

DON'T SAY DON'T

Tell the brain what to do, not what to avoid—it only sees the command.

Players are constantly told what not to do every day by parents, teachers, and coaches. Don't talk back. Don't fidget. Don't fight with your brother. Don't slide low to high. Don't ball watch. Don't be silent. Don't force the ball. Don't turn the ball over. Don't all cut at once. Don't shoot at the goalie. Don't hit the goalie. Don't pass to the goalie. Don't hang your head. Don't be afraid. Don't think of pink elephants. Don't think of pink elephants. Don't think of pink elephants.

We can't tell the human brain not to do something. Whenever we put something in the negative, we're often reinforcing the idea instead of pushing it away. Are you still thinking of pink elephants? If we see signs that say, "wet paint, don't touch," how many of us want to check and see if the paint is really wet? We always want to do what comes after the word don't.

Professional skiers have no trouble navigating through trees and zig-zagging around them. How do they do it? If they tell themselves, "Don't hit a tree, don't hit a tree," they focus on the trees. What happens then? They'll hit the tree because that's all they're paying attention to.

Instead, they tell themselves, "Follow the path—follow the path," and the path becomes the only thing they see. Suddenly, all the trees fade away, and they ski smoothly along the path.

At your next practice, track how many times you hear the coaching staff say the word don't. If you are like many that I've listened to, it will be between forty and one hundred forty times in a ninety-minute practice. Yes, I counted—and no, I won't name the coaches.

I hope that each time you say the word don't, it will challenge you to think about how you could reframe that thought into a desired outcome. Involve your team to help you become a better coach. You can tell them:

"The coaches always want to teach you what to do and not what not to do. We want you to help us be better coaches, so if we use the word 'don't', please stop us and ask, 'What do you want us to do, coach?'"

Here are some simple changes:

Don't force the ball	Value the ball or make smart passes
Don't hang your head	Keep your head up
Don't all cut at once	Time your cuts
Don't swing your stick	Control your checks
Don't push	Maintain hands or stay strong
Don't shoot with low angle	Get to the middle or good vs. great shot
Don't cut	Keep your space
Don't slide low to high	Stay on your man or slide at the 12
Don't ball watch	See both or keep your head on a swivel
Don't hit the goalie	Shoot to net or Shoot to a square. Instead of aiming for a corner, how about one square of net in the corner.

Don't Be Afraid or Don't Be Scared

It is important to address this specific phrase a bit more here. Fear cannot be turned off completely for every shot by goalies. There will be times when fear sneaks in—especially for younger and newer goalies. Even the best pro goalies show signs of fear on some shots.

Goalies often do not want to admit they're scared. They may feel it's a sign of weakness—or fear judgment. So, what should we do when we see a goalie showing signs of fear? The worst thing we can say is, “Don't be afraid!” or “Don't be scared!”

Aside from the word don't, these phrases are dismissive—and do not address the root of the problem. Fear isn't something we can switch off all the time in goal. Worse, if we say this from across the field, all the other players hear, and now look at the goalie who was scared on one shot.

When we notice signs of fear on a shot, we need to be quick to encourage and remind them to focus on the release, stay ready, and prepare for the next shot. It's about staying present—and not dwelling on what happened before.

This approach works better because it gives them something concrete to focus on—the next shot. It shifts their attention from the fear itself to the task at hand.

It's important for us to talk and guide them through the fear. The ultimate goal is to help them experience fear less often. It's a process—not a quick fix. It takes time, patience, and understanding.

PAUSE & PONDER

For Coaches

- How often do you catch yourself using the word don't in practice or games?
- What positive or action-focused phrases could you substitute for your most common "don't" statements?
- Do you involve your players in helping you reframe negative language? How could you start?

For Goalies

- How do you react when a coach or teammate says "Don't be afraid" or "Don't mess up"?
- What is one positive phrase you want to start telling yourself this season instead of a "don't"?
- How can you train your own inner voice to avoid "don't" and focus on "do" (e.g., "track the ball," "stay balanced")?

For Parents

- How often do you catch yourself saying "don't" to your child during sports—or in everyday life?
- What effect do you think it has on your child when you phrase things in the negative rather than the positive?
- How can you help your child reframe moments of fear, frustration, or mistakes into actionable next steps?

For Players

- How does it change your mindset when instructions are framed as "do this" instead of "don't do that"?
- When you hear "don't" during practice or games, what picture immediately pops into your head?
- How can you train yourself to flip negative thoughts ("don't miss") into positive ones ("aim small, hit small")?