



THE EXCEPTIONAL PROGRAM

The Six Beliefs of Exceptional
Athletic Programs
(But most never think about
them)

BUILD BETTER ATHLETES.
DEVELOP BETTER PEOPLE.

THE WIN NOBODY IS TALKING ABOUT.

Every athletic program invests in performance.

Practices develop skills.
Competition develops experience.
Seasons create memories.

But the athletic department should always be developing something else, too.

Confidence.
Resilience.
Leadership.
Relationships.
Identity.
Purpose.

An athletic program is one of a school's most visible classrooms, shaping who student athletes are becoming.

Exceptional programs embrace that responsibility intentionally.

Thank you for investing a few minutes in this guide.



My hope is that it sparks conversations across your athletic program and helps you look differently at the work you're already doing—becoming even more intentional about the impact it can have long after the final whistle.

—Scott Roussell
After We Play
Founder



EVERY PROGRAM HAS TWO MISSIONS.

One is easy to see.

Win games.
Develop athletes.
Build teams.
Compete for championships.

The other is less visible.

Build confidence.
Create belonging.
Develop leaders.
Strengthen relationships.
Help young people discover
who they are beyond
their sport.

Both matter.

Competitive excellence gives
athletes something to pursue
and something meaningful to
carry forward.



The most exceptional athletic
programs don't choose
between performance
and people.

**They intentionally develop
both.**

The six beliefs that follow
define what it means to build
that kind of program.



01 PURPOSE

Exceptional programs believe athletics should develop something bigger than athletic ability.

Winning, competition and excellence matter.

But the greater value is who athletes become along the way.

A clear purpose aligns decisions, coaches and families around one question:

What do we hope every student-athlete gains from being part of this program?



**PURPOSE GIVES
PERFORMANCE A
BIGGER REASON**

We've all seen
this happen . . .

A successful coach joins the department. The teams win, but athletes begin defining success by results.

At the next coaches' meeting, the Athletic Director asks:

"What do we want our athletes to become because they played here?"

The conversation changes. So does the program.

That's the Exceptional Program.

REFLECTION

If every coach in your department were asked why your athletic program exists, how similar would their answers be?



02 BELONGING

Exceptional programs believe every student athlete should feel seen, valued and connected.

Belonging isn't the same as being on a roster. It's knowing you have a place—that your presence and contribution matter.

Athletes thrive when they feel connected and part of something bigger than themselves.

Exceptional programs don't leave belonging to chance. They build it through relationships, traditions, mentorship and everyday moments that say: You matter here.

“**Being on the team isn't the same as feeling part of it.**”



We've all seen
this happen . . .

A freshman enters the locker room on the first day. Everyone else already seems to belong.

No one is intentionally excluding them—but no one is welcoming them either.

A veteran player notices and says, “You’re with us.”

One small moment changes everything.

That’s the Exceptional Program.

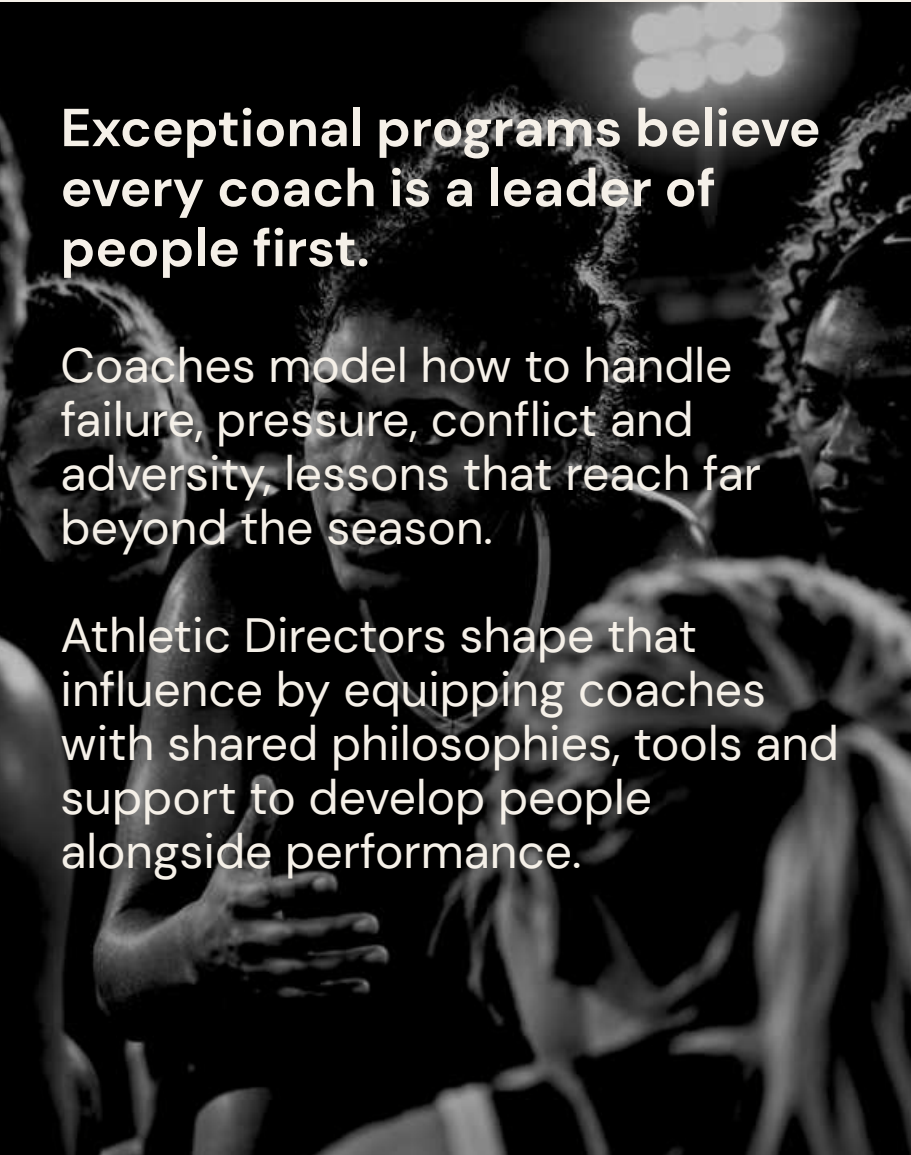
REFLECTION

If you could go back to your first year as an athlete, what would have immediately made you feel like you belonged?



03

LEADERSHIP



Exceptional programs believe every coach is a leader of people first.

Coaches model how to handle failure, pressure, conflict and adversity, lessons that reach far beyond the season.

Athletic Directors shape that influence by equipping coaches with shared philosophies, tools and support to develop people alongside performance.

“**Every coach is teaching more than the game.**”

We’ve all seen
this happen . . .

Two athletes make nearly identical mistakes.

One coach turns the moment into a lesson. Another responds with criticism.

Both want accountability, but only one builds the athlete in the process.

The Athletic Director ensures that every athlete is developed by the same standards, regardless of the coach or team.

That’s the Exceptional Program.

REFLECTION

How consistently do your coaches understand and demonstrate what leadership should look like across your entire athletic program?



04

WELL-BEING

Exceptional programs believe the person behind the athlete matters as much as performance.

Today's athletes carry pressures—from academics and social media to anxiety, relationships and fear of failure—that don't disappear at practice.

Supporting well-being doesn't mean lowering expectations. It means creating an environment where athletes can meet challenges, grow and get support when they need it.

“**The strongest programs see the person behind the performance.**”

We've all seen
this happen . . .

Practice ends and one athlete stays behind.

Instead of assuming it's about performance, the coach asks, “How are you doing, really?”

The answer has nothing to do with sports, and soon the athlete is connected with someone who can help.

The coach didn't need to be a therapist. They needed to notice.

That's the Exceptional Program.

REFLECTION

If an athlete in your program were struggling with something no one could see, how confident are you that an adult would notice, and know what to do next?



05

PARTNERSHIP

Exceptional programs believe athlete development is a shared responsibility.

Athletes are shaped by families, coaches, teachers, teammates and mentors. When those influences compete, athletes feel the tension. When they share a bigger purpose, athletes feel the support.

Exceptional programs create that alignment, helping everyone understand their role in developing the whole athlete.



Alignment doesn't mean everyone agrees. It means everyone knows what matters.

We've all seen
this happen . . .

A parent sends an angry email after a difficult game.

Instead of becoming defensive, the Athletic Director listens, clarifies expectations and returns to their shared goal: helping the athlete grow.

The parent may not get what they wanted, but they understand the why.

Trust replaces tension.

That's the Exceptional Program.

REFLECTION

How intentionally does your program help coaches, families and administrators see themselves as partners in the same athlete development mission?



06

LEGACY

Exceptional programs measure success by what athletes carry with them long after the season ends.

Championships, records and banners matter. But the greatest legacy shows up in how former athletes lead, face adversity, build relationships and contribute to their communities

Every athlete eventually plays a final game.

Who will they be when it's over?



**THE REAL LEGACY
OF ATHLETICS
WALKS OUT THE
DOOR WITH YOUR
GRADUATES.**

**We've all seen
*this happen . . .***

Years after graduation, a former athlete returns to campus.

They barely remember the scores or statistics. But they remember the coach who believed in them, learning how to lose without quitting, and discovering they could lead.

The trophy is long gone.

The lesson isn't.

That's the Exceptional Program.

REFLECTION

Five years after graduation, who do you hope your athletes say your program helped them become?



THE JOURNEY CONTINUES.

The Exceptional Program is not a finish line.

It is a commitment renewed every season through the coaches you hire, culture you create and relationships you strengthen.

Beyond schedules, budgets and competition is a bigger opportunity: shaping young people during some of their most formative years.

Build a program that pursues excellence without losing sight of the person pursuing it.

CHOOSE YOUR NEXT STEP



ATHLETE

Build confidence.
Create your game plan.



PARENT

Connect beyond the sidelines.
Deepen your relationship.



COACH

Transform your team.
Develop better athletes and better people.



CLUB LEADER

Build a High-Impact Club.
Create a lasting legacy.



ATHLETIC DIRECTOR

Shape an Exceptional Program.
Create a culture that lasts.

