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## **An Approach to Coaching Young Soccer Players**

### **Part One: Where I am as a coach...**

I've been coaching young soccer players for many years. I've coached at many different levels, boys and girls, all ages and in many different situations. I've always been proud of the fact that I spend a great deal of time thinking, reading and writing about working with young players.

One of my main aims as a coach to children is to always be open to new ideas and ways of thinking. Consequently, I'm always changing, always evolving. I'm not the coach that I was 10 years ago, nor five years ago. I'm not the coach I was a year ago and I may very well not be the coach that I was 6 months ago. New ideas and thoughts are constantly moulding and shaping me.

Ironically the more open that I become, the more reading I do, the more thinking I do on the subject the more convinced I become that there are fewer and fewer concepts that one can and must hang one's hat on. At present, I would say that for wisdom and humility's sake I, as a coach, should only be fully committed to basic concepts such as honour and respect and all else should be negotiable and flexible.

### **Part Two: So here are my present guidelines...**

- 1) Don't coach unless you really love kids and get a 'kick' out of being with them.
- 2) The youth coach's duty is to provide a safe, secure and positive environment in which children can have fun playing the game of their choice.
- 3) The coach must at all times respect all of the children. In time this respect may grow to become trust.
- 4) The children must at all times have fun; be engaged; be enjoying themselves. Youth sport is no place for anger and gloom.
- 5) The coach's job is to encourage and help his athletes to improve in their performance of their chosen sport. When a child, in a positive environment, improves at an activity then he/ she has more fun and may very well want to improve further in order that he/ she can have even more enjoyment.
- 6) In helping his athlete(s) to improve a coach should attempt, with the athlete(s), to set aims and objectives on an individual and, often, on a team basis.
- 7) In helping a player to attain goals and enjoy the experience of attaining those goals, the coach is helping to ready the athlete for the preparation, commitment, work and joy which they will find necessary to enjoy success in later life at school, at university, at work and in relationships.
- 8) "The most important decision a youth soccer coach ever makes concerns playing time.... No child ever signed up to play soccer to sit on the bench watching other kids play." **Elaine Raakman, 'Just Play'**
- 9) Coaching is about the athlete, not the coach.

### **Part Three: Until recently the qualities which I professed to look for in young athletes were...**

**Commitment; Attitude; Enthusiasm; Respect; Fun.**

I've thought, for some time, that the most important of these is **Commitment**. A coach can work on the other aspects but if the player isn't **Committed**... e.g. present at practice... then he can't do anything about other matters.

As for **Respect**, I now feel that quality can very easily be linked to **Attitude** and therefore one or other of them may be redundant. To me, **Fun** and **Enthusiasm** are self-evident, basic, positive qualities and so I do not question their validity. But, maybe they could be linked to each other.

Recently I've given a great deal of thought to two other traits. These are... **Personality; Competitive Spirit**. It's great to see a kid playing and showing his **Personality**. It indicates to me awareness, involvement and lack of reserve or shyness. It may also be an indicator of **Commitment**.

**Competitive Spirit** often gets a bad name but when I write of **Competitiveness** I refer to one's willingness to not so much compete against others and prove that one is 'superior' to one's opponent but rather to compete against oneself; to be better this week, this month than one was last week, last month. There is also the view that a worthy, competitive opponent is an athlete's best friend as he/she challenges one to perform better.

#### **Part Four: So what do I do when working with young athletes (6 to about 9 years of age)?**

First off let me have some fun... **Technique, Schmeqnique & Fitness, Schmitness. Who cares!**

So here a few things, more or less in order, that a coach can do, and in doing so, I believe, be much more effective as a coach to young players...

- 1) Kids want to kick the ball, they want to have **Fun**. They are not interested in listening to coaches drone and on about proper technique. They don't come to the field to listen to coaches yapping away incessantly and 'correcting' them.

Recently I had a discussion with a senior youth soccer coach on this issue. My associate insisted that players must first of all be taught good technique. I have heard this often. My argument was, and is, that infants don't need Phys Ed teachers to teach them how to get up on their feet, balance, to walk, to run, to jump, spin, crawl, to throw, catch and do many other physical things that they become very adept at. They don't need speech therapists or grammar teachers to teach them how to speak, listen, comprehend or construct sentences, all of which they normally become very good at before they ever go to school. Indeed, if they couldn't do these things it probably would not be suitable for them to attend school. No, what they need is to play soccer and to enjoy that play. What that requires is a nurturing coach present who understands children and plays a role not unlike the infant's mother; encouraging, caring and patient.

At some point the **Committed, Enthusiastic** young player will have gained enough familiarity with the ball and be sufficiently **Coordinated/Agile** that he/she will be receptive to the teaching of technique. The timing of that cannot be imposed on the child. For some it will come earlier than others and irrespective of when that stage is reached it is not necessarily an indication of how the player will perform 6- 8- 10 years down the road.

Some will say that kids by the age of 7, if they are 'serious' about their soccer, should be ready for technique training. After all, kids in other countries are ready! Well, we should not compare our kids with children in other countries; there are many variables... climate, demographics, football culture, commitment, opportunity etc.... which come into play. What we should accept and certainly what I have experienced is that our kids are, for the most part, not ready... **Commitment, Coordination/Agility, Familiarity with the Ball...** at the age of 7 for traditional technique training.

- 2) Sessions should be... **Active; Competitive; Fun.**
- 3) Avoid drills, technique, fitness exercises etc. We don't want kids standing around and we don't want them doing physical training exercises which they do not understand and for which they are not ready.
- 4) Concentrate on... **Decision Making, Thinking; Creative Play; Game Knowledge.**  
Always aim to play games, often SSGs, with conditions... with or without the ball.  
Whenever possible games should have conditions which force the players to think and be creative... 'must beat a man before shooting'; 'only use left foot'; '5 taps equals a goal' etc.
- 5) In terms of fitness, concentrate on and challenge them with activities which emphasize...  
**Agility; Balance; Coordination; Flexibility; and the JOY of Running.**
- 6) First instruction to young players... from the coach's point of view young players only have to concentrate on three skills... **Dribbling; Passing; Shooting;** (Implicit in these is Receiving the Ball & Ball Mastery/ Control)
- 7) Before the age of 9 **Passing** should not, generally, be coached. Youngsters are extremely egocentric. Their understanding of the need to **Pass** the ball comes with maturity and understanding of the game. It should not be imposed on the child.
- 8) Players must be given the condition that they must never, ever just kick the ball away. They must control the ball. Celebrate such efforts. Make it a condition that when the ball comes to a player he/she must touch the ball at least twice.
- 9) Encourage players to make decisions. When appropriate, review the possibilities with them but insist that they make the decision. Remember we are only concerned with three possibilities...  
Can you **Dribble?** Can you **Shoot?** Can you **Pass?**
- 10) Insist that they keep the ball on the ground. Demonstrate and show why this is a good idea. Explain to them how they can accomplish this.
- 11) Ensure that the players work often with their 'weak foot'. Make it a condition in games that they play.

#### **Part Five: So what does it take, in terms of sessions/ week for a player to get to the level that he/ she aspires to?**

In the first few years (7-9 years of age) there is no doubt in my mind that **Commitment** is the number one trait. Here is a way of 'streaming' players in the early years (at least!)...

One game a week...	'House League'
One game, one practice a week...	'All Star'
One game, two practice a week...	'Select'
One game, three practice a week...	'Elite'

There is no sense of 'good' or 'bad' intended. It is simply a matter of level of interest.

## **Part Six: And in the End...**

At the beginning of **Part Four** I 'mocked' the idea of **Technique** and **Fitness**. I did so because in my experience soccer coaches spend too much time fretting about these aspects of coaching. Our job is not to coach a kid to do 500 keep-ups or to do 'tricks' with the ball or to do 50 push ups or run 'round the track 10 times. Yes, these are worthy accomplishments and are indeed part of the whole picture but as Marshall McLuhan might say "They are the medium, not the message." No, our job is to help the players to become better soccer players.

**Fitness:** Active, young children will be fit enough to play soccer. Soccer practice and coaching can and should improve this condition but will not create it in young children.

**Technique:** I have often instructed kids that if they want to improve their technique they should "... not come to practice for a month, instead, get a ball, find a friendly wall and kick the ball against the wall for 20 minutes every day for that month... oh, and while you are at it make sure that 10 minutes of that time is spent kicking the ball with your 'weak foot'...". Not surprisingly, in this day and age, I don't think any player has ever taken my advice. Instead, they, and their parents, persist in believing that somehow a coach can, in one or two sessions a week, provide the 'magic bullet' which will make their children magicians of ball work.

**Technique:** Kids who really want to improve their Ball Mastery skills should do it, for the most part, on their own. They could always have a ball with them, they could play in the yard at school, they could kick a ball against a wall, they could play after school, they could play in the basement, they could put down two tee-shirts in the living room and practice manipulating the ball around the tees... sole of foot, figures of 8, 'weak foot', outside of foot, inside of foot, 'defender, body, ball' etc.

I do not discount **Technique** and **Fitness** but rather recognize them as tools rather than products as we help the children to improve.

***Having good technique is part of being a good soccer player.  
However, a player may have good technique and, yet, not be a good soccer player.***

***Being fit is part of being a good soccer player.  
However, a player can be fit and, yet, not be a good soccer player.***

And, anyway, if you're still fretting, how better to improve a young player's **Technique** & **Fitness** than by emphasizing the following?...

<b>Commitment;</b>	<b>Active;</b>	<b>Competitive;</b>	<b>Fun;</b>
<b>Decision Making;</b>	<b>Creative Play;</b>	<b>Game Knowledge;</b>	<b>Dribbling;</b>
<b>Passing:</b>	<b>Shooting;</b>	<b>"Don't ever kick the ball away..."</b> ,	
<b>"Keep the ball on the ground..."</b>		<b>"Lots of work with 'weak foot'..."</b>	

**Gerald Steele**