

ATHLETE EXPERIENCE INTELLIGENCE

SportsCARE

High-Functioning Team Systems,
Sustainability, and Excellence

A sustainability and optimization resource for high school athletic teams.

**Built around the athlete,
for the athlete.**

<https://sportscarelab.org/>

How to Use This Journal

Journal 3 is the final volume in the SportsCARE series. Where Journal 1 helped teams stabilize critical systems and Journal 2 guided active development of team culture, this journal is designed for teams that are functioning well and want to optimize, sustain, and lead. The focus shifts from fixing gaps to building excellence that outlasts any single season, coach, or athlete.

Who This Journal Is For

This journal is designed for athletic teams that have completed Journals 1 and 2 and are ready to build high-functioning, self-sustaining team systems. It is most effective when all stakeholders — athletes, coaches, and administrators — are genuinely invested in long-term excellence.

Recommended Participants

- * Athletes (all team members, including senior leaders)
- * Head coach and assistant coaches
- * Athletic trainer or school nurse
- * School counselor or designated support professional
- * Athletic director or administrator

The Eight Optimization Areas

1	Athlete Wellness and Recovery Education Build advanced knowledge of recovery science, burnout prevention, and sustainable performance.
2	Protective Factors Assessment Identify and formalize the strengths already present in your team system that reduce risk and sustain performance.
3	Athlete Leadership Council Establish a structured athlete leadership model that distributes responsibility and builds future leaders.
4	Advanced Injury-Response Scenarios Stress-test your injury reporting and response systems with realistic, high-pressure scenarios.

5	Peer Mentorship Activity	Design a peer mentorship structure that connects experienced athletes with newer members.
6	Equity and Inclusion Review	Conduct a deep audit of equity and access and build structures that guarantee inclusion as a system — not a value.
7	High-Performance Team Standards	Co-create the advanced behavioral and performance standards that define a high-functioning team.
8	Sustainability and Succession Plan	Build the structures, documentation, and transitions that allow your team culture to outlast any individual.

Facilitation note: This journal is designed for teams with strong foundational systems. If significant gaps in safety, trust, or communication remain unaddressed, complete Journals 1 and 2 before beginning Journal 3.

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

High-Performance Baseline Assessment

Complete this assessment before beginning Unit 1. Rate each statement on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This assessment is calibrated for high-functioning teams — honest ratings below 4 indicate real optimization opportunities.

#	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	Our team has a formal, documented injury-response protocol that every athlete knows.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2	Athletes on this team understand the science of recovery and apply it consistently.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3	We have a structured athlete leadership model that distributes responsibility equitably.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4	Our reporting systems have been tested under realistic pressure and performed well.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5	Experienced athletes actively mentor newer members through a defined structure.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6	Every athlete on this team — regardless of status — has equal access to support and opportunity.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7	Our team standards go beyond behavior to define what high performance actually looks like.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8	Our team culture is documented well enough that it would survive a complete coaching change.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9	Athletes on this team understand the difference between productive stress and burnout.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10	Our protective factors — the strengths that reduce risk — are identified and actively maintained.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11	Athlete leadership on this team is developed, not just identified.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12	We have rehearsed how to respond to high-stakes injury or safety scenarios.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13	Peer relationships on this team are a structured part of athlete development.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14	We regularly audit our systems for equity gaps — not just our intentions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15	Our team standards are co-created, not handed down.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

#	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
16	We have a succession plan for when key athletes or coaches transition out.	0	0	0	0	0
17	Burnout prevention is a named priority in how we structure training and competition.	0	0	0	0	0
18	Our team's culture is strong enough to self-correct without adult intervention.	0	0	0	0	0
19	Athletes on this team lead systems — not just teams.	0	0	0	0	0
20	This team is built to get better every year, regardless of who is in it.	0	0	0	0	0

Scoring guide: 80-100: Optimization-ready - use all eight units to formalize and sustain. 55-79: Near-ready - address gaps in units scoring below 3 before full optimization push. Below 55: Return to Journal 2 to strengthen foundational systems first.

Understanding Your Optimization Score

Band	Score	What It Means	Priority
BUILDING	Below 55	Foundational gaps remain - Journal 2 first	Complete Journal 2
ADVANCING	55-79	Strong base - targeted optimization possible	Units 2, 3, 7 first
OPTIMIZING	80-100	High-functioning - build for long-term excellence	Full journal sequentially

UNIT 1

Athlete Wellness and Recovery Education

Why It Matters

High-functioning teams do not just train harder — they recover smarter. Advanced wellness education moves beyond basic awareness to build team-wide literacy in recovery science, load management, and burnout prevention. When athletes understand the physiology behind recovery, they become active participants in their own sustainability.

LESSON 1

The Science of Sustainable Performance

Sustainable high performance requires a deliberate balance between stress and recovery. The table below addresses the most common beliefs that lead athletes and coaches to underinvest in recovery systems:

Common athlete belief	What recovery science shows
More training always leads to better performance	Performance improves during recovery, not during training
Feeling tired means I need to push harder	Persistent fatigue is a signal of under-recovery, not weakness
Sleep is optional when training demands are high	Sleep deprivation reduces reaction time, decision-making, and injury resistance
Mental fatigue doesn't affect physical performance	Cognitive load directly impairs physical output and coordination
Burnout only happens to athletes who lack commitment	Burnout is a physiological and psychological response to chronic overload

Discussion Questions:

- * Where in our current training structure are we most likely underinvesting in recovery?
- * How do we currently identify early signs of burnout — and what happens when we spot them?
- * What would a team that takes recovery as seriously as training actually look like?

"The best training program is the one the athlete can sustain. Recovery is not the opposite of performance. It is the mechanism through which performance becomes possible."

ACTIVITY 1

Recovery Audit and Education Plan

Evaluate each recovery area below against your current team practice. Identify gaps and name specific, actionable changes.

Recovery Area	Current Team Practice	Gap Identified	Recommended Change
Sleep (7-9 hrs for adolescents)			
Active recovery sessions			
Nutrition timing and quality			
Mental deload periods			
Load monitoring			
Burnout screening			
Return-to-play protocol			

Complete your Advanced Wellness Education Plan:

Top 2 recovery gaps most affecting our team right now:

One structural change we will make to our training schedule:

How we will screen for early burnout signs:

OUTPUT -> Advanced Wellness Education Plan

UNIT 2

Protective Factors Assessment

Why It Matters

Most improvement work focuses on fixing what is broken. High-performing teams also invest in protecting what is working. Protective factors are the specific strengths in a team system that reduce risk and sustain performance — but they erode without intentional maintenance. You cannot protect what you have not named.

LESSON 2

Building On What Already Works

Protective factors are not the same as general team strengths. They are specific, measurable conditions that reduce the likelihood of harm and increase the likelihood of sustainable success. The seven core protective factors below have the strongest evidence base in high-performance athletic settings:

Protective Factor	What it looks like when active
Strong coach-athlete trust	Athletes feel safe raising concerns and receive consistent, responsive support from adults.
Psychological safety	Athletes can make mistakes, ask for help, and speak honestly without fear of consequences.
Clear reporting pathways	Athletes know exactly who to contact, how, and what to expect when they raise a concern.
Peer support culture	Athletes actively look out for each other's wellbeing, not just performance.
Equitable access to resources	All athletes — regardless of status — can access support, training resources, and leadership opportunities.
Consistent follow-through	When adults make commitments to athletes, they keep them — every time.
Recovery-first culture	Rest and recovery are visibly valued and modeled by coaches and team leaders.

Discussion Questions:

- * Which protective factor is strongest on our team right now — and what specifically created it?
- * Which factor is most at risk of eroding — and what is the threat?

* What would it take to move from passively having a protective factor to actively sustaining it?

"Protective factors do not maintain themselves. Every strength on your team is one bad decision, one leadership change, or one difficult season away from erosion — unless it is actively protected."

ACTIVITY 2

Protective Factor Mapping

For each protective factor below, assess whether it is currently active, identify the evidence, name the greatest threat to it, and describe how you will protect it going forward.

Protective Factor	Is it active? (Y/N)	Evidence	Threat to this factor	How to protect it
Coach-athlete trust				
Psychological safety				
Clear reporting pathways				
Peer support culture				
Equitable access				
Consistent follow-through				
Recovery-first culture				
Other: _____				

After completing the map:

Our three strongest protective factors:

The protective factor most at risk of erosion — and why:

One concrete action to protect our most vulnerable factor:

OUTPUT -> Team Protective Factor Profile

UNIT 3

Athlete Leadership Council

Why It Matters

Athlete leadership is often treated as a personality trait — something you either have or don't. High-functioning teams treat it as a system: structured, developed, distributed, and succession-planned. An athlete leadership council is not a social committee. It is a governance structure that gives athletes genuine voice in the systems that shape their experience.

LESSON 3

Leadership Is a System, Not a Title

Most teams identify leaders and give them a title. High-functioning teams develop leaders through structured progression, give them real responsibility, and build systems to sustain leadership capacity across seasons. The framework below outlines four levels of athlete leadership:

Leadership Level	What it looks like	Potential roles
Emerging Leader	Developing self-awareness, learning team norms, beginning to support peers informally.	Peer buddy, role modeling, informal check-ins
Developing Leader	Taking on structured responsibility, receiving mentorship, facilitating small group conversations.	Activity facilitation, mentorship pairing, wellness check-ins
Established Leader	Shaping team culture, mentoring emerging leaders, co-facilitating team sessions.	Council membership, formal mentorship, culture stewardship
Senior Leader	Co-designing team systems, advising adults, building succession plans.	Council chair, succession planning, adult partnership

Discussion Questions:

- * What does athlete leadership currently look like on this team — and who has access to it?
- * How are leaders currently selected — and what does that selection process signal about who leadership is for?
- * What would a formal athlete leadership council change about how decisions get made on this team?

"The best test of an athlete leadership council is not whether athletes show up to meetings. It is whether adults change their decisions because of what athletes said."

ACTIVITY 3

Leadership Council Design

Use the framework below to design your Athlete Leadership Council. Every field should reflect a real structure your team will actually implement and sustain.

Draft your Athlete Leadership Council Charter:

Council name:

Membership criteria and selection process:

Meeting cadence and format:

Core responsibilities of council members:

How council input is acted on by coaches and administrators:

Succession and onboarding process for new members:

Important: An athlete leadership council only works if adults genuinely act on its input. If athlete input is collected but consistently ignored, the council erodes trust faster than having no council at all.

OUTPUT -> Athlete Leadership Council Charter

Advanced Injury-Response Scenarios

Why It Matters

A protocol that has never been tested is a plan that has never been proven. Under pressure — before a championship, in front of a crowd, with competing priorities — even well-designed systems can fail. Scenario-based stress-testing reveals the specific points where your protocols break down before a real crisis does.

LESSON 4

Systems Fail Under Pressure If They Have Not Been Tested

The difference between a team that responds well to a crisis and one that does not is almost never about values. It is about whether the system has been practiced. Scenario testing builds the muscle memory that makes correct responses automatic under stress.

Signs a protocol is untested	Signs a protocol has been stress-tested
Adults are uncertain who the first contact is	Every adult can name the first contact without hesitation
Response timeline is vague	Specific timeframes are known and practiced
Documentation happens after the fact or not at all	Documentation begins during the event
Athlete protection is assumed, not structured	Anti-retaliation steps are activated automatically
Escalation is ad hoc	Escalation triggers are pre-defined and known

Discussion Questions:

- * When was the last time your team rehearsed a response to a serious athlete concern?
- * Which scenario type do you feel least prepared for right now?
- * What is the cost of discovering a protocol gap during a real event rather than during a drill?

"A crisis does not reveal your values. It reveals your systems. The question is not whether your team cares — it is whether your protocols work when caring is not enough."

ACTIVITY 4

Scenario Stress-Testing

Workthroughall four scenarios below as a team. For each one, describe how your current protocols would respond, identify any gaps, and name specific updates needed.

Scenario A - Pre-competition injury concealment

An athlete tells a teammate they have been hiding a knee injury for two weeks because they are afraid of losing their starting position before the championship. The teammate comes to you.

Who is the first adult contacted? What happens in the first hour? What is communicated to the athlete? What documentation is created?

Team response	Gap identified	Protocol update needed

Scenario B - Mental health disclosure during check-in

During a weekly check-in, an athlete rates themselves a 1 and, when followed up with privately, discloses they have been experiencing significant anxiety and have not been sleeping for weeks.

Who is contacted? What support is activated? How is confidentiality handled? What follow-up is scheduled?

Team response	Gap identified	Protocol update needed

Scenario C - Retaliation after reporting

An athlete reported a harassment concern last week. This week, they tell you they have been excluded from team social activities and received hostile messages from teammates.

What constitutes retaliation? Who is notified? What is the timeline for response? How is the reporting athlete protected?

Team response	Gap identified	Protocol update needed

Scenario D - Coach-athlete conflict escalation

An athlete approaches the athletic director to report that a coach has been publicly criticizing their performance in front of the team in a way they describe as humiliating and demoralizing.

What is the review process? Who is involved? How is the athlete protected during the review? What constitutes resolution?

Team response	Gap identified	Protocol update needed

After all four scenarios, document your findings:

The protocol step most consistently unclear under pressure:

The role most uncertain about their responsibility:

Two protocol updates we will implement before next season:

OUTPUT -> Injury Response Verification Report

UNIT 5

Peer Mentorship Activity

Why It Matters

Culture is not transmitted through policies. It is transmitted through relationships. When experienced athletes invest intentionally in newer members, they transfer not just knowledge but belonging — the sense that this team is worth joining and worth staying in. A well-designed peer mentorship program is one of the highest-leverage culture investments a team can make.

LESSON 5

Culture Is Transmitted Through Relationships

The most sustainable teams are the ones where veterans invest in rookies not because they are told to, but because the structure makes it natural and valued. Peer mentorship, when well-designed, reduces isolation, accelerates culture transmission, and builds the leadership pipeline at the same time.

Informal peer culture (no structure)	Structured peer mentorship
Culture transmission is random and dependent on personality	Culture transmission is intentional and consistent
New athletes learn norms by watching and guessing	New athletes are explicitly brought into norms through relationship
Experienced athletes mentor only those they like	All new athletes receive equitable mentorship access
Mentorship ends when the season gets hard	Structure ensures mentorship continues through high-pressure periods
Impact is invisible and unmeasurable	Impact is tracked and used to improve the program

Discussion Questions:

- * How do new athletes currently learn what it means to be part of this team?
- * Which veterans model the culture you want to sustain — and do they have the structure to pass it on?
- * What would a new athlete experience in their first six weeks if your mentorship program were fully active?

"The question is not whether senior athletes are influencing new ones. They always are. The question is whether that influence is intentional."

ACTIVITY 5

Mentorship Program Design

Use the six-step framework below to design your peer mentorship program. Every step should produce something real — a name, a date, a training plan, or a matching process your team will actually use.

1	Define the purpose and scope What specifically will mentors do? Academic support? Wellness check-ins? Culture orientation? Be specific — vague mentorship programs fail.
2	Select and train mentors Identify athletes with the maturity, trust, and capacity to mentor. Train them — do not just assign them. Training includes active listening, referral pathways, and boundary-setting.
3	Match pairs thoughtfully Matching based on sport role, background, or communication style increases effectiveness. Avoid automatic pairing by seniority alone.
4	Structure early interactions The first three interactions should be structured with a specific purpose. Open-ended 'just check in' meetings rarely happen consistently.
5	Create a light accountability system Mentors check in with a trusted adult every two weeks. Not to report on mentees — to get support for themselves as mentors.
6	Evaluate and adjust At 30 and 60 days, ask both mentors and mentees: Is this working? What would make it better? Adjust based on what you hear.

Design your Peer Mentorship Program:

Program name and purpose statement:

Mentor selection criteria:

Training plan for mentors (who, when, what):

Matching approach:

Structure of the first three interactions:

30-day check-in process:

OUTPUT -> Peer Mentorship Program Framework

UNIT 6

Equity and Inclusion Review

Why It Matters

Inclusion is not a value statement. It is a measurable condition of a team system. High-functioning teams do not just commit to inclusion — they audit it, identify gaps, and build structures that guarantee equitable access and belonging for every athlete. Values without systems are just aspirations.

LESSON 6

Inclusion Is a System, Not a Value

The most common equity failure in athletic teams is not overt discrimination — it is the invisible accumulation of small, unexamined advantages for some athletes and small, unexamined disadvantages for others. A deep equity audit makes the invisible visible.

Equity Dimension	Audit Question
Access to medical and training resources	Do all athletes — regardless of position, status, or background — receive the same quality of medical attention and training support?
Representation in leadership	Do athlete leadership roles reflect the demographic composition of the team, or are they concentrated among a particular group?
Communication equity	Do all athletes receive the same quality and consistency of communication from coaches and administrators?
Psychological safety across identity groups	Do athletes of different genders, races, or backgrounds report the same levels of psychological safety?
Equitable accountability	Are behavioral standards applied consistently, or do high-performers or certain groups receive more latitude?
Inclusion in team culture	Do all athletes feel genuinely included in team social culture, not just tolerated?
Recovery and rest equity	Do all athletes receive the same encouragement and permission to prioritize recovery?

Discussion Questions:

- * Which equity dimension is most likely to have a gap we have not yet named?

- * How would we know if a particular group of athletes on this team were experiencing inequitable treatment?
- * What is the difference between treating all athletes the same and treating all athletes equitably?

"Treating everyone the same is not equity. Equity means ensuring every athlete has what they specifically need to succeed — and that requires seeing difference, not ignoring it."

ACTIVITY 6

Deep Equity Audit

Complete the audit below with radical honesty. A rating of 3 or below on any dimension requires an action. The goal is not a perfect score — it is accurate information and real commitment to change.

Equity Dimension	Current State (1-5)	Evidence	Gap or Concern	Action Required
Medical and training access				
Leadership representation				
Communication equity				
Psychological safety				
Accountability consistency				
Cultural inclusion				
Recovery equity				

Equity and Inclusion Action Plan:

The equity dimension with the largest gap on our team:

Three specific actions to address it (with owners and dates):

How we will know if our actions are working:

OUTPUT -> Equity and Inclusion Action Plan

High-Performance Team Standards

Why It Matters

Basic behavioral standards define the floor. High-performance team standards define the ceiling — and raise it each season. The difference is not stricter rules. It is deeper ownership. When athletes define what excellence actually looks like in specific, behavioral terms, they create a standard they hold themselves and each other to — because they built it.

LESSON 7

Excellence Requires a Standard Everyone Owns

Most teams have behavioral standards. High-performing teams have performance standards — specific descriptions of what excellence looks like in practice, in competition, in adversity, and in how teammates treat each other. The table below shows the difference:

Basic behavioral standards	High-performance team standards
Don't be late	We arrive prepared — physically and mentally — and we protect each other's preparation time
Respect teammates	We hold each other to the highest standard of care, and we do it with dignity
Work hard in practice	We bring the same intensity to preparation that we bring to competition — every session
Report injuries	We prioritize long-term health over short-term performance — always, without exception
Be a good teammate	We define what a good teammate does specifically, and we hold each other accountable to that definition

Discussion Questions:

- * What is the highest standard of excellence this team has ever demonstrated — and what made it possible?
- * Where is the gap between our current standards and the standard we want to be known for?
- * What would it mean to write a standard that your most committed athletes would be proud to be held to?

"Standards set the floor. But high-performing teams write standards that describe the ceiling — and then they raise it every season."

ACTIVITY 7

Advanced Standards Co-Creation

As a team, write your high-performance standards across each area below. These should go beyond behavior to describe what excellence actually looks, sounds, and feels like on this team.

Draft your High-Performance Team Standards Charter:

1. How we prepare for competition (mental and physical):

2. How we hold each other to a high standard with dignity:

3. How we define and sustain our recovery culture:

4. How we lead when adults are not present:

5. How we respond when a teammate is struggling:

6. How we handle adversity and losing:

7. How we welcome and develop new team members:

8. How we represent this team and institution beyond the field:

Standard of excellence: Every standard in this charter should be specific enough that any athlete on the team could tell you exactly what it looks like in practice — and exactly what a violation looks like.

OUTPUT -> High-Performance Team Standards Charter

UNIT 8

Sustainability and Succession Plan

Why It Matters

The most important question a high-functioning team can ask is not 'How do we perform well this season?' It is 'How do we build a team that performs well every season — regardless of who is in it?' Sustainability requires documentation, leadership pipelines, culture transmission systems, and the humility to plan for your own departure.

LESSON 8

Great Teams Are Built to Outlast Their Builders

Every team that has ever been excellent eventually had to answer one question: What happens when the people who built this leave? The answer depends entirely on whether the culture was carried in people or embedded in systems.

Succession Area	The critical question
Coaching transition	What happens to team culture when a coach leaves? Is it documented well enough to survive?
Senior athlete transition	How do departing seniors transfer knowledge, relationships, and culture to the next generation?
System documentation	Are your protocols, standards, and resources documented in a form that new adults can implement?
Leadership pipeline	Is the next generation of team leaders already being developed — not just identified?
Institutional memory	Are the lessons learned from difficult seasons, crises, and successes captured anywhere?
Culture transmission	Is your team culture transmissible — or does it depend on specific individuals to survive?

Discussion Questions:

- * What is the most fragile part of our team culture right now — the thing most dependent on one person?
- * What would a new coach need to know in their first week to protect what we have built?

* What would it mean to build a team that gets better every year, regardless of who is coaching it?

"The best measure of a leader is not what they built. It is what continues to grow after they leave."

ACTIVITY 8

Succession Planning Session

Complete the succession plan below. Every row should result in a real document, a real owner, and a real date. The goal is a team that can sustain its culture without depending on any single person.

Succession Area	Current State	Documentation Needed	Owner	Target Date
Coaching transition				
Senior athlete transition				
System documentation				
Leadership pipeline				
Institutional memory				
Culture transmission				

Complete your Sustainability and Succession Plan:

If the head coach left tomorrow, what would be at risk of being lost?

If the five most senior athletes graduated tomorrow, what would be at risk of being lost?

The single most important thing to document before next season:

Our succession review date (annual):

The ultimate test of a sustainable team: Would your culture, your protocols, and your standards survive a complete change of coaching staff and senior athletes in the same year? If yes, you have built something that matters. If no, this unit tells you exactly what to build next.

OUTPUT -> Team Sustainability and Succession Plan

[CLOSE](#)

Post-Journal Optimization Review

This is the final review across all three SportsCARE journals. Complete it as a team before signing the long-term commitment. This is an honest assessment of where your team system now stands and what it will take to sustain excellence.

Across all three journals, what is the single greatest transformation in how this team operates?

What protective factor are you most confident will survive the next transition — and why?

What is the succession risk you are most focused on addressing in the next six months?

What would it mean for this team to be genuinely excellent — not just high-performing — five years from now?

What does this team owe to the athletes who will come after the people in this room?

Long-Term Team Commitment

This commitment is the culmination of all three SportsCARE journals. It belongs to this team, this season, and every team that follows.

Commitment	What We Agree To
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Sustainable Excellence	We pursue performance that is sustainable — not performance that costs athletes their health, dignity, or longevity.
Protective Factors	We actively maintain the conditions that make this team safe, trusting, and effective — not as a one-time effort but as an ongoing responsibility.
Athlete Leadership	We develop leaders, not just identify them. Every athlete on this team has a pathway to meaningful leadership.
System Resilience	We test our systems before crises test them for us. Scenario rehearsal is a standard part of our preparation.
Mentorship Culture	We transmit our culture intentionally through structured peer mentorship that every athlete experiences.
Structural Equity	We audit our systems for equity gaps, act on what we find, and hold ourselves accountable to measurable outcomes.
High-Performance Standards	We hold ourselves to a standard of excellence that we wrote together and that rises every season.
Succession Planning	We build for the future. Our culture, our protocols, and our standards are documented well enough to outlast any individual.

Team Representative

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Head Coach

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Athletic Trainer / Counselor

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Athletic Director / Administrator

Signature: _____

Date of Completion

Date: _____

