want to matter.
2. **Empathize** – Empathy is much deeper than understanding. It’s actually feeling what the other person feels. Empathy requires a very intense effort to feel what the other person is going through. And because it takes time to know enough about a person to empathize with them, too many coaches overlook this vital step in *really* connecting with their players:
   * If they’re younger than 16 they were born after 9/11 happened – which means they *know* about it, but we actually *felt* it
   * They’ve grown up in a world of violence with 60 mass shootings totaling 795 fatalities since 2001, while our violence happened far away in war zones.
   * Close to 50% of them feel overwhelming anxiety or depression!
   * The popular movies of their time are Divergent and Hunger Games – where kids are endangered or killed, while our movies were Ghostbusters and Home Alone.
   * Honesty is a huge tool in creating a relationship with your players. I never hesitate to ask them to help me make an idea current, or to let them know if I don’t know something. As Daniel Coyle says in his new book [*The Culture Code*](http://danielcoyle.com/buy-the-culture-code/)*,* vulnerability is one of the 3 qualities that all outstanding performers possess.
3. **Time-Travel –** This is the magic that allows older coaches to connect with younger players. Traveling in time is usually thought of as a backward exercise, like traveling back to the middle ages. But I’m talking about traveling forward – throwing your mind into the world of technology and current-day examples.
   * Use your iPad at practice to show video of what the player is doing instead of trying to describe it in words.
   * Figure out a key word as the focus for each day’s practice and then use it in a #hastag. By the way, they have NO clue what the pound sign means. It’s a hashtag to them.
   * Have your players use their phone to record a key thing they learned at last practice and replay it for you before today’s practice.

Coaching any athlete takes effort, and a huge part of that effort is spent on trying to get them to listen, to be vulnerable and to try their best. Kids in any day are good kids! They want to do well and please the people they care about. Kids in any day have big hearts and kind souls so work harder to find those qualities within each of your players, and not so hard trying to keep the *old days* alive!