

The Spotlight Burns: Hypervisibility, Identity Compression, and Internalized Competition

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Date: 6/4/2025

Before we dive in, let's define the core terms that shape this conversation:

- **Hypervisibility** is the experience of being constantly seen, judged, and turned into a symbol—often because of a marginalized identity—without being fully supported. It feels like being under a spotlight that exposes flaws, but rarely offers warmth.
- **Identity Compression** refers to the process of shrinking or muting parts of yourself to fit into dominant norms. It's not just about masking—it's about survival through self-erasure.
- **Internalized Competition** arises when people from marginalized groups feel they must outperform or distance themselves from others like them to gain acceptance. It turns belonging into a zero-sum game.

When you're from a minority group, whether that's gender, race, neurotype, disability, or sexuality, you don't just get to walk into a training space and remain unnoticed. You walk in under a microscope created through bias and scarcity.

Minority groups are expected to both represent and assimilate while they are hypervisible and under-resourced at the same time. That combination doesn't just create pressure—it erodes identity.

Performing Belonging: How Exposure Shapes Expression

High exposure often masquerades as opportunity. "It's good you're getting attention," they say, which is dismissive of many legitimate concerns raised by minority communities about overcoaching or other problematic interactions. Furthermore, that attention comes with an unspoken caveat: *accept the interactions or be rejected*.

To be the "good" woman in a male-dominated space, you learn to erase anger, mute fear, and package grief as grit.

To be the "safe" Black athlete, you learn to smile more, speak softer, and carry twice the weight in half the words.

To be the neurodivergent fighter they "trust to compete", you mask, mimic, and manage sensory overload until burnout looks like failure.

When the dominant group praises you for these manipulated responses, it doesn't feel like acceptance—it feels like the trap that forces a reshaping of your personality. Then, even after successfully achieving your goals, you may feel that you cannot reclaim the traits that had to be erased and ignored to do so.

When Minority Groups Fight Each Other to Belong

Toxic competition among members of marginalized groups isn't a character flaw—it's a survival response based around trying to be accepted by the dominant group.

In environments where only some of "us" can be accepted, scarcity becomes identity. The desire to belong to the dominant group breeds quiet rivalries:

- Who's less emotional?
- Who's more technically skilled *and* more palatable?
- Who doesn't "make it about race/gender/etc."?
- Who will allow others to walk over boundaries?
- Who will allow themselves to be tokenized/sexualised/flirted with/allow comments about their bodies etc?
- Who will be the "mom" of the group and care for everyone else?

Worst of all... Who's willing to pretend they're not affected by any of it?

This creates a violent meritocracy of assimilation. Not only do we lose the richness of who we are, we start gatekeeping it from each other.

This internalized toxic competitiveness can be further affected by the dominant group teasing about traits of the marginalized group, as it now points out the "differences" apparent in the individual that may make them rejectable by the group. A common example of this is female-bodied athletes being teased about presenting in any feminine manner in or out of a competitive space.

A classic example and a common one is a female bodied fighter wearing a dress and hearing something like the following, "Hey, you're not allowed to look hot like that, you're one of the guys."

This pressure doesn't only come from the dominant group, it often gets mirrored and perpetuated within minority communities. We see it when women subtly or overtly undermine each other for being "too girly," "too loud," "too soft." We see it when neurodivergent athletes question the legitimacy of others' coping strategies, or when BIPOC athletes are left to compete for limited spots or visibility instead of building shared platforms.

This doesn't have to be our norm.

We, the minority members of the community, do have some control and power here. We can, as a group, decide that we will not participate in these dynamics when they occur. We can model

public solidarity that directly contradicts the scarcity myth. When the dominant culture sees us fighting each other, or tolerating being pitted against each other, it becomes a tacit endorsement of the very system we're trying to dismantle.

Refusing to participate in these dynamics is not just about protecting ourselves; it's about creating a foundation for collective success. If we cannot back each other, we will always be vulnerable to being isolated, tokenized, or dismissed.

We need to stop letting people, whether from the outside or within, define the terms of our relationships with one another. That means naming the dynamics when we see them, offering each other grace, and building a culture that prioritizes inclusion over competition.

Solidarity can look like praising another woman's fight instead of comparing it to yours, naming a peer's growth in front of others, or redirecting praise toward team effort instead of individual rank.

Reflective Prompts for Marginalized Athletes:

- Am I reinforcing competition by distancing myself from others like me?
- When I see someone else succeed, do I feel inspired—or threatened?
- Is my critique of another marginalized person rooted in insecurity or fear of being replaced?
- Have I judged someone for being “too much” or “not enough” of our shared identity?
- Am I performing palatability to gain access—at the expense of authenticity?
- Could this be internalized misogyny, racism, ableism, or another bias I've absorbed to survive?
- How can I publicly support others like me—especially when we're being compared or pitted against each other?
- Have I ever benefited from someone else being diminished? How can I repair that?

Reflective Prompts for Coaches:

- Do I unintentionally reward students who compete with each other instead of those who support one another?
- Have I judged a student for being “too much” or “not enough” for being outside the norm of the dominant group?
- Have I teased a student about being “different” from other fighters?
- Have I outside of the fighting field verbally commented on a student presenting as “feminine”?
- Have I unintentionally pitted two minority members against each other in training or competition?

Encouraged Until Effective: When Support Turns Sour

Another issue that is prevalent is cheering the underdog but not the successful minority. At first, we're the underdog, the brave exception, the promising beginner. We're praised not only for our potential but for how well we reflect the dominant group's belief in their own generosity: *Look how supportive we are of her, of them.*

Then something shifts the moment potential becomes real. The moment we start winning consistently, the encouragement fades... or worse, sours. Jokes sharpen. Feedback becomes harsher/increasingly derogatory or disappears entirely. Or worse, training becomes less about learning and more about proving you are capable of staying "good". The quiet camaraderie of being "one of the good ones" turns to subtle gatekeeping. Coaches and peers who once rooted for us begin to resent our presence.

We call this the **conditional allyship trap**: they're willing to believe in equality *until* they have to feel it, *personally*. Until your win means their loss. Until your presence disrupts the hierarchy they've grown comfortable in.

This is especially apparent in gendered dynamics in combat and performance sports. Many men are fine with the idea of women being equal, until they have to admit a particular woman is equal to *them*. When a woman wins a fight or earns a title that places her in direct comparison with her male peers, her success becomes personally threatening. It exposes insecurities and biases that had been hidden beneath surface-level support.

This isn't just discouraging, it's destabilizing. It teaches marginalized athletes that their success must always be wrapped in gratitude, humility, and non-threatening energy. Because once they stop being inspirational and start being formidable, they are no longer welcome in the same way.

Reflective Prompts for Students:

- Have I noticed a shift in how I'm treated as I improve or win more?
- Do I feel like I need to downplay my success to stay included?
- Has someone I admired stopped offering support after I surpassed them?
- Do I fear that being too skilled will isolate me socially?
- Do I perform humility to avoid being seen as arrogant or "too much"?

Reflective Prompts for Coaches:

- Do I hold space equally for the success of all my students—or does it feel different when one surpasses my expectations?
- Do I unintentionally offer more support to students who feel "safe" or non-threatening?
- Have I ever withdrawn mentorship or praise when someone I taught became better than me or my peers?
- Do I make space for high-performing marginalized athletes to lead, teach, and be celebrated?

Too Much, Not Enough: The Emotional Bind

Women, in particular, are caught in an emotional double-bind in sport and coaching spaces.

“Patriarchy has no use for women who are not useful. And to be useful, you must be manageable. You must not make too much noise.” — bell hooks, *The Will to Change*

If we cry? We’re weak.

If we stay calm? We’re cold.

If we rage? We’re unstable.

If we set boundaries? We’re “too much”.

Emotional expression gets pathologized instead of understood. Further, the tools most coaches have been trained to use work best on emotional responses that *look* like their own—ones they’ve been taught to see as valid. This leaves many of our coaches lacking the correct tools for creating a space where students do not need to change to fit a mold they can respond to.

So grief, fear, and shutdown responses that come from trauma or cultural context get mislabeled as drama, defiance, or dysfunction. This doesn’t just affect performance. It undermines trust, regulation, and safety.

Reflective Prompts for Students:

- Do I feel like I need to manage my emotional expressions to avoid being labeled as weak or unstable?
- Have I ever been afraid to cry, show anger, or express frustration in training?
- Do I feel pressure to package my emotions in ways that make others more comfortable?
- What emotional responses have I been told are “too much,” and where did that messaging come from?
- Have I been rewarded for suppressing my emotions—and what has that cost me?

Reflective Prompts for Coaches:

- Which emotions make me uncomfortable when I see them in students?
- Do I respond differently to emotional intensity based on a student’s gender or identity?
- Have I ever pathologized a student’s emotions instead of exploring what they might need?
- Do I have strategies for co-regulating with students, or do I rely on them to self-manage?
- When have I used labels like “dramatic,” “too sensitive,” or “cold” to avoid my own discomfort?

Sexualization as Social Currency

Another often-unspoken layer of hypervisibility for female fighters is sexualization.

There is a tolerated, and sometimes encouraged, undercurrent where female-presenting fighters are objectified in order to be accepted. Comments on appearance, flirtation passed off as compliments and "jokes" that lean on innuendo. Unnecessary touch/touching without asking to correct something/fix armour. Intentionally trapping or fighting in slow work to get physically close, in a way that wouldn't be logical in full speed or in full armour. Expecting hugs or other kinds of intimate touch. These behaviors are often normalized under the banner of camaraderie or tradition. However, they reinforce power dynamics that erode safety and agency.

For some women, participating in this dynamic becomes a survival tactic that can be based in trauma. If you can't avoid being sexualized, you learn to manage it. You laugh along. You tease back. Perform the role. Why? Because pushing back might mean exclusion, ridicule, being labeled difficult, or physical harm.

"The way trauma affects the brain means some of us fight, some of us flee, some of us freeze. None of those are wrong. They are adaptations." — Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*

This puts athletes in a no-win position: either reject the objectification and risk social isolation, or tolerate it and slowly internalize that being seen is conditional on being desirable. In either case, the fighter's value is shifted away from their skill, resilience, or tactical mind and toward something they did not consent to define them.

This dynamic doesn't just harm women. It distorts the integrity of the training space for everyone.

Here's why this Conversation Matters:

- **Sexualization is often minimized or excused**—especially in historically male-dominated, “rough-and-tumble” spaces where “locker room culture” still lingers.
- **Coaches may be complicit without realizing it**, either through silence, laughter, or using praise that objectifies under the guise of encouragement.

Coach Prompts for Addressing Sexualization and Power Dynamics:

- Have I ever used compliments or feedback that focused more on a student's appearance than their skill?
- Do I speak differently to or about students based on how they present their gender or sexuality?
- When another coach or peer makes a sexualized comment, do I laugh along—or intervene?
- Have I ever justified flirtation or teasing as “just part of the culture” or “how we bond”?
- Do I create space for students to speak up if something made them uncomfortable, or have I subtly signaled that calling it out is risky?

Repair Practice for Coaches:

- Apologize clearly and without defensiveness if you've said something that crossed a line.
 - Model correction: If someone else makes an inappropriate comment, correct it calmly and firmly so students see that safety matters more than comfort.
 - Shift the tone: Praise based on effort, growth, resilience—not body, gender expression, or sexual desirability.
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Overcoaching: When Help Becomes Harm

Definition: Overcoaching is when a coach provides excessive, untimely, or overly detailed instruction to the point that it overwhelms, confuses, or disempowers the athlete. It often stems from a place of wanting to help, but ends up interfering with the athlete's ability to self-regulate, make decisions, and develop trust in their own process.

Sometimes, coaching crosses the line from supportive to overwhelming. This happens more frequently in minority groups than others due to the microscope created from hyper exposure. Athletes that stand out are often held to harsher standards. Behaviors that might be brushed off in a dominant group member become focal points of critique when exhibited by someone marginalized.

It can come from a biased space where a student is perceived as needing “more help” because they are different or “less capable,” or from a well-intentioned desire to help a standout minority student succeed. But even when well-meaning, overcoaching can isolate the athlete, reinforcing the narrative that they are an exception, a project, or someone who requires “special handling.”

This dynamic also creates social rifts. When one student receives consistent attention—however positive—it can create resentment among peers, especially if the extra coaching is not contextualized or requested. What was meant to uplift can inadvertently distance the athlete from their community.

Overcoaching is a common but often unrecognized form of control that can derail an athlete's confidence, self-trust, and autonomy.

What Overcoaching Looks Like:

- Giving excessive or conflicting feedback in rapid succession, especially mid-performance.
- Offering advice during a competition instead of beforehand or in post-analysis.
- Cheering loudly for one athlete while ignoring others in the same cohort.
- Moving the training goalposts constantly (“Good job, now try this... now do this other thing... now try faster...”).
- Info-dumping technique corrections without giving space for integration.

What It Does to the Athlete:

- Creates confusion and mental fatigue.
- Shifts focus from embodied learning to approval-seeking.
- Undermines the athlete's decision-making and body awareness.
- Can increase performance anxiety or lead to a shutdown response.
- Often triggers trauma responses in athletes who grew up in perfectionist or critical environments.

How Coaches Can Self-Assess for Overcoaching:

- Am I talking more than the student is moving?
- Do I give them time to reflect, adjust, and ask questions?
- Do I trust them to try, fail, and figure things out without constant input?
- When they compete, do I speak to them to serve *their* needs, or to serve *my* anxiety?
- Do I allow my student experience success in a repeated manner before adding new goals or feedback?
- Have I confused intensity with effectiveness?

Less is often more. Let your coaching be a framework, not a flood. Athletes need space to integrate, experiment, and develop ownership over their progress.

The Pressure to Please:

For many athletes—especially those from marginalized groups—overcoaching doesn't just feel overwhelming. It feels like a test of belonging. The urge to smile, nod, and absorb every piece of unsolicited advice becomes a survival strategy. Refusing or even pausing that flow can risk being seen as ungrateful, arrogant, or—as is often weaponized against women—*bitchy* or "too much."

Balancing Boundaries and Expectations:

Students navigating overcoaching often have to walk a tightrope of protecting their mental space while avoiding social penalties. This emotional labor is compounded when there's a power dynamic at play, especially with respected coaches or high-status peers.

Student Prompts for Boundary Setting:

- "Thank you, I'm working on one thing at a time right now. Can I come back to that note later?"
- "I appreciate the feedback—can I write it down and revisit it after practice so I can stay focused right now?"
- "I'm trying to stay in my own process during this round. I'd like to reflect first before I take more input."
- "Can we save this conversation for after? I'm practicing staying present and not splitting my focus."
- "Can you take the feedback to my coach/trainer? I am focused on x right now but want to be able to get your feedback."

Reflective Prompts for Students:

- When I get a lot of feedback, do I feel energized or shut down?
- Do I ever pretend to take advice just to avoid conflict or judgment?
- What signals in my body or focus let me know I've hit my limit?
- Have I ever been afraid to ask someone to pause coaching out of fear I'd be labeled as difficult?

Advocating for your needs in a training space isn't disrespectful, it's responsible. It doesn't have to be dramatic to be effective. We all, students and coaches, have to learn that boundaries are not rejection—they're structure. The right coach will respect that. If they don't? That tells you they were never creating safety, only control. You get to choose differently.

For those of us who've lived this tightrope, it's not theoretical, it's bone-deep.

My Own Experience: "Smiling, Silent, and Still Not Seen"

As a female-bodied fighter, I learned early that I had to be "the happy and tough-as-nails one" to be allowed space. If I was frustrated, I had to reframe it into something funny or surface-level, or else it made coaches uncomfortable. Expressing a raw struggle wasn't an option unless I put it into a context that mimicked the male experience—aggressive, stoic, solution-focused.

I erased my own gender to be one of the boys. It got me social access but came at a cost. When I experimented with feminine presentation—a dress at court, eyeliner, softness—I was teased, as if I'd broken the character I had been performing. I felt I couldn't be both respected *and* visibly feminine. So I leaned into being a tomboy, and I secretly resented the women who didn't have to choose.

Worse, I judged them. I thought they were being "girly for attention." But that wasn't the truth. That was my own internalized misogyny, shaped by fear of rejection. Fear that if I didn't reject femininity, I wouldn't be seen as a real fighter and lose access to the male coaches I had worked so hard to get access to. Worse, I continually fought the fear that I was just an accepted pet—a mascot of inclusion, not a peer—even after I was knighted.

Overcoaching was a regular thing, with people who wanted to be genuinely helpful approaching me after every fight with advice or words of encouragement. I then got told "you are so spoiled with how much feedback you get." All the while, I was internally in chaos about how to not reject well meaning coaches and supporters and find some piece where I got to work on just one thing or not have to pretend to take it all graciously even when I just wanted to focus on what I was doing. This was all out of fear they would take my boundaries as rejection and I would lose access.

One of the things I struggled with worse than coaching was the popularity and praise from non fighters in the community. I would get stopped and told "you did well" and want to respond with "I

lost all my fights!”. As time went on this praise became a burden and I felt that I needed to perform for the crowd and that there was not a time I was not under the microscope and made to live out others dreams of success vs my own.

Bias continued to shape my experience, and I felt constant pressure to double down on the tomboy persona and to be successful for others. Further, I am female-bodied, coaches would spout half-truths as gospel. I was told I would cry, that my body mechanics were different, that I would process adrenaline a certain way. None of that was true. I don't cry in armor. I have atypical adrenaline responses. Worse, most physical traits that differ between men and women mattered far less than height. What I needed wasn't generalizations. I needed coaches who paid attention to me as *me*.

Instead, I got lazy assumptions wrapped in old training habits.

Today, I'm a trainer who is far more educated about my biases than when I started in this sport. With that knowledge, I have faced how I was part of the issue and now part of the solution—so that our marginalized communities can be authentic and accepted, and we can have a better fighting community for it.

Facing into our Biases and Questioning Ourselves

One of the best and quickest ways we can own our part is by asking ourselves questions. This is about self-exploration, not punishment, and should be used as a tool for developing a better understanding of where you need to focus to tackle your biases.

The following is a small list of prompts that can be used by yourself or in a group of people to create conversations. Please make sure that when in a group setting you have a moderator to manage defensive responses and keep this as a reflective exercise.

Prompts for Coaches

- Do I notice myself "trusting" certain students more quickly? What social traits do they share with me?
- How do I respond differently to emotional intensity in students of different genders or backgrounds?
- When someone is struggling emotionally, do I try to fix, dismiss, or punish? Or do I know how to co-regulate?
- Have I ever praised a student for "not making it about their identity"? What did I really mean by that?
- Is there something prohibiting the student from learning what I am teaching? Physical limitation, emotional state, etc.
- Do I ask female bodied students to take on more of a support role in training and projects before male bodied students?

Social Bias Awareness Prompts for Coaches

- What assumptions do I make about emotional control and gender? Who taught me those?
 - Do I assume certain body types or identities are more "resilient" or "logical"?
 - Have I subconsciously rewarded athletes who perform emotional suppression?
 - When a student fails, do I interpret it differently based on their background?
 - Have I ever interrupted someone's emotional processing because I was uncomfortable?
 - Have I tolerated or participated in the sexualization of fighters? Have I mistaken it for bonding?
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Prompts for Students

- Have I ever felt like I had to perform a version of myself to be accepted in training spaces?
- Do I judge others (or myself) for being too emotional, too quiet, too expressive?
- What parts of my identity do I hide or downplay in my training community?
- When I feel like I don't belong, what do I do to try to "earn" that belonging?
- Have I ever felt like the "exception" or "token" in a way that isolated me from others?

Social Bias Awareness Prompts for Students

- When I see someone different from the dominant group succeed, do I feel inspired, jealous, or critical? Why?
 - Do I assume that someone who expresses emotion is less technically skilled?
 - Have I ever participated in teasing or distancing someone for not fitting in?
 - What stereotypes about gender, race, or ability have I internalized—and how do they shape how I see others?
 - Have I laughed off a sexualized comment that made me uncomfortable? Why?
 - Have I made someone's value about how they look, instead of how they fight?
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Repair and Rebuilding

To create safe, emotionally honest environments for marginalized athletes:

- **Learn to co-regulate.** Emotional regulation is a skill, not a personality trait. Coaches must be able to model calm, stay connected, and help athletes return to baseline.
- **Name the bind.** Say out loud that emotional double standards exist. Validate that what athletes are feeling is real.
- **Broaden your toolkit.** Learn about trauma responses. Listen to athletes who don't mirror your experiences.

- **Value process, not polish.** Don't reward masking. Reward honesty, effort, and boundary-setting.
 - **Disrupt sexualization.** Do not tolerate flirtation framed as feedback, or sexual innuendo passed off as praise. Name the harm, protect the space.
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Conclusion - Changing the Spotlight

Let the training space be a place of healing and growth, not just proving and blending in.

We, as coaches and students, are not trying to build a homogenized group of people who can merely compete and present well. We are building warriors who can be authentic and present—who train harder, fight longer, feel seen, and are genuinely safe as themselves.

That means addressing not just the content of what we teach, but the *how*—how we coach, how we praise, how we interrupt, and how we respond when a boundary is drawn. It means recognizing that overcoaching, emotional double binds, and hypervisibility all have a cost—and that cost is too often borne in silence.

As coaches and students, we are either contributing to the status quo or choosing to be brave enough to disrupt it. That includes questioning how we give feedback, how much we speak, who we spotlight, and how we support growth without overshadowing autonomy. Coaches must remember that the power dynamic around this is unbalanced and that to ask ourselves how we can take on the burden of this change for our communities.

We must teach consent and communication as part of training—not just in drills, but in the emotional architecture of how we learn together. Be the example. Set the tone. Model boundaries, receive feedback with grace, and be willing to unlearn what was taught through scarcity or fear.

Be the example that safety doesn't require sameness. Set the tone for what dignity under pressure can look like.

“When we are no longer afraid to be fully ourselves, we can stop trying to outperform each other to survive.”

— adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*