

# The Craft of Coaching (NSCAA)

*"A good coach is able to take a player where they have never been before and will not get to on their own."* John Wooden

This in many ways gives meaning to what it is to coach. Coaching is a craft, a professional endeavor, which requires pride of performance, as well as the continuous acquisition of knowledge and skills. Coaching can be enormously satisfying.

Many would argue that the ultimate acid test of a player is "What impact did you have on the game?" Surely the ultimate acid test of a coach is "What impact did you have on your players?"

It would be disingenuous to assert that a player's sole means of improvement is through good coaching. Coaches take too much credit for producing good players and too much criticism for producing poor ones. Playing with and against better players ultimately is what improves a player. Players also improve from modeling – watching and imitating good players. Improvements are accelerated for players immersed in a soccer culture where good play is appreciated and the game is respected.

Player improvement also occurs, undeniably, from participating in focused, dynamic and well-structured training sessions. The role of the coach is to teach and challenge players. It is unusual to hear of players from winning programs who are dissatisfied with the quality of coaching they receive on the training ground. They have been recruited for their ability, but they stagnate as players due to a lack of interest or lack of skill of the coach to help them. How much better would it have been for the aforementioned candidate to have won trophies and improved during his time as a player? How much more rewarding would the playing experience have been if the coach had taken player development as seriously as managing the program? The very best coaches we have, obviously, do both. Players want more from a coach than winning trophies. They want to prepare for the next level. They want to get better.

The craft of coaching players comes down to four basic tasks. The end results are carefully designed and focused training sessions in an environment which closely resembles the competitive pressure of a game, and in which players improve. The four basic coaching tasks are:

- 1) Observation
- 2) Organization
- 3) Instruction
- 4) Motivation

## Observation

To discover what players need to work on in training, the coach must observe them play in a game situation. The game tells us what training a player needs. The observations the coach makes during a game will give the practice session a focus. Consequently, the soccer-coaching model on game day is quite different from the more American sports of football, basketball or baseball, all of which encourage a high degree of interaction between players and coaches. Possibly lacrosse or ice hockey are better models for soccer, wherein the coach observes the game, occasionally exhorts players to perform, and makes tactical or strategic substitutions.

Match observation and analysis is a very difficult skill. Watching a lot of soccer games obviously helps develop this skill. Sitting quietly with a pad and pen to note observations is helpful. Developing the ability to look away from the ball is also extremely important. Here are three classic scenarios where looking away from the ball might be important:

1. If midfielders get caught in possession, you may accuse them of indecision. Had you looked away from the ball at the forwards, however, you would have seen that they had not checked back for the ball or made runs to space to receive a pass.
2. Your forwards have the ball outside opponent's penalty box. Are your backs pushed up to the half line to compact the team defensively?
3. Your team plays a 4-4-2. When the right flank has the ball, does left flank come inside to become a third center forward, or does he/she stay wide? This has implications for getting into penalty area if a cross is delivered or leaving space for overlapping left back.

Compartmentalizing observation into categories is also a useful approach when observing a match.

1. *Individual* - Evaluation of each players technical, tactical, physical and psychological performance.
2. *Small Groups* - Observation of defenders, midfielders, and forwards as units. Observation of vertical thirds, left flank, central, and right flank. Observation of players within 12 yards of the ball. Observation of first and second attackers. Observation of first and second defenders
3. *Team* - Observation and evaluation of the ability of the team to apply the principles of game to different tactical situations?

Attack:

- a. Penetration
- b. Support
- c. Mobility
- d. Width
- e. Creativity

Defense:

- a. Pressure
- b. Cover
- c. Depth
- d. Balance
- e. Compactness

## Organization

Soccer players learn to play better soccer by practicing soccer-like exercises. Contrived drills, excessive standing in lines, scrimmages with no focus, running laps have very little benefit to players. Coaches need to organize their training sessions with the goal of improving players by having them play soccer. "The game is the teacher" is a phrase that we hear over and over again. In practical terms, this maxim means that the coach organizes conditioned games to improve players. The kind of conditions the coach puts on the games will help teach the players.

Part of the skill of a "good" coach is to design exercises that specifically address problem areas. The conditions the coach puts on games basically fall into the following categories:

1. Numbers of players (e.g. 4 v. 2, 8 v. 8, 6 v. 6 + 1, etc.)
2. Size and shape of field (narrow and long for vertical passes, short and wide for shooting or crossing.)
3. Goals or methods of scoring (shooting into a full goal, dribbling across a line, 6 passes equals a goal, etc.)
4. Numbers of touches (1 touch to encourage passing and support play, 2 touches to encourage receiving)
5. Zonal restrictions (field marked off by cones with restrictions as to who can go into certain zones)

The methods a coach uses to improve players depend on such factors as age, ability and ultimate purpose of a practice. The methods of a youth coach uses are completely different than those of a college coach. A coach preparing to play an opponent may also be more concerned about the future game than the one that is past.

All coaches are encouraged to write down a practice plan regardless of age group of the players. Practice plans should identify the goal(s) of the training session, as well as delineate practice sequencing and duration of exercises. Training sessions must have a focus. Improvements will more likely occur when concentration is on one, two, or (at most) three concepts. Sequencing of exercises within a training session must follow a logical progression. The coach may work with the back four versus two center forwards before putting them into a game situation. Having a youth player practice dribbling and footwork in a 1v1 situation may precede playing in a small-sided game. Practices should be about the same length as a game. Therefore, the duration of training sessions should vary with player age and experience.

The coach should meet with players prior to session to explain what they will be doing in practice. This is helpful in focusing players on a goal and preparing them, psychologically, for practice. In general, it is better to do "fitness" training as part of the normal practice environment rather than devote time to running that is not soccer-related.

In general, a typical practice should consist of the following components:

1. Technical Warm-up – Should be related to theme and focus of practice (e.g. passing in pairs, circle routines).
2. Small-Sided Activity – Practice-games that focus on observations the coach makes from games. A typical format for this phase of training is 4v4.
3. Expanded Small-Sided Activity – During this phase, the coach may split team up for "functional" training (e.g. goalkeepers and defenders in one end, midfielders and forwards in other).
4. Game-Like Activity – This phase should be as game-realistic as possible. Play a 7v7, 8v8, or 9v9 game to full-sized goals with goalkeepers. Coach emphasizes points from the practice.
5. Warm-down – Players jog and stretch together led by captains. This phase can also be used for shooting practice (i.e. line-drills) or PK practice.

## Instruction

Possibly the biggest difference between experienced coaches and novice coaches is in the quality and quantity of their instruction. There are certain "teachable moments" that occur in a practice session when the skilled coach speaks and addresses a player or group of players. The number of instructional stoppages and their timing very much will be a matter of choice for the coach. It will also depend on the age group. In general, younger will need more instruction than older players.

Teachable moments or "coaching points" happen at fairly predictable times, including when something is done incorrectly or when something is done correctly. When players are clearly fatigued, an instructional moment is a

welcome a rest and Between exercises, during water breaks, or when the ball goes out of play are also logical times for making coaching points.

Instructional points can be made to an individual, group or a team. They can be made while play continues or play can be stopped. Most importantly, they must focus on the actual teaching theme or goal. Sometimes silence can be the coach's greatest ally. Clearly there are no absolutes as to how the coach gets improvement out of players. Coaches must understand what is best for their environment and fits their personality. Avoid too many stoppages that prevent any flow from developing in a training activity.

The keys to success in teaching soccer tactics to youth players are these:

1. Teach simple soccer tactics that the players can use with the skills they possess.
2. Teach basic soccer tactics that are appropriate to player age and skill level.
3. Use simple, direct, and unambiguous language, and keep it brief - no long lectures, no sarcasm that could be misinterpreted. Speak carefully and be specific and brief.
4. Seeing is better than hearing. Doing is better than seeing. So, introduce your topic, show it, and get the kids doing it quickly.
5. Teach one tactical idea at a time. Don't make a distraction by making other corrections.

## Motivation

One of the great rewards of coaching is helping to energize a player and stimulate a player so that he or she wants to improve. Players will improve only if they want to improve, but the coach can offer extrinsic motivation that lights a spark in a player. The coach does this in a number of ways, including:

1. Quality practices - Practices that are organized, focused, and facilitate clear improvement will help to motivate players. Fun also helps!
2. Specific instruction – Constructive coaching points that specifically relate to the focus of the session will keep players motivated.
3. Mixture of positive and critical reinforcement - Coaches must be demanding at times. The best coaches understand how to mix praise with honest criticism in such a way as to challenge the players to improve.
4. Appearance and participation - The coach should have a modicum of physical fitness and dress like a coach. Players like it when a coach occasionally joins in a practice. (Hint: make yourself the +1 who cannot be tackled). It also helps if you are actually enjoying coaching.
5. Realistic expectations - Prudent coaches set realistic goals and targets for the players. They keep the game within the context of how good the team is.

Personal honesty and integrity are qualities that are respected by players. In addition, players will clearly respond to a coach who displays an interest in them aside from their soccer ability. Talk to your players about school, about their goals for college, and other non-soccer activities they are involved in – show them you really care about them as individuals and not just as players.

If you are meeting your new soccer team and starting practice next week, here are some ideas to help you get off to a good start.

1. Plan out your seasonal year, including league matches, training times, tournament travel and scrimmages. Talk it over with your club coaching director and a parent or two.
2. Be first to make arrangements with other coaches for scrimmages and with your club field assignor for any extra training time or scrimmage times on your fields. (Hint: always be nice to your field assignor)
3. Communicate your plan to your parents on paper and in person after your first practice. Keep it simple and friendly.
4. Start your first practice on time and stop on time. Don't wait for late arrivers at this practice or any other.
5. Whether players arrive on time or late, greet each one personally by name at this practice, and every practice to follow.
6. Meet your parents and find a loyal, enthusiastic, and well-organized team manager who is a good communicator, leader among parents, and who has a good attitude.
7. As you meet your parents, consider it a sales call. First impressions are important. Don't talk about what you need until you find out all about the parents and players.
- 8 A team that chases scores or standings may have some successes. But a team that diligently concentrates on executing the small details of the game will always be successful.
9. When the going gets tough and the game is on the line the victor is many times decided by a player or small group that takes some chances. Promote an environment where taking some chances, showing some creativity and playing with passion are rewarded, even if attempts sometimes does not work out.
10. Demand that players always execute properly. Coaches can tell if a player is not skilled and needs more practice or is just not concentrating. If a team is not executing do not “practice” bad. Try another drill. Change the practice plan or just end practice.

## Characteristics of Successful Soccer Teams

1. *More Possession* – control the pace and direction of play – control of the midfield
2. *More Attempts at Goal* – more chances and more shots on goal
3. *More Attacking Options* – A Multi-dimensional and Flexible Attack
4. *Quick and Organized Transition to Defense* – Getting Numbers Behind the Ball – Quick Transition
5. *Ability to Create Scoring Opportunities from Possession and Build-up* - Gaining Possession in the Defensive Third and Counter-Attacking
6. *Ability to Regain Possession in the Attacking Third* – High-Pressure Defense
7. *Ability to Attack through the Center of the Field* – penetration in the middle
8. *Exploiting Wide Areas to Create Scoring Chances* – Crossing and Finishing
9. *Making Effective Use of Set-Play Opportunities* – Set-plays account for 30-40% of all goals scored