

# SUPPORTING NEURODIVERGENT PLAYERS

People who are neurodivergent often have different social preferences, ways of learning, ways of communicating, and/or ways of perceiving their environment. Supporting neurodivergent players starts with a mindset of understanding, flexibility, and respect. Here are a few guiding principles for bringing out the best in everyone:



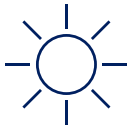
## **Get to Know the Athlete**

Ask how they learn best, what motivates them, and what makes them feel comfortable and confident.



## **Provide Choice and Control**

Support autonomy and reduce anxiety by offering choices about activities, positions, and equipment.



## **Be Mindful of the Environment**

Loud noises, bright lights, or crowded spaces can be overwhelming. Use sensory-friendly spaces whenever possible.



## **Be Clear and Consistent**

Predictability helps reduce anxiety and builds trust. Create a visual schedule and use consistent warm-ups, stations, and cues.



## **Create Structure, But Stay Flexible**

Many players thrive with clear expectations. Routines are important but so is adapting when things don't go as planned.



## **Celebrate Effort, Not Just Results**

Positive reinforcement builds confidence and keeps players engaged.

# COMMON STRENGTHS

It is important to recognize the incredible strengths that neurodivergent players can bring to their teams. When these qualities are nurtured and channeled the right way, these players can become some of the most dedicated, innovative, and inspiring individuals on the team. Many neurodivergent individuals are known for the following strengths:

STRENGTH	WHY IT MATTERS	COACHING STRATEGY
<b>Creativity</b>	Seeing the game differently often leads to clever plays or problem-solving on the fly.	Stay open-minded and allow space for creative and unconventional techniques to emerge.
<b>Pattern Recognition</b>	The ability to quickly read, recognize, and react to common situations is important at all levels.	Create game-like scenarios in practice. Provide constructive feedback to reinforce patterns.
<b>Hyperfocus</b>	The ability to focus intensely on a specific skill, position, or game situation.	Pay attention to passions and engage players in activities that interest them.
<b>Energy &amp; Empathy</b>	Their enthusiasm can lift the entire team's spirit.	Provide plenty of opportunities for leadership and social connection between players.
<b>Resilience</b>	Navigating a world that sometimes misunderstands them builds grit.	Be sure to celebrate effort, progress, and personal growth in addition to performance.

# COMMON CHALLENGES

Of course, neurodivergent players may face challenges and social barriers as well. These aren't flaws, they're signals for support. With understanding and a few adaptations, coaches and other stakeholders can help these players feel more confident in their abilities. Here are some common challenges and coaching strategies to consider:

STRENGTH	WHY IT MATTERS	COACHING STRATEGY
<b>Sustaining Attention</b>	Directing and sustaining attention can be challenging for some players.	Use stations to keep groups small and activities short. Consider creating movement breaks between reps (jumping jacks, celebration dances, secret handshakes, etc.).
<b>Complex Instructions</b>	Long or complicated instructions may strain working memory.	Introduce activities using a First/Then approach. For example: "First scoop up the ball, Then make a pass". Use teammates to model each step of the activity.
<b>Sensory Overload</b>	Sensitivity to noise, texture, or light may affect focus and comfort.	Designate a sensory zone where players can go to self-regulate and reset. Allow for stimming or fidgeting to help players calm themselves.
<b>Social Challenges</b>	Communication differences can impact teamwork and peer relationships.	Address these challenges with understanding and empathy to ensure players aren't unfairly penalized for differences beyond their control.
<b>Confidence &amp; Autonomy</b>	Sudden changes to schedules, lineups, or game plans can affect confidence.	Be proactive with planning and communication. Offer choices and provide opportunities for peer-to-peer leadership.

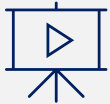
# INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Every player brings something special to the team, and that includes how they see the game, build their skills, and perform on gameday. Coaching neurodivergent players doesn't mean doing more, but it does mean doing things a bit differently. A few small changes can make a huge impact:



## Break Things Down

Complex sequences can be overwhelming. Teach skills in small chunks, one or two instructions at a time, instead of all at once.



## Show, Don't Just Tell

Provide multiple learning methods including live demonstrations, visual aids, or short videos to reinforce what you're teaching.



## Ask, Don't Assume

Check in with athletes and ask about their preferences, needs, and goals. When players feel heard, they're more likely to engage.



## Set the Example

Players will follow your lead, so stay positive and supportive when managing behavior.

**IMPORTANT:** Remember that every person is unique, and that neurodivergent players will have a wide spectrum of strengths and challenges. These strategies may work well for certain players but not for others.