



The Winning Mindset

Juli Benson

Team Culture and Recognizing Eating Disorders

Purpose: The purpose of CTCs *The Winning Mindset* is to collect and present articles by accomplished athletes, coaches, and business leaders in an effort to provide our readers with valuable insight into successful training, racing, business, and the characteristics of a high-performance mindset.

Juli Benson has been a key figure with the U.S. running scene for 25 years. Her 7-year professional running career was highlighted with her Olympic appearance in the 1500 meters in 1996. She has coached professional and collegiate athletes for nearly two decades, including Colorado native Jenny Simpson during her 1500-meter World Championship season in 2011. Juli's college coaching stops have included the U.S. Air Force Academy, George Mason University, Georgetown University, the University of Pennsylvania, and James Madison University. She currently coaches post-collegiate athletes who are preparing for the U.S. Olympic trials. Juli's coaching services can be found at www.julibensontraining.com

CTCs Request (by Rob Berry): One of our main purposes at CTC is to help provide valuable coaching information and address important training and racing topics for athletes and coaches.

I think this article is a great starting point to create a good discussion for teams and coaches in order for everyone to contribute to a healthy team culture.

In late 2019, the Nike Oregon Project entered the national news scene stemming from reports about problems with the team culture and alleged eating disorders with some of the athletes. The purpose of this article is **NOT** to pass any judgment toward NOP or its athletes – I don't know any of the athletes or coaches and I have no access to facts regarding the team culture or events.

I asked Juli to work through her thoughts on team culture and eating disorders so we could build an article for the CTC website. I did **not** want an article getting wrapped up in scientific jargon and principles. Juli has a unique, highly qualified perspective and I wanted her to walk our readers through the "**what you actually see on a team / how it feels as an athlete**" part of the challenge. My hope is that our athletes and coaches can better understand the problem and how it is displayed within team culture, along with the risks faced by athletes. I am proud to add her work to our website!

Juli's Response:

Team Culture and Recognizing Eating Disorders

In my senior year of college, I was ready for a competitive breakthrough.

I arrived at the East Coast Conference Championships fit and confident, looking to set a PR. I was also incredibly nervous and didn't have much of an appetite in the weeks leading up to my race. I didn't worry about the fact that I wasn't eating very much – I knew I wasn't intentionally avoiding food and I just chalked it all up to nerves.

I entered the 1500-meter final ranked 11th. Only 12 runners made the final, and I advanced easily. My anxiety increased, and the next day I was too nervous to eat much at breakfast. My entire family was also present at the meet -- a first-time occurrence – and I was just ready to run my race.

The gun went off. One by one, I passed runners until just one other woman separated me from the championship. With 100 meters remaining, I saw my rival tilt her head JUST slightly in my direction, but I knew I had her. I won the race and was elated.

For obvious reasons, I remember that day vividly. I also clearly recall the “praise” I heard after the race and for several days afterward.

“You look SO fit.”

“You're so thin and cut.”

“This is the most fit you've ever looked.”

“Wow, you're so skinny!”

The comments were all about my appearance. Hearing “congratulations” or “that was an amazing finish” would have been much more affirming, and I began questioning my own effort and my training.

Was my weight loss the reason why I won? If I lost a few more pounds between now and the NCAA championships, would I run even faster??

I did lose another two pounds. This time the weight loss was conscious -- it felt good to hear the compliments and I assumed the weight loss had a direct correlation to my conference championship success. But I did NOT run faster. I ran slower and didn't have the energy to recover between the trials and the final race. Lesson learned.

Despite my concerns, I knew I was one of the lucky female athletes surrounded by positive coaches that chose to educate me about the importance of fueling and keeping my body strong. I was also lucky that I had a *relatively* healthy body image. But so many young female student-athletes do not, and their coaches might inadvertently be contributing to eating disorders, injury and a distorted body image with comments that emphasize weight loss and a “skinny” appearance over physical and emotional health.

Coaches need to walk a tightrope between serving as a safe space for an athlete to come and share her concerns, issues and fears about her performance without trying to “fix” her by focusing on her weight as the “problem.” [In a blog post from the Rosewood Centers for Eating Disorders, lead dietitian Jennifer Lentzke, a registered dietitian with specialized training in eating disorders and sports nutrition, discusses the importance of coaches understanding the multi-faceted nature of disordered eating among their athletes and how they can help stop the problem before it starts.](#)

“Coaches aren’t aware of the enormous number of athletes dealing with disordered eating,” Lentzke wrote in the organization’s blog. “It’s prevalent in almost every sport. Coaches need to educate themselves on eating disorders, so they can be aware of what to look for.”

Healthy, not skinny

As my running career progressed, I knew I eventually would become a coach. I had the opportunity to serve as a graduate assistant coach while I was still training, and I was fascinated with every exercise physiology class I took in grad school and after college. I loved the process of combining the artistry and science of movement in order to help athletes reach their goals – it was intoxicating to me and I knew it was what I wanted to do as a career.

I was fortunate early in my coaching career to work with some highly accomplished coaches and very talented athletes. I went to every clinic I could and talked to any coach that would give me the time of day. I wanted to learn, learn and learn some more.

All my studies and education, however, could not have prepared me for what I would spend a significant amount of time doing.

The “wow, you’re so skinny” comments I received during my senior year in college would be repeated throughout my collegiate coaching career with one significant difference -- I started to hear them in relation to the young women entrusted to my care.

I spent countless hours talking with student-athletes that had some sort of disordered body image or eating concern. I would say that throughout my entire career, addressing this issue was part of my coaching load on a monthly basis.

At times it felt like the blind leading the blind, and as a young coach new to the profession, I know I wasn't prepared to provide guidance to my student-athletes about disordered body image. There was no instruction in my graduate school courses nor in the coaching clinics I attended that could have given me a blueprint to help the student-athletes I coached. That has to change -- I don't want another generation of aspiring young coaches to be caught off guard if they encounter an athlete struggling with an eating disorder, as I was shortly after taking my first professional position. This is why I'm passionate about taking steps toward a solution that includes more targeted education and support for new coaches.

My passion about this subject is fueled by two stories that stand out among the many I encountered from my college days, to working with collegiate athletes, as well as working with post-collegians. At one school, 10 days before we were set to start fall practice, I received a phone call from my boss, the head track coach. He was practically giddy.

“Wait until you see Carrie (name changed for privacy purposes),” he gushed. “She looks amazing! She is going to run so fast this year.”

Coaches obviously have little contact with the athletes during the summer, so I had not seen Carrie since May. When she arrived on that first day of practice at the start of her junior year, I was completely shocked, but not for the reasons I expected. Her appearance was drastically different. Her face was skinny and gaunt, and her body had little to no body fat. She now possessed a defined musculature that wasn't apparent just eight weeks prior. I could tell immediately that she needed medical help.

I was aware of and had seen athletes that had struggled with disordered eating – which can include anorexia, bulimia or bingeing. I was a distance runner and, unfortunately, eating disorders are relatively common in the sport. This, however, was the first time I had seen the transformation take place in someone I cared about so much – not only as a student-athlete but also as a maturing young woman.

I was also confused. Was this the outcome we wanted? The head coach, a person I highly respected was SO excited about this transformation. And guess what? Our team was AWESOME that fall and so was Carrie. What was the message here?

As a hyper-competitive, Type A athlete, I really enjoyed our success and beating teams we weren't “supposed” to beat. As an educator and coach, I was deeply conflicted about the messages we sent to Carrie and to the team. I know Carrie completed her collegiate eligibility and was successful from an athletic perspective, but she struggled through significant personality changes and dealt with depression those final two seasons on the team.

I kept asking myself “Is this how it's done?”

At another program, not much had changed. At the start of my tenure, I had a meeting with a coach about recruiting. The coach described the top five female high school student-athletes he was currently

recruiting. Of course, he detailed the girls' accomplishments, but he also described several as "tall and very athletic looking."

I began to research these recruits, and it was very clear to me that these student-athletes were not healthy. Like many programs, our team had several women struggling with eating issues and disordered body image and it was extraordinarily frustrating that this wasn't apparent to the coach or training staff.

I saw the problem, but I kept asking myself, "What's the solution?"

Understanding the problem and recognizing the female athlete triad

The fact that many coaches don't recognize the problem *is* the problem itself. It's possible that neither of these coaches were aware of the severity of the situation regarding Carrie and the prevalence of disordered eating issues on our team and potentially with our recruits. From my years of experience coaching and observing teams, I think there are coaches that aren't aware of the severity of the situation until it slaps them in the face.

It is factual that as an athlete loses weight, her power-to-weight ratio will increase as will her VO2 max. These two things lead to increased performances. Coaches like increased performances. And, it is easy to justify or turn a blind eye to the red flags when a coach is in the middle of a successful -- perhaps the most successful -- season he or she has ever had.

Lentzke, the Rosewood Ranch dietitian, mentions this contradiction in her blog post.

"Unfortunately we find that coaches often don't act on their suspicions, especially if the athlete is still performing well," she wrote. "A lot of coaches let anorexic runners keep running because they're fast. What they're not considering is if that girl continues in her eating disorder, she will have the bones of a 60-year-old by the time she's 18."

The "slap in the face" comes in a few ways. First, the athlete with the extreme weight loss gets hurt. When an athlete has lost too much weight, the body has few reserves left to repair an injury. At that point, the athlete will store any calories for survival and injuries will take much longer to heal **IF** they do at all.

Second, the eating disorder becomes "contagious." If an athlete on a team has a significant weight loss, but is allowed to continue training and competing, AND experiences a high amount of success, her teammates can often try to mimic this behavior to reap similar results. This can change a team's chemistry and lead to cycles of injury-ridden teams and poor performances.

It is my belief that neither coach in the above scenarios was intentionally seeking athletes with eating disorders and certainly was not wishing an illness on any athlete. But both examples, at well-resourced NCAA programs, place glaring spotlights on a problem that desperately needs addressing.

[A 2006 New York Times article](#) details the most extreme scenario of what could happen if coaches fail to reach out to female athletes with disordered body image. The article highlights a 17-year-old 3,200-meter run Wisconsin high school state champion who was found dead just three years later. She was 5-foot-8 and 125 pounds when she won her state title, but 70 pounds at the time of her death. Her coach didn't know she had never had a menstrual cycle and had been battling anorexia since she was 9.

Her coach was proactive to a degree in recognizing an issue when she arrived in the fall for cross country season looking "frail and underweight," and the article mentions that he prevented her from competing in several meets. But he didn't know – and didn't know to ask -- if she was experiencing menstrual cycles or was struggling with anorexia.

After her death, the coach began asking himself what more he could have done, and if a better understanding of anorexia could have helped him save his student-athlete. At the time of the article's publication, this coach had decided to stop coaching girls' sports.

While most stories of disordered body image won't end as tragically, plenty of others will conclude with young female athletes suffering broken bones, stress fractures and osteoporosis.

How can coaches prevent their student-athletes from reaching this breaking point? Below, I offer some suggestions for a better method of helping our young female athletes.

A path forward

All coaches should be educated and trained in recognizing what's known as the female athlete triad.

[The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists defines it as a medical condition observed in physically active females involving three components:](#)

1. Low energy availability with or without disordered eating
2. Menstrual dysfunction
3. Low bone density

The position statement adds that women and girls experiencing the condition do not have to show evidence of all three components. One is enough to warrant action.

The cycle starts with athletes cutting back on fuel or not eating at all to lose weight or keep weight down. That in turn can lead to amenorrhea, or missed menstrual cycles. The loss of one's menstrual cycle is a sign of decreasing bone density, which of course, makes athletes more prone to stress fractures, bone breaks and osteoporosis.

Understanding the triad is just a start. Coaches must start asking the important questions and ensure that their programs also have support systems in place to help their student-athletes. Here are some

steps coaches and athletics programs can take in this direction to support the overall health of their female student-athletes.

Invest in continuing education: Athletics programs should mandate educational workshops for coaches of high-risk groups. All women's teams should be included under that umbrella, but long-distance runners or athletes competing in aesthetic, judged sports such as gymnastics, diving and dance could all be considered high risk. The workshops, clinics, conferences and other training modules should include evidence-based information from experts in sports medicine, sports psychology, nutrition, exercise science and other related areas that can address concerns facing student-athletes and their physiology.

Create a healthy culture: Coaches can forget they are in the business of EDUCATION. Take the time to educate teams on the importance of nutrition, fueling and recovery. Define what those terms *actually mean*. Don't be afraid to talk about disordered body image in a healthy way -- avoid making it a taboo subject. The more this is addressed among the team in a healthy, positive way, the more this has a trickle-down effect on team culture. In the *New York Times* article, one female collegiate cross-country coach said she directly instructed her student-athletes to tell her if they lost their menstrual cycles so she could refer them to nutrition counseling and screenings. Obviously, this level of communication requires significant trust between a coach and his or her charges, but by creating this culture early, student-athletes can feel comfortable coming to a coach with a concern about their bodies.

Develop a comprehensive framework of support: NCAA schools should consider developing an eating disorder task force or committee that could consist of 2-3 coaches, a counselor, nutritionist, physician and other related specialists. The University of Alabama has upwards of 100 people who work with the football program to continue its dominance – imagine if women's teams had the same. This shouldn't be the job of one or two team coaches alone – coaches must have a reliable safety net in place that involves the entire institution.

Changing the narrative

Imagine a culture where we protected the physical and emotional health of our female student-athletes and considered their well-being as important as winning. Maybe my coach would have noticed my shrinking figure before my conference championship meet back in the late 1990s and asked me about my fueling efforts to ensure I wasn't intentionally restricting myself in a misguided effort to lose weight to become faster.

We must also recognize how much power we have as coaches. We know how athletes think because nearly all of us were athletes ourselves. We revered and respected – or sometimes feared -- our coaches and took their words as truth. Positive or negative reinforcement from a coach had the ability to alter our entire eating or training regimens.

Lentzke also noted the importance of coaches' input in the Rosewood Centers blog.

“Coaches need to be sensitive to the way athletes think,” she said. “Athletes may feel an immense amount of pressure. Athletes tend to really look up to the coach. They want to perform. They feed off positive reinforcement. They will hang on every word that the coach says. One offhand comment about their weight or appearance can be the trigger for someone who is vulnerable, so be careful what you say. Also be aware of the implicit messages or pressure athletes may feel to drop weight or look a certain way.”

I hope that in the future, young coaches will have everything they need – from education and training to multiple levels of support -- to help female student athletes have a prosperous and healthy student-athlete experience