

Coaching At The Game

Junior Soccer Coaching Style On Match Day

from the [Abbotsford Soccer Association](#)

Soccer Culture

The essence of the soccer culture is that soccer is the "player's game". What this means is that, once the game is underway, the players are expected to make their own decisions as to the right thing to do in any situation, without interference from coaches or spectators. Of course, in a professional game, there are plenty of spectators with an opinion but their input is thankfully lost in the noise of the crowd. In a youth soccer game with only a handful of spectators, loudly-voiced opinions and "suggestions" are all too easily heard (at least by the other spectators - see below).

This soccer culture is alien to most North American sports, in which the coach is effectively a part of the team, controlling plays, using a timeout to stop the other team's momentum, instructing a player to run or stay on base and so on. Irrespective of whether you think this is good or bad, [I'll admit that I prefer to make my own decisions], it is not the soccer way. Once the whistle blows there are no practical mechanisms provided by the laws of the game for a coach to influence the outcome. The players make individual decisions, good or bad, and collectively have to react as a team to the strategy and tactics of their opponent. They learn to do this in two ways, first at practices, where the coach does have control, and second and, ultimately more importantly, by experience at the games. This is the origin of the soccer coaching adage "the game is the teacher". It takes a lot of games to get the experience, but there really is no short cut, much as coaches might wish there were!

Many coaches find this situation frustrating, especially if they also coach a sport in which they do have more control. A common reaction is for the coach to become a "shouter". In the extreme this takes the form of a continuous barrage of shouted verbal instructions to the players, which is essentially an attempt by the coach to "control" the game. At any game with a noisy crowd this doesn't work, of course, although some coaches develop remarkably loud voices trying. This style of coaching at the game is sometimes also referred to as "mini-coaching".

What's the Law?

FIFA law states that a "coach may convey tactical instructions to his players during the match and must return to his position immediately after giving these instructions. The coach and the other officials must remain within the confines of the technical area, where such an area is provided, and they

must behave in a responsible manner".

The spirit of the FIFA law is that coaches convey only occasional instructions to players and these are limited to "tactical", that is "off the ball" instructions. The expectation is that coaches use the game to observe their players in action and use what they see as feedback into the practice situation.

Discussion

Lets start by admitting that many veteran coaches, including the author, have followed the humbling path from mini-coaching to being an observer and cheerleader at games. We're not perfect either. Sometimes we lapse into bad habits under stress because we're human. But we believe in the soccer culture and strive always to be good role models. In this section I will discuss some of the issues surrounding mini-coaching in more detail and explode some myths.

1: Instructions get through to the player on the ball.

It's hard to accept this if you have never played a team sport. The truth is that, when concentrating on handling the ball, it is impossible to process instructions. Players shut out extraneous inputs; all they hear is a general background noise. Of course, if they are close and you shout really, really loud, they'll hear you, but in doing so they will probably lose focus on what they are doing and lose the ball.

2: Players like being shouted at [told what to do]

Even if they do, [I haven't met any yet - and you have to ask them to really find out], it isn't helping them make their own decisions, and they'll never become good soccer players if they don't. Some coaches justify their behavior on the grounds that the kids need really the instructions and that it helps them become better players. It's possible that this could be true but at what cost? Again, it's hard to appreciate this if you haven't played a sport with a "coach", but most adults would find it irritating and unsettling to be the subject of constant verbal instructions. Kids spend their whole lives being told what to do by adults. Historically they learned to play sports without adult involvement. Times have changed so that organized sports are now the norm, for better or worse, but that doesn't give adults the right to take over their games. It's the players' game.

3: I only ever provide positive instruction and encouragement

I hear this a lot and I'm sure some coaches really believe it. However, if you're a real shouter, you will inevitably get seriously involved in what's happening out there on the field. Eventually when something goes wrong, you'll let your guard slip and some not-quite-positive remark will emerge, because it's practically impossible to keep the brain properly engaged when in verbal torrent mode. As an example, what do you think is the impact on your players of a shout of "Wake up, defense!" immediately after a goal is

scored? I would suggest to you that this belittles the players and simply expresses the coach's dissatisfaction with their play.

It is not positive coaching and it is unlikely to improve performance on the field. Other tell-tale phrases are those containing "you should have..." or "you need to...". While well intentioned, these remarks will be perceived as criticism by the players. I don't know too many adults who respond well to public criticism, let alone kids. Just remember, the players only "need" to have fun. Finally, panic shouts of "Get it out of there!", "Shoot!", "Boot it!" just overload the players with noise. They rarely have any useful effect, except to make players feel more nervous and unsure of themselves. Great performances are not made in a mental state of panic.

4: I have a really nice voice at 90 decibels

My experience is that listening to a shouter coach, however well intentioned he/she is, just gets plain annoying after a while. It certainly spoils my enjoyment of the game. Spectators (parents) come to watch their children play, not to listen to the coach.

5: The parents expect me to instruct the kids at games. No parent has ever complained about my coaching style.

Many parents are equally unaware of the soccer culture, and simply transfer their expectations from other sports. Others are themselves intimidated by a coach who is a shouter. Some, seeing progress in their child's soccer development, may put up with the shouting because "my child is learning a lot this season". [Many shouter coaches are indeed good at teaching soccer at practices].

6. It's ok to complain to the referee if he/she makes a call you don't agree with.

Mini coaching often goes hand-in-hand with public complaining about the refereeing. Again, if you are involved with the game at the mini-level, you are going to react deeply to every call, just as if you were actually out there on the field, and if you're verbalizing, you'll find it very hard not to say something critical. There is no margin for discussion on this one: public complaining about the refereeing is not acceptable, period.

7: It's very important to me that my team wins the game.

A lot of mini-coaching has its roots in the coach being too personally invested in the success of the team. This is dangerous ground that can lead to some truly bad behavior by coaches. And, yes, it happens every season. Sometimes a coach is trying to make up for his or her failed success in sports by playing vicariously through the team. Other times the drive to win (at all costs) is just too deeply embedded in his or her personality. Other times the coach feels inadequate if the team isn't successful and attempts to remedy this by mini-coaching. If any of these resonate with you, just remember "it's for the kids". You are a teacher not a player.

8: Should coaches be silent at games?

No! The opposite extreme of a shouter is the truly silent coach, which is easily mistaken for indifference. Players do like to be praised when they do well. There are plenty of opportunities at a game to provide praise and positive encouragement to your players. It's also perfectly ok to communicate tactical suggestions just so long as you don't do it continuously. For example, instructions to your defense to move up with play, and occasional positional advice. What you should not do is try to teach positional play at a game by constant instruction.

Conclusion

If while reading this you recognized some of your own behavior at games, try to examine your reasons for mini-coaching. Hopefully some of the arguments above will persuade you that there is another way that will achieve the same results and, in the process, let the kids play their game in as natural a way as possible.