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Let the Kids Solve the Problems

Coaching children means having lots of opportunities to solve problems. But I believe that, as coaches, we should encourage our athletes to solve their own problems.

Several years ago I was coaching a team of 8 year olds in the Toronto Soccer Association Youth Development League. On that team there were three children who, at the start of the season, said that they wanted to play in goal. Actually, not believing in set positions for children of this age I rotated five different players, with varying degrees of success, through the position in the course of the season. However, those three were our regular goalies.

In July of that year we played in a Tournament, the West Rouge Challenge. Before the second game all three of my regular goalkeepers came to me, one by one. Each said that he did not want to play goal in the next game. This was a problem for me. We wanted to put on a good show in the Tournament. We had no other boys who had the inclination and/ or the experience to play in goal in the upcoming game.

But, maybe most important was the fact that these three boys had voluntarily taken on the responsibility of being our goalkeepers for the season. Now, at a fairly important juncture, they were renegeing. Of course, I did not see this as the end of the world but rather as a learning opportunity. So, I duly gathered the three boys together and gave them the old pep talk about responsibility, teamwork and respect. But still what to do about getting a goalie for the game?

The answer was simple. I told them that I was leaving it up to them to decide which of them was going to be goalkeeper. I sent them off to discuss the matter and asked them to come back to me with a decision in two minutes. This they did and just like it had been scripted they came back two minutes later and we had a goalie.

They did it. I encouraged them but they did it! I never asked them what had transpired in their conversation. They all seemed perfectly happy with the decision. Among them they had an important discussion and come to a decision.

And that, folks, is a bunch of 8 year olds! What great things will those kids be capable of in 10 years time if their future coaches... and parents and teachers!... encourage them to take responsibility, to be creative and to make decisions?

Gerald Steele