



Playing Underclassmen Ahead of Seniors

This resource stems from a question submitted to the Ask PCA blog. Responses come from our experts including PCA Trainers, who lead live group workshops for coaches, parents, administrators and student-athletes.

“One of my player’s parents wants to know why it is fair to bring up a freshman or sophomore to play in front of their daughter, who is a senior. What is the best way to handle this?”

PCA Response by Lisa Christiansen, PCA Trainer–New York

The best way to handle this situation is to prevent it from happening. As a varsity coach, in my pre-season meeting with players and parents, I explain that excellence is the goal for our program and that a player’s age rarely influences my playing time decisions.

In the pre-season meeting, I explain the PCA Double-Goal Coach model, where the first goal is winning, and the second, more-important goal is life lessons through sports. Then, I encourage them to be “Second-Goal Parents,” who look at the big picture and understand the roles that they and the coaches play in teaching lessons that will lead to success in life beyond sports.

If you have not explained your playing-time criteria and you are now facing these questions about “fairness,” you may need to have some difficult conversations. You will need to explain your criteria, emphasizing a meritocracy.

Be prepared to specify the measures you are judging, such as statistics, effort in practice, or team chemistry, and be able to provide a mix of examples illustrating where the player meets or exceeds your criteria and where she falls short. Avoid direct comparisons between the senior in question and any of her teammates.

If the athletes themselves don’t understand playing time criteria, I encourage them to ask for a meeting with their coach to discuss the situation. And I hope parents encourage the same thing, because student-athletes who take this step are more likely to feel empowered, part of the process, responsible and able to advocate for themselves in future circumstances, such as employment, where there is even more at stake than playing time.

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