



The Academy for Sport Leadership Case Study  
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Category: Self-Awareness / Coach Performance

## Bursting the Bubble: Feeling Like a Fake

The late September sky beamed a radiant gold. Not bright gold. But a gold that reminds us of the stars of affirmation our pre-school teacher stuck on our papers. Yes, the September sky looks the same every year. But we need reminders of the beauty of not only sun rises and sun sets, but the sun's daily hue. The clouds carve out their own image, as if to invite the viewer to discern between the September Gold or Arctic White—which color is the background which is the foreground. Or are the bursts of color simply overlapping? Only time will tell.

Kennedy Porter is a “rising star” in the coaching ranks. After only two seasons she has accumulated 35 wins to 15 losses. She was the conference coach of the year this past season. “She’s only getting started” her athletic director reminds everyone.

But in her mind doubt emerges. Maybe she’s as good as her athletic director suggests. But why then, does she not feel like she’s a success?

Kennedy’s father prepared her to coach. He coached for thirty two years; always eager to share his coaching life with her. Isn’t it enough that her coaching upbringing extends two decades of daily nurturance? You’d think it was enough when added to her early career successes. But her accomplishments fail to adjust her sense of self-worth; she’s blind to her unique abilities to coach.

Kennedy feels like a fake. She fears next season. She has created in her mind a suspicion that she’s not good enough and lives in dread that she’ll be exposed next season. “I was lucky this past season, but my luck has to end sometime. Then everyone will know I’m not up to the job.”

Deep inside Kennedy fears that she is an imposter who will eventually be discovered. In many walks of life there are high achievers who believe they are complete fakes. To the outside observer, these individuals appear to be exceptionally accomplished. Despite their achievements, however, these people truly believe they are frauds. Where does this doubt come from? Psychologists call it *neurotic imposture*—the imposter phenomenon.

Some Hardworking coaches, talented as they are, believe they don’t deserve their success. Rather than accepting the accolades that accompany success, coaches like Kennedy attribute their successes to luck, serendipity, timing, knowing the right contacts, family, or just “looking” the part. They apologetically accept the approval and applause that that chews them up inside.

The darkness comes equipped with feelings of self-doubt and anxiety, though less noticeable when a coach is beginning their career, when they occupy a lower rung on the coaching ladder. But once a coach becomes a head coach, or highly visible assistant—everything she or he does is scrutinized. Scrutiny by one’s self and others demands, as it were, is to be considered an end unto itself.

## **Fear Becomes Reality**

Unfortunately for Kennedy, she's certain her fears will emerge and get the best of her and the team at a point in time no one knows. Because of her negative thoughts and feeling, Kennedy will go to great lengths to avoid mistakes or failures. Self-doubt does, at times, render her motionless, unable to deal with uncertainty.

The Imposter Phenomenon appears unannounced. So when Kennedy faces a tough opponent she questions whether or not she knows how to win. If she loses, the next day she operates with a high degree of nervousness and abrasiveness. This spills over in to interpersonal interactions. Little things ignite a fire. Tension heats up and feedback is delivered in a skewed manner, thereby distorting communication. It's as if this were a punishment for Kennedy, her coaches, and the players.

While this experience might be part of the experience of every coach, the coach afflicted with the Imposter Phenomenon is more likely to make poor decisions and then to compound their decisions by neglecting the outcome and failing to recognize and repair the damage. In Kennedy's case, she might feel she let her Dad down and because of errant thoughts she digs in her heels and forces everyone to work overtime to ensure she lives up to her father's expectations. This is a self-defeating behavior; teams don't play to win one for the coach's father.

Paradoxically, the Imposter Phenomenon does not actually prevent Kennedy from having success, but she's very likely to not achieve all she is capable of achieving. Lacking a realistic sense of her own competencies, it's likely she does not possess a way to internalize her coaching strengths. Imposter feelings make it likely that she'll have difficulty internalizing positive feedback and underestimate her capabilities. Failing to deal with the Imposter Phenomenon has consequences for Kennedy, her staff, and her players. However, despite its covert nature, the Imposter Phenomenon abnormality is solvable by understanding more about it and designing thoughts and actions that are likely to have a powerful influence on change.

## **Team Conversation**

Conversation is an experience. In fact, in many cases it's the dominant action—think staff meeting. Take this opportunity to explore and understand a better way to communicate and learn from one another through conversation. Have each member of the staff read the short case and then answer the questions below. Once all coaches are prepared, dig deep and discuss. Learning will emerge out of the interaction among the coaches.

Priming the pump: *"We are all capable of believing things which we know to be untrue, and then, when we are finally proved wrong, imprudently twisting the facts so as to show that we were right."* —George Orwell

- Once minds are made up, it is hard to change them. What are the implications (short and long) of the imposter phenomenon?
- Knowing how the Imposter Phenomenon works, what assumptions need to be challenged in order for Kennedy to break through this condition?
- Family dynamics are considered, in some cases, as a contributing factor. What inferences might you make regarding Kennedy's background?
- Overconfidence might be the flip side of the Imposter Phenomenon. What assumptions might you use to validate this claim? How might you and your staff combat overconfidence?