

## RISK MANAGEMENT FOR REMOTE COACHING

Triathlon, like many endurance sports, lends itself very well to remote coaching. Swimming, cycling, and running can be done anywhere and do not require a structured environment or facilities to complete training. While there is a long tradition of remote coaching in this sport, the pandemic forced many more into an online space and rapidly changed and improved the tools and knowledge around how to work effectively in a remote environment.

The post-pandemic landscape supports both in-person and remote coaching, and there are more people operating in a remote or “hybrid” space than ever before. While research is still progressing around best practices for remote coaching, there is no doubt there is a need for and high value placed on this highly flexible delivery of coaching services in the sport of triathlon.

There are some really positive aspects of coaching in this way, but there are also some aspects to be wary of when it comes to risk mitigation. The following section outlines some things to be aware of and prepare for. However, this is a rapidly changing landscape and coaches are encouraged to continually seek out more information on how to be an effective remote coach.

### SAFE SPORT

Safe Sport policies and best practices also apply to remote coaches. It is important for remote coaches to understand potential pitfalls and mitigate risks. Some key areas are as follows:

#### **Communication & Clear Boundaries**

What research is available on remote coaching supports the need for clear boundaries. One of the biggest identified advantages of working as a remote coach is flexibility. You can work from anywhere with athletes located anywhere in the world. While there is a big up-side to this style of work, one of the common risks is a blurring of boundaries and loss of work/life balance. Remote coaches feel the need to be “on” and accessible all the time. This can make it difficult to build and maintain the structure of a professional relationship and easy to burn out.

Remote coaches use a wide variety of communication mediums. There are many tools to choose from and advantages to working across multiple platforms. Selecting communication tools that are effective and work well for you and your athletes is important, but this is also an important part of setting clear boundaries and building a strong professional coach/athlete relationship.

For example, direct message functions over social media platforms have an inherent informality and imply a social relationship over a professional one. While some tools available on social platforms may be completely appropriate, functional, and accessible for a group; they may not set the right tone when translated into a one-on-one environment. Using these tools isn't bad or wrong, but additional care is needed to avoid unnecessary risk. Having a clear record of your communications is a way to protect yourself. Email is great for this and is recognized as a professional communication tool.

The TYPE of communication – language and style – is also an important consideration. Language should always be professional regardless of the platform. This consistently signals a professional relationship. Some things to think about:

- » **Be CONSISTENT in your communication.** Establishing your “normal” and being consistent breaks down opportunities for misinterpretation or misreading tone/intention.
- » **Avoid casual language over text.** Emojis, GIFs, jokes, etc. are very open to misinterpretation and can land much differently than you intend. Communicate as if you are communicating with your employer.
- » **Proofread your messages for clarity and tone.** Rushed communications or autocorrect can lead to misunderstandings. Taking the time to proofread is a great habit to get into.
- » **Give yourself visual cues and reminders.** It is easy to let your guard down when you’re constantly switching between personal and professional communication platforms. Little things like labelling athletes in your contact list as “Name/Athlete” as a visual reminder to switch gears into your professional style can help.
- » **Be extra cautious around existing relationships.** Remote coaches are often working with their peers; athletes who are the same age and have similar interests. It is easy to have or form friendships outside of coaching and this can shift the way you communicate. If the friendship is damaged for any reason your personal communications can be a risk to you professionally.

## One-on-one sessions

The nature of remote coaching makes the likelihood of one-on-one coaching sessions much higher. Even in a virtual environment, this is a position of risk for a coach. Being remote does not remove the power or authority a coach has over an athlete. Consider how you can navigate this environment to establish strong safe sport practices. Some options include:

- » Form remote groups where possible to shift into a group setting
- » Use video conferencing tools and record sessions (with everyone’s permission) to keep clear records of coaching sessions
- » Invite an assistant coach or training partner into one-on-one sessions, and/or copy them on individual communications
- » The CAC “Understanding the Rule of Two” e-Learning module includes online coaching and highlights some important things to think about. This free 20-minute module is highly recommended for remote coaches.

## Coach / Athlete Relationship

Remote coaches have a difficult task when it comes to building relationships. To work in this space, athletes are required to be more self-directed and provide accurate feedback on how they are progressing. Coaches don’t have the luxury of physically observing progress or assessing challenges in the same way. It is a tough line to walk in order to build a strong and trusting relationship, provide and receive effective feedback, navigate the blurred communication lines, and maintain professional boundaries.

Building relationships is easiest face-to-face in-person. Efficacy can be reduced with each layer added between a coach and athlete as cues for expression, intention, and tone are also reduced.

Face-to-face video calling provides more cues than voice-only calling, which provides more than live texting, and then asynchronous texting, etc. Remote coaches have lots of communication tools to choose from but getting as close to “face-to-face in-person” as possible supplemented by other tools minimizes this barrier to relationship building.

Remote coaches need to be more thoughtful and creative in how they build their relationships and garner feedback. Listening carefully and knowing what to ask and how to frame questions are important skills.

## SAFETY

The Community Coaching Manual outlines risks and safety measures to consider while training. Remote coaches may be sending athletes out to train in an unsupervised and unstructured environment. The safety measures outlined should still be carefully considered and communicated to athletes.

It is good practice for remote coaches to have a formal discussion around training safety with their athletes. This could be part of onboarding for a new athlete and included in a remote training waiver. A waiver provides a clear process to set expectations for how your work together translates into practice.

Including safety information in writing with an athlete acknowledgment (“I have read this”) is a great way to protect yourself. Remote coaches cannot control the training environment or assess all the potential risks. The athlete needs to be given more ownership over their own safety.

Regular reminders on best practices and check-ins on safety should still be included in day-to-day communications.

## DATA ANALYSIS/ COACHING TOOLS

Being outside of the training environment, remote coaches need to be more reliant on data collected from a wide variety of devices and subjective feedback from the athlete. There are many tools available to collect data on an athlete’s training or competition performance.

“Training Peaks” is a long-time partner with Triathlon Canada and is a good example of the kind of software that can be used to communicate and monitor training programs. “Strava” is another good example of a highly utilized platform that exploded during the pandemic. In 2022 they announced over 100 million users, having nearly doubled in 2020/2021. Now into 2024, you can get “smart” everything from trainers and pedals, to watches and rings, to goggles. These kinds of services and tools are becoming embedded in sport culture.

While these tools can be used very effectively, there is a cost. Remote coaches are expected to be experts on a myriad of platforms and tools. Athletes and coaches can be selective on what they’re comfortable with or want to use. Subscriptions, admin, hardware, technical support, time learning new systems, etc., all add up.

Technology also continues to advance at an astonishing rate. Staying current is very difficult. Planning use of technology, prioritizing data that can be applied in a meaningful way, and communicating expectations in this area are all important considerations.

There are great education tools out there on how to maximize a given platform or tool. For example, Training Peaks provides online courses on how to get the most out of their products and has a great technical support service for troubleshooting issues. It is worth looking into these kinds of supplementary support systems for whatever you're using to really get the best value out of these products.

## NETWORKING

Many of our top coaches in the country utilize a hybrid coaching model to support athletes on track for the Olympic or Paralympic Games. They can support these top performing athletes by building a network around them. While they may not be able to be present in the daily training environment all the time, they tap into other resources to manage identified gaps and gain external feedback beyond athlete self-reporting. This can cover a wide variety of aspects that support the success of the athlete or enhance their training and health, from integration into local clubs to sessions with technical experts and medical professionals such as strength and conditioning coaches, nutritionists, physiotherapists, counselors, and doctors.

Triathlon is a unique sport because of the integration of three distinct disciplines. A great triathlon coach isn't necessarily an expert in all three sports. Being able to effectively build a plan that balances the demands of all three disciplines and prioritizes health within the scope of the overall season is much more important. Tapping into subject area experts is a common and highly effective practice and can be a great way for remote coaches to enhance the services they offer to their athletes.

Communicating with those coaches or experts directly is key. For example, go a step beyond recommending a local club to your athletes and make semi-regular contact with the club coach. Make them a part of your team and use their feedback to enhance your understanding of what your athlete is doing.