



Jeff Janssen

# Coaching Today's Athlete

## Millennial-generation athletes require a different approach

By JEFF JANSSEN, Janssen Sports Leadership Center

**A**re today's athletes different than years past? Do you at times feel a little disconnected from the current generation?

Fortunately, you don't need to be up on all the latest catch phrases, texting, hottest websites and dance moves, yet you do have to understand what makes today's generation of athletes tick and how to coach them accordingly.

According to authors Neil Howe and William Strauss of an interesting book called "Millennials Go to College," today's Millennial generation (generally regarded as any person born between 1982-1997) is significantly different than in years past in seven primary ways.

### 1. Special

As a group, Millennials have been taught that they are special and vital to the success of their family, team and community. They have received an unprecedented amount of focus and attention from their parents and other adults, so they naturally feel that they are entitled.

### 2. Sheltered

Most Millennials have been protected and sheltered from birth. While this sheltering has created a generation that is much healthier and less prone to injury, it has also prevented them from experiencing, learning from, adapting to and overcoming the important and inevitable hard knocks of life. Because of this sheltering, many are crushed when they receive less than an "A" for a grade, don't get a ribbon for coming in ninth place, get cut from teams and receive any type of negative feedback. It's as if they've rarely received any criticism and subsequently don't know how to handle it.

### 3. Confident

According to the authors' polls, Millennials tend to be a more confident generation when it comes to their ability to achieve. However, they sometimes forget that success is not going to come instantly but instead must be worked at consistently.

### 4. Team-oriented

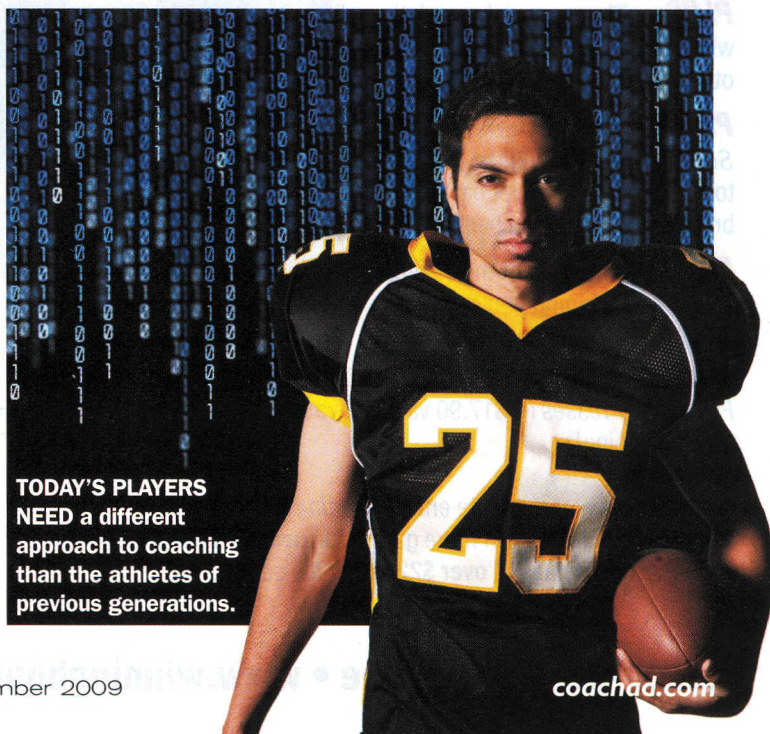
Millennials are the most interconnected generation yet. Between emailing, texting and staying connected through social networking sites, peer networks are a huge part of their daily experience. They have strong team instincts and like to stay connected with their social group.

### 5. Conventional

Rather than the usual rebellious teen years, Millennials tend to embrace the more traditional values of their parents. They are much less likely to use alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana than the generations before them. Howe and Strauss write, "Millennials describe closer ties with their parents than in teens in the history of postwar polling."

### 6. Pressured

Because of the increased competitiveness for grades, school admissions and jobs, today's Millennials are feeling much more pressure to succeed than generations before them. They believe the stakes are high and the price of mistakes is more consequential than in the



**TODAY'S PLAYERS NEED a different approach to coaching than the athletes of previous generations.**

past. Further, many of them are overscheduled and overwhelmed from childhood with private lessons, camps and tutors all designed to help them try to get ahead of the ever-increasing global and local competition.

## 7. Achieving

With higher standards, Millennials are highly focused on achievement and “are on track to becoming the smartest, most-educated adults in U.S. history,” according to the authors. Their test scores are continually rising and more of them are focused on going to college than ever before. They have a strong need to achieve.

### Millennials & Coaching

More specifically for coaches, I do hear a lot of coaches say that today’s athletes seem more fragile because they have been sheltered and protected from many of the natural disappointments of life. It also seems that many of the Millennials think that today’s “instant-gratification” society also applies to athletics. They think that they can master skills in a short period of time without going through the natural and time-consuming process that it takes to learn and master a complex sport skill.

Coaches also realize that Millennials are much more influenced by their parents in comparison to past generations. Not only have young adults changed but parents have become much more involved and sometimes intrusive in their children’s sports.

Finally, with today’s media-obsessed society, many Millennials have extremely short-attention spans if they are not physically or mentally engaged in an activity.

### Advice For Coaching Millennials

Based on the changes outlined by the authors of “Millennials Go to College” and the ones observed by coaches, here are some tips to help you coach your Millennials.

✓ **Help your Millennials understand that adversity is inevitable, temporary and helpful in the long-term.** Because many Millennials don’t handle failure well, you should invest the time to show them how to handle it productively. Teach your athletes how to maintain their composure and confidence — and how to refocus on to the next play.

✓ **Help your Millennials understand that getting better is a long-term process.** Help your Millennials create a long-term training schedule that takes them from where they are now to where they want to be. Encourage them to make the choice to stick with their plan over the long run. Remind them that success takes a long-term investment of time.

✓ **Understand that there are dozens of things that compete for your Millennials’ attention and time.** Don’t get frustrated when your athletes are involved in a multitude of other activities. Make your sport and team one that they enjoy being a part of and see real gains when they participate. If you can do this, they will gravitate to you.

✓ **Don’t lecture - Edu-tain.** Short attention spans are a hallmark of the Millennial generation because of the fast-paced world of technology. These young athletes have hundreds of television channels to choose from if they are bored, hundreds of video games, billions of websites to surf and multiple ways to instantly communicate with friends. Thus, you too have to try to build in the entertainment factor when you coach — or you quickly lose their focus. Make drills short, interesting and competitive to hold their interest.

✓ **Provide opportunities for young Millennials to engage in free athletic play.** I developed something I call Free Play Fridays. I piled a bunch of sporting equipment in the back of our mini-van and drove to a local park. We invited two dozen of my 9-year-old son’s friends and acquaintances to join us for a morning of free play. They could choose whatever sports and activities they wanted to play, make up the teams and have fun on their own in a minimally supervised environment. I was there merely to keep them safe and to attend to any injuries. Despite having a low turnout because most of the children were so overscheduled, they had a chance to experience sport without the pervasive, well-meaning interference of adults for at least a few mornings.

✓ **Develop your parents into allies, not adversaries.** Because Millennials and their parents still seem in some ways to be attached at the umbilical cord, you need to find ways to include them rather than fight them. By reaching out to parents and coaching them on what is appropriate and what isn’t, you have a better chance to turn them into allies than adversaries.

✓ **Help youngsters fight their own battles.** Along with the parent issue, many athletes try to have their parents fight their battles for them. Instead, encourage your athletes to constructively fight their battles on their own first. Teach them how to maturely approach conflict and how to work through it effectively. These conflict-management skills are vital for them as they have families and businesses of their own.

✓ **Remember that people are people.** Finally, even though there are differences from years past, ultimately remember that people are people. Make your practices engaging, challenge them to improve, build their confidence, support them when they struggle and you’ll be sure to have a great time coaching athletes of all ages while watching them get better. **CAD**

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