

How to Coach the Millennial Student-Athlete: Part I

(a partial review of *Grown up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*, Tapscott, 2008)

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The Millennial generation (or Net Gen) is here! The "digital age" has brought a new kind of student-athlete to your campus, classroom, and team... and these Millennials are here for years to come.

The Millennials are a group of special, sheltered, smart, optimistic, and incredibly "busy" athletes who come to your team with their "stealth fighter" parents at their side to help with their every decision.

Millennial student-athletes have been told that they are the best, the brightest, and capable of almost anything. But wait . . . is this good or bad?

As a coach, how do you best relate to future recruits and current athletes who have watched "reality" TV their entire lives, have always viewed professional athletes in the Olympics, and have never known the existence of the Soviet Union (Howe & Strauss, 2007)?

For many coaches there may be a "generation gap" when working and communicating with current athletes. Then again, it can be argued that there has always been this "gap" across generations.

As a coach trying to adapt to this new generation of players, what should you expect? What can you expect?

How do you best relate to this Millennial student-athlete?

And how do you best coach, mentor, empower, and challenge this group of athletes?

While each athlete is unique, be prepared for your athletes to have high expectations of you and your coaching. Also, expect more parental involvement than ever before. And, as much as you might desire the Net Geners to "pay their dues"... many Net Geners may lack the perseverance and long-term commitment that you are looking for.

Oh, and one more thing . . . the Millennials will expect sincerity, integrity, honesty, and a positive environment in which to work and play. In short, the Net Geners are looking for a collaborative environment in which coaches and athletes work with and learn from one another.



THE 8 NET GENERATION NORMS

According to Tapscott (2009), there are eight Net Generation Norms:

1. They want **Freedom** in everything they do . . . from freedom of choice to freedom of expression-- channels, product, brands, jobs, and even how they express themselves . . . the Millennials take their many choices for granted.
2. They love to **Customize** and personalize -- everything from desktops, websites, ring tones, screen savers, to their own entertainment.
3. They are the new **Scrutinizers** -- things need to be of quality and they are watching closely on products and the delivery of these products . . . including your coaching.

4. They look for **Integrity and Openness** when deciding what to buy and where to play. Millennials look closely at whether or not your values align with their own . . . they can always go somewhere else.
5. They want **Entertainment and Play** in their work, education, sport, and social life . . . this generation has been raised on "interactive experiences" (video games) and entertainment media (reality television).
6. They are the **Collaboration and Relationship** generation -- just look at Facebook, Myspace, texting, You Tube, etc.
7. They have a **Need for Speed** -- rapid communication is the norm . . . an instant message demands a quick, if not instant response.
8. They are the **Innovators** -- everyone wants the new Blackberry or iPhone - not because the old is "outdated or not cool" but because the newer products can do more stuff . . . Millennials want to be around people who are incorporating innovative ways of teaching, mentoring, and coaching.



6 SUGGESTIONS FOR COACHING THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION ATHLETE

So, how do you coach this new generation of student and athlete? Tapscott (2009) has offered six suggestions for working with the Millennial generation. What follows are these suggestions as they might be applied to coaching:

1. **Empower your athletes to collaborate** - encourage athletes to work with each other to accomplish tasks, resolve conflict, and develop "new ways" for attaining team goals . . . give them a say in developing workouts, practices, and team schedules. Allow for plenty of creativity and spontaneity.
2. **Rethink authority** - remain the clear leader but know that in some areas it may be beneficial to let the Net Gen athlete become the teacher . . . and remember appreciation, recognition, challenge, and praise must be authentic.
3. **Reinvent yourself as a coach and customize your coaching** - How can you be more relational, collaborative, sincere, positive, tech savvy, empowering, engaging, experiential, open (transparent), fun, innovative, and trusting? Look for new ways to inject fun into your practices . . . you might even consider "entertainment" as a part of your coaching.
4. **Develop a strong "family"** - just talking about the importance of family is not going to be enough . . . you must become "family". Prioritize spending quality time with your players and developing two-way communication, mutual trust, and respect for every player and coach in the family.
5. **Forget the "guilt trip"** . . . It won't work with your athletes -- a guilt trip will likely be perceived by your athletes as a sign that you "misunderstand" this generation. For many Net Geners guilt equates to "you don't care" or "you don't understand".
6. **Be a person of strong character and integrity** - be honest, considerate, accountable, and transparent. This generation loves to know the "real you". "No BS to the generation with finely tuned BS detectors" (p.288).



In closing, we will leave you to ponder the following question: ***Will you coach this new generation to meet you and your ways of coaching or will you change your coaching strategies to better meet the desires of the Millennial generation?***

You will likely have to do both . . . but think about the qualities and characteristics of this new generation and begin to strategize how you might better connect, empower, build up, and challenge these Net Geners toward greater responsibility and accountability.

In Part II of this article, you will be presented with nine additional ways to "coach up" and better connect with your athletes. An important goal will be to capitalize on the strengths of this generation while, at the same time, remaining true to your own coaching strengths.

So... how do you best relate to this generation of student- athlete? Well, what do you think?

Don Tapscott (2008). Grown up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World

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