

# Out of the Huddle, Into the Delivery Room (Or, How to Coach a Pregnant Partner)

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I remember listening to a Bill Cosby comedy sketch as a kid. His wife was having a baby, and Bill's job was cheerleader: "Push it out. Shove it out. Way out!"

Gentlemen, our roles in the delivery room have changed during the last thirty years. We are no longer cheerleaders, merely standing on the sidelines of birth, rooting for Mom to do her best. There's a reason we're called coaches, guys. In this game, we're right there on the field with Mom. We prep our star athlete. We help devise the plays. And, come game time, we've got a job to do.

So, put down those pom-poms, and pick up that clipboard. You've got a baby to deliver!

To get off to a winning nine-month season, culminating with a championship game in about forty weeks, you must have a game plan. Here's one that seems to work:

## 1) Practice, Practice, Practice

No matter how talented a star athlete is, if she's unprepared going into the big game, she's going to have a tough time. That's why every coach's mantra must be, "Practice, practice, practice." Your job as delivery coach is to support your superstar, to be there for her, and, most importantly, to prepare her for delivery.

If you've read about delivery preparation, watched videos on it, or taken any prenatal classes, you probably have learned techniques to help Mom-to-Be through difficult contractions, active labor, and transition.

These techniques are your plays, the backbone of your offense. Your partner won't be able to access these plays come game time unless she's practiced them... with her coach. Talk with her, and help her decide which techniques she feels will benefit her most during labor.

Once you've both decided on your plays, write them down. Every last one. Any technique that you feel may remotely benefit Mom. This will be your "play book". It will be crucial to your success as Coach.

You should run through your play book nightly. Practice breathing. Do it just like you would during labor. A good coach once told me, "You'll never do it right in a game, unless you do it right during practice." Help your woman into the different positions you've discussed: squatting, slow dancing, using the birthing ball, whatever's in the play book. Get a clock and try the positions and movements for the length of an actual contraction (60 seconds or so).

Practice the massage and touch techniques you'll be responsible for. Talk her through visualization exercises. Practicing visualization is imperative, so you won't feel pressure to make something up on the spot, mid-game in the delivery room that does nothing for Mom. Learn what she reacts best to: picturing the baby, a cool mountain stream, the streets of Paris.

Don't forget, you can add any new plays to your playbook that you learn or discover, as well as remove those that tend not to work. Discuss these with your partner. An open line of communication is important.

## 2) Talk Through Pre-Game Jitters

The key to any good coach-player relationship is an open line of communication. It's also key to a good labor. Just like an athlete, your partner, no matter how prepared, will no doubt have pre-game jitters. Hollywood has painted an unnerving picture of the birthing process. Stories about 36 hour labors and perineum tears don't help the cause.

Sit your partner down and get the concerns out in the open. Ask her how she feels about the big day. Then, help her build her confidence in the areas she's doubting. A good coach knows his player's weaknesses, but emphasizes her strengths: "Remember how you vowed you'd never fly again? But, when your sister needed you, what did you do? You got right back on that plane without thinking twice. When it comes down to it, you not only face, but you conquer your fears."

Help get her to a point where she doesn't think she can do this, but she knows that she has what it takes to meet her delivery goals. Pump her up to

the point where she says, “I can do this. I will do this. There is no other option.”

Like an athlete, 90% of the game is mental. Getting her to embrace success could be crucial later. Because once you’ve established that this is possible, it’s only a matter of reminding her during delivery, instead of having to convince her that she’ll be able to push this baby out on her own.

Also, find out now, beforehand, what she thinks she may need during labor. You’ll want to arrive prepared: robe, slippers, food, type of drink (my wife survived on cranberry juice), back massagers, photos, hot pads, ice packs, a mat, special pillows, etc... Brainstorm together.

These items are your “sideline essentials”. List your sideline essentials in your playbook, then be sure to accumulate (and eventually bring) them all. Odds are you’ll need only a fraction of what you take, but you never know which fraction until you’re in the midst of labor.

Talking was not the best use of my wife’s precious energy during labor. She was more of a grunter and signaler. Set up a form of communication beforehand (nods, hand signs, finger gestures). Think of a coach giving his batter hand signals or a player asking if she should run play “J” or “7”. It saves time, energy, and makes life easier for both of you.

Don’t forget, a good coach listens to his player. If you give her the opportunity, she’ll have plenty to tell you. If she thinks of a new sideline essential or a new play, add them to the playbook. If she is compelled to tell you her baby dream from last night, listen to it. If she says she needs help around the house, vacuum, clean, dust, whatever.

### 3) Game Time

This is it. It’s what you two have prepared for. You remember all that practice? All those signs and signals you developed? Now, it’s time to employ them. Your woman has a lot to go through during the labor. It’s your responsibility as her coach to guide her to victory. Communicate with her during this time. You’ll need to read her, decipher her signals and body language. She may not use words to tell you what’s going on, but she will communicate.

How much you've practiced, how often you discussed your plays and signs, how well you know how to utilize your sideline essentials, will be evident now as you try to communicate during labor. If you are well-prepared, you'll know what she needs. You'll know what to ask. And, you'll know when she needs you to zip it, so she can get some rest. Ultimately, your star will do what she feels works best for her when push comes to push harder. But, the more you've practiced and the more tools the two of you have at your disposal, the more she'll have to choose from when she's grasping for straws.

Remember all of that confidence-building you worked on, letting her realize that she knows she'll be victorious? Now that she's in labor, there's a good chance she'll look at you with glassy eyes and moan, "I can't do this." The more you've worked on this earlier, the easier it will be now.

Look her right in the eyes and remind her. "Yes, you can. You remember, you told me you knew you might doubt yourself, but you also told me you'd get through it. You can do this." Athletic coaches call this tough love: "Yes, you can. Now, get back out there and win this game."

It was incredible when I used this with my wife. The glassy look disappeared. Determination took its place. And, she said, more to herself than to me, "I can do this. I will do this."

If you're not sure what your woman needs, ask simple questions she can answer with a "yes" or "no", or with a single word: "Do you want more juice?", "Would you like to walk or rock?", "Are you cold?" Conserving energy will benefit your partner, you, and the baby.

Read her body language. You know this woman better than anybody else in the room. If she's perspiring, cool her down. Keep her hydrated. And, let her rest between contractions.

Labor can be confusing, and your woman may not know what she needs. Your job is to figure it out. The coach needs to see the big picture. I remember my wife's face in a tight frown between every contraction, when she should have been resting. I touched her jaw and forehead and whispered, "Relax between contractions." That was all it took. She relaxed and was able to rest easier between plays.

If she's whimpering, tell her to bring down the sounds to low, deep moans. If she can't, you do them. She'll soon be copying you. The moans will lower her stress and anxiety.

#### 4) Remembering the Victory

This will never happen again. Sure, you may have another baby, but each birth experience differs from the last. Ask any coach who's been to more than one Super Bowl or World Series, no matter how much you plan, each game is unique. So, be in the moment. Focus on your partner, but also try to collect incidents and phrases during labor, because your woman will miss much of what has gone on around her.

Try to grasp and store the reality of the delivery, because it's so easy to forget so much of it, due to the intensity of it all. Be your partner's recorder. Spark her memories. Tell her what happened behind the scenes.

Just five minutes after our daughter was born, as my wife held her in her arms, the nurses cleaned and straightened and tidied. I looked around and said, "That was weird." Everyone stopped and looked at me, but my wife agreed. It didn't feel like what had just happened, had really happened. It was almost like we'd just finished watching it all on TV, or maybe like an experience someone had told us. Talk about surreal.

Remember as much as you can. Tell your star all you record. Write down anything you think you may forget, but hope you never do.

When it comes down to it, your player's going to make the final decisions. A good coach will give his player a myriad of tools and all the situations he can conjure. But, when push comes to "Get this baby out of me", your star player will make the final choices. She will determine how the game is won. If you've coached her well, her choices will be based on your playbook, good judgment, and cool thinking.

And, when the final play is done, and the fans have left the stadium, hold that trophy in your arms, cherish it, and take it and your star player home where you can relish on your incredible winning season and the strong team you've become. Good game, Coach.