



COACHING A YOUTH SOCCER TEAM -- AN INTRODUCTION

Biff Sturla
President, Lower Merion Soccer Club
soccer@lmsc.net

Last Revised: July, 2008

Many adults who volunteer to coach youth soccer teams are parents of the players. Many of these coaches have a very limited soccer background. Some coaches played the game at some level years ago, but few if any, actually know how to COACH a youth soccer team. This paper is an attempt to help adults who are new to the world of coaching in youth soccer. It is assumed that this parent/coach has little or no formal training in coaching the sport.

The emphasis of this paper will be on coaching players ages 6 - 9. Much of the material presented here comes directly from the United States Soccer Federation and their various level youth coaching courses.

THE TWO PRIMARY GOALS OF YOUTH COACHING

1. **Instill a love of the game in each player.** Even if the coach is unable to accomplish anything else, if he can get the players to love the game and look forward to the next practice, the next game and the next soccer season, then the coach can consider himself to be successful. Soccer must always be FUN ... for the players and for the coaches.
2. **Instill a desire to master the ball in each player.** Coaches must convince each player of the NEED to develop soccer skills (technique). The players must be convinced that it is **FUN** to work with a soccer ball. Players must learn to WANT to master the skills, not feel that they are being forced to master the skills.

WHAT IS NOT THE GOAL OF YOUTH SOCCER COACHES

Too many adults equate winning games with success in coaching. Unfortunately with young players, the easiest way to win is to have the players neglect skill development and just kick the ball down the field and run after it. This does nothing to develop skill in the players, yet some coaches think they are soccer geniuses because their teams are able to win on a regular basis.

Winning must NOT be a high priority. Obviously kids will have more fun (and will love the game more) if they win more than they lose, but coaches must discipline themselves to keep their priorities in line and concentrate on enjoyment of the game and skill development.

At the end of the season, a coach should look at his team and compare their play to what it was at the beginning of the season. If the players have developed a great love for the game and have greatly improved their skills and knowledge of the game, then the coach has had a successful season. If the coach looks primarily at his team's record, then he is likely to be more interested in satisfying his own ego than he is in his players' well being.

With these goals in mind, let's look into how youth soccer coaches can best go about accomplishing the goals listed above.

THE FOUR COMPONENTS OF SOCCER

With regard to coaching, the game of soccer is divided into four distinct areas. These areas are often referred to as "The Four Pillars Of Soccer."

- **TECHNICAL:** HOW to perform a skill. Technical skills include shooting, passing & receiving, dribbling, goalkeeping, heading, tackling, etc.
- **TACTICAL:** Tactics is DECISION MAKING! Tactics answer the questions of WHEN, WHERE and WHY to doing something. There are three types of tactics, those being INDIVIDUAL (1v1), SMALL GROUP (2v1 up through 4v4) and TEAM (5v5 for youngsters up to 11v11 for adults).
- **PHYSICAL:** Speed, quickness, size, strength, agility, coordination, endurance, etc.
- **PSYCHOLOGICAL:** Is the player having fun? Is he developing mentally? Can he perform under pressure? Is there too much pressure placed on the player to perform well?

Coaches must try to address **all four of the pillars** in every activity they organize in a practice.

ECONOMICAL TRAINING -- Probably the biggest "buzzword" in soccer coaching, economical training is the ability of a soccer coach to combine AT LEAST two of the four pillars of soccer into every aspect of a practice. If any part of a practice addresses only one of the four pillars, then that part of practice cannot be considered to be effective.

Example 1: Players are divided into groups of two, each group playing 1v1 keepaway.

- Technical: There is a 1:2 ball:player ratio so they are getting many touches on the ball.
- Tactical: They are making decisions throughout the entire activity.
- Physical: They are working very hard and are developing physically.
- Psychological: The players are competing against another player, which is always FUN.

Example 2: The coach has the kids run two laps around the field for a warmup.

- Technical: The ball:player ratio is 0 so there is no technical work (no touches on the ball).
- Tactical: No decision making so there is no tactical work.
- Physical: Lots of work, but only as much as example 1 above.
- Psychological: Players do not like running laps and are probably not having any fun.

The first example above exemplifies "economical training" and the coach can be sure that the activity is productive. The coach in example 2 is wasting the players' time.

As mentioned before, we need to concentrate on skill development (technique). This is accomplished at the fastest rate if EVERY player has a soccer ball in each activity. Coaches should require that EVERY player bring a ball to EVERY practice and to EVERY game (for warmups).

THE ORGANIZATION OF A TRAINING SESSION

- 1) Bring players in quickly and get them organized. Don't have the players looking into the sun or into any other distractions (passing cars, groups of people, parents, etc.).
- 2) BRIEFLY tell the players what they will be doing and WHY. Sell them on the topic (enthusiasm).
- 3) Demonstrate (or have a quality player demonstrate). "Paint a picture for them."
- 4) Let them practice the skill.
- 5) Make corrections, decide on how and when to correct (individual corrections or group corrections).
- 6) Continue practicing the skill.

Making Corrections During Practice: This is important, but the most important thing for the coach is to create the proper competitive environment in the practice session. All activities must be interesting and challenging to all of the players so that they are challenged and want to work hard.

THE THREE STAGES OF AN EFFECTIVE PRACTICE (TECHNICAL)

At each practice, the coach should focus on a SINGLE technique. A practice designed to develop the players' technical skill should be divided into three successive stages as follows:

1. **FUNDAMENTAL STAGE:** There is no opponent and little pressure of time and space. All players work with their own ball. Maximize the number of touches on the ball that each player makes. The more touches on the ball each player takes, the better.
2. **MATCH RELATED STAGE:** An opponent is used (but not necessarily at 100 percent).
3. **MATCH CONDITION STAGE:** Small sided game (scrimmage) played at match speed. The coach may set restrictions or requirements to ensure that the desired skill is being performed.

Whenever a coach is teaching a particular technique (skill) to the players, he should follow these three stages **in order**. The practice should NOT move on to the next stage until the previous stage has been mastered by the players.

AN EXAMPLE OF AN EFFECTIVE TECHNICAL PRACTICE

Suppose that the coach has decided to work on the technique of dribbling. Here is an example of how the coach could run a practice for 12 players which focuses on dribbling:

START OF PRACTICE - Quickly bring the players in (facing away from distractions such as the sun). BRIEFLY tell them that they will be working on dribbling and what the importance of dribbling is. Demonstrate the various TECHNICAL components of dribbling (or use a demonstrator). Quickly get the players organized into the Fundamental Stage of practice:

1) FUNDAMENTAL STAGE - Mark out a 20 x 20 yard playing area (grid) with a dozen or so cones. Place all 12 players in the grid with EACH player having his own soccer ball. Have the players dribble around randomly in the grid using the inside of the foot, outside of the foot, sole of the foot, etc. Encourage players to use both the left foot and right foot. Tell the players that they must keep their heads up during this activity in order to avoid collisions.

This activity concentrates on dribbling technique play but also has a bit of the tactical component (deciding on which surface of the foot to use and which direction to go in order to avoid a collision), the physical component (lots of running) and the psychological component (the activity is mentally challenging and the kids enjoy it as long as they get brief rest periods).

2) MATCH RELATED STAGE - In the Match Related Stage, opposition is added. For this activity, the coach takes six of the players' soccer balls away and requires that any player without a ball try to steal another player's ball (note that about half of the players start with a ball and half do not). When a player has his ball taken away or he is forced out of bounds, he must immediately find a different player and try to take away that player's ball.

Again we are concentrating on the players' TECHNICAL development but the activity also has tactical elements (decision making), physical work and psychological rewards (they are being challenged and enjoy the competition).

3) MATCH CONDITION STAGE - The last 20 to 30 minutes of ALL practices should be spent in game competition. Kids love to compete, this is why they signed up for soccer so LET THEM PLAY. In the Match Condition Stage, we set up game situations but control the game to accomplish what we want.

As an example, set up two simultaneous games of 3v3 on adjoining fields. Set a requirement that each time a player gets the ball, he must try to dribble past an opponent before he may pass. Alternatively, the coach could require the player to take a minimum of four touches on the ball before passing. These restrictions would not apply if the player is able to shoot the ball. Encourage the players to try the various dribbling skills that they were working on earlier in practice.

To maximize the effort of the players, keep score in the Match Condition Stage. If your Match Condition Stage uses four teams, setup a small tournament.

UNDERSTANDING THE MATCH CONDITION STAGE

Youngsters love to compete and they love to play games. As coaches, we don't want to deny this so we try to end EVERY practice with one or more games. The job of the coach is to design games that will allow the players to leave practice with big smiles on their faces and at the same time improve their skills.

The solution is **SMALL SIDED GAMES**. Youth soccer coaches should rarely if ever have full sided games in practice. They should NEVER set up a scrimmage with another team that is practicing at the same time. WHY? Because then your ever important ball:player ratio is too low. If two teams of 12 are sharing a single ball, your ball:player ratio is 1:24 which is clearly not acceptable.

We want our end of practice scrimmages (and all other parts of practices) to have a high ball:player ratio so as to **MAXIMIZE THE NUMBER OF BALL TOUCHES AND DECISIONS A PLAYER MAKES**. In our Match Condition Stage above, we used the concept of "Small Sided Games". We divided our 12 players into four teams of three players and had TWO GAMES going on at the same time. Here, we had a ball:player ratio of 1:6, thus ensuring that ALL players were very involved in their game, made a large number of touches on the ball and a made a large number of tactical decisions.

The highest ratio that is considered acceptable is to split your own team into two and play. This would make it 1:12 so the players would be half as involved, but certainly much more involved than playing against another team (1:24 ball:player ratio).

OTHER WAYS TO MAXIMIZE PLAYER PARTICIPATION IN SCRIMMAGES

1) Although only one ball is used in each practice game, the coach should place all other balls inside each of the goals. Then, when a ball goes out of play, the goalie can get a different ball from inside the goal and quickly put it into play. This is much more time efficient than having someone constantly chase the ball that went out of play. Only when all available balls have been used up should players retrieve the balls (and again put them inside each goal).

2) Playing in Small Sided Games gets tiring and the players need to rest. Rather than having all players rest at once, the coach can keep the game going at all times by rotating one player from each team out of the game at a time. The resting player can take a water break or can be standing behind his goal retrieving balls shot out of play. This way the game never stops and each player gets a chance to rest at some point. Again, we have maximized the number of ball touches and the number of decisions each player makes during the scrimmage.

3) To best supervise two groups, the coach should have an assistant coach or another player's parent or older sibling help out by supervising the second group. This will allow for both games to run smoothly at the same time with the proper supervision.

HOW TO RUN SCRIMMAGES TO MAXIMIZE PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

1) The number one rule that the coach must enforce is the "**NO BOOM BALL**" rule. This means that each time a player gets the ball, he may make a decision as to whether to a) **pass** the ball, b) **dribble** the ball or c) **shoot** the ball. **The decision is up to the player** but he should NEVER be allowed to just BOOM the ball down the field. Coaches must NEVER allow this. Instead, the player must make an intelligent decision each time he has the ball and must have an intelligent thought behind each touch of the ball. This is THE MOST IMPORTANT RULE that the coach must enforce to maximize player development.

2) **Let the players make their own decisions!** Coaches should **not** make the decisions for the players by telling them what to do when they have the ball. **Decision making** is a major part of soccer but too often an overeager coach will shout instructions to the player with the ball. This does NOTHING for player development and will prevent the player from being able to think on a soccer field. **COACH, BUT NEVER OVER-COACH. Coaches must discipline themselves to know when to not say anything.**

AN EXAMPLE OF A PRACTICE FOCUSING ON SHOOTING

The following is an example of a technical progression for shooting for 8 to 10 year olds. The keys to the progression are the fact that there is a high ball:player ratio and the fact that the progression moves from simple to complex (Fundamental Stage to Match Related Stage to Match Condition Stage).

1) FUNDAMENTAL STAGE - Set up a row of five cones, each spaced about eight yards apart. This will create a total of four regular sized goals. Divide the players into groups of three with each group working at one of the four goals. Have one player in each group serve as goalie while the other two players stand about 15 yards from the goal, one on each side of the goal, each with a ball. The two shooting players in each group alternate taking shots on the goalie. If the ball goes through the goal or goes wide of the goal, the player on the other side of the goal can collect the ball.

Have the players progress from shooting a stationary ball to dribbling the ball towards goal and shooting. It is VERY important that they work on this both **left footed and right footed**. Be sure to rotate the players so they all get a chance to play goalie. The players can also practice shooting volley shots by throwing the ball up in the air and shooting it while it is bouncing.

2) MATCH RELATED STAGE - After the players have had a chance to practice their shooting technique without the pressure of an opponent, progress to having the players shoot while they are being defended by an opponent.

Place two players about 30 yards from a goal which is defended by a goalie and one defender. The goalie punts the ball out to the attackers as the defender starts to run out from the goal line, towards the attackers. The two attackers then go to the goal 2 versus 1 and try to score. Since there are more attackers than there are defenders, they should be able to get off a shot although the defender will still be able to pressure the attackers into releasing the ball much quicker than in the Fundamental Stage.

If this activity is too difficult for the attackers, the coach can change the activity to use three attackers. Alternatively, the coach could play as the defender, thus controlling the amount of defensive pressure being applied to the attacking players.

It is the coach's job to control the amount of pressure in every activity so that the attackers are affected by the pressure but are still able to realize **success under pressure** in each activity. It is very important to ensure that the players realize success in every activity of a practice session.

This activity should be done using two or three different goals simultaneously in order to minimize the amount of time that players are standing idle, watch the other players in action.

3) MATCH CONDITION STAGE - In the final stage of the technical progression, we set up two small fields. Each field should be only about 20 yards long. On each field, two teams play 3v3 (with one player on each team designated as a goalie). During the games, players are to be encouraged (or required) to try and shoot every time they get the ball. Play for 10 minutes and then switch opponents. Be sure to keep plenty of extra balls inside of each goal so that a new ball can be put into play as soon as the ball being used goes out of play.

Players will play much harder if score is kept. A round robin tournament could be held between the four teams. The key to the Match Condition Stage for this practice is to create an environment where the players will take plenty of shots. By keeping the goals close together, each team will have plenty of shooting opportunities.

In this practice, we started with no pressure from an opponent (Fundamental Stage), progressed to a controlled amount of pressure (Match Related Stage) and finished with a Small Sided Game designed to encourage trying the skill (shooting) that was the focus of the practice (Match Condition Stage). Since the practice ended with the players competing in a game, they will most likely leave practice with a smile.

THE STAGES OF AN EFFECTIVE TACTICAL PRACTICE

Up to now, we have focused on running practices that focused on a particular **TECHNIQUE**. Coaches of younger teams should spend the majority of their time teaching **TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENT**. Teaching **TACTICAL** skills (decision making) is of limited use until the players have developed technical skill. Still, there comes a time when youth coaches need to briefly teach tactics (decision making). As stated before, there are **three types of tactics**: individual, small group and team tactics.

The two MOST important tactics are 1v1 offense and 1v1 defense. For younger teams, small group tactics can get touched upon, but team tactics (5 vs. 5 or higher) should not be stressed until players have reached their teenage years and are technically sound players.

Similar to the progression discussed for teaching a technique, tactics are taught in a progression of stages (simple to complex). The following is the progression that should be used when teaching tactics:

1. Have players practice in **unlimited space**.
2. Play in a **confined area - grid** first for possession only, then playing with direction.
3. Have play go to a **single** (full sized) **goal**.
4. Have play go to a full sized goal with a **counterattack goal** (any size).
5. Finish with play going to **two** (full sized) **goals**.

AN EXAMPLE OF AN EFFECTIVE TACTICAL PRACTICE

Below is an example of a tactical practice that focuses on midfield play (possessing the ball):

- 1) UNLIMITED SPACE** - Divide the players into groups of three with each group having a ball. Begin by having the players in each group pass among themselves while moving randomly about the field.
- 2) CONFINED AREA** - Set up three 20x20 grids with players in each grid playing 3v1 keepaway. Here we start to introduce **DECISION MAKING**. When a player receives the ball, which teammate should he pass to? Which foot and which surface should he receive with and pass with? As mentioned, the decision making must be done **UNDER PRESSURE**. Here, the player is under the pressure of both the opponent and of the boundaries of the grid. Play first just for possession, then have the offensive team try to take the ball from one end of the grid to the other (now in a 30x20 yard 'rectangular' grid).
- 3) PLAY TO A SINGLE GOAL** - When the players have realized success with the grid work, they should play to a single regulation sized goal. Here we could have the players playing 3v1 in front of a goal with a goalie in it. The players could be required to make five passes before being allowed to shoot. If the defender steals the ball, play starts over.
- 4) ADD A COUNTERATTACK GOAL** - Mark off a counterattack goal or line which the defender must try to dribble through if he steals the ball. Play continues until the offense either makes five passes and shoots or until the defender dribbles through the counterattack goal.
- 5) PLAY TO TWO GOALS** - Play a game of 2v2 with goalies and two offensive "NEUTRAL" players. The neutral players would always play on the team in possession of the ball. The neutral players switch from one team to another as soon as the defensive team steals the ball. Again, require five successive passes before either team can shoot.

END OF PRACTICE: Finish the practice with a regular **small sided scrimmage**, perhaps two games of 3v3. **MINIMIZE** your coaching at this point. **LET THEM PLAY, LET THEM HAVE FUN.** The coach should **OBSERVE** the play to see if the players are incorporating what they just learned into their game.

When scrimmaging or doing competitive activities, **ALWAYS KEEP SCORE IN THE GAME.** This will give the players an incentive to work harder. Kids love to compete. If playing a midfield game in a grid, count the number of consecutive passes made and challenge them to reach a certain number. Players will enjoy the practice more when you keep score, as long as the competitiveness isn't overdone and does not cause the players to lose sight of what they were working on earlier in the practice.

AN EXAMPLE OF A TACTICAL PRACTICE FOCUSING ON 1 v 1

By far, the MOST IMPORTANT tactic that a coach can teach is 1 versus 1 (both offense and defense). In order for players to develop their individual soccer abilities, they must be given the opportunity to "take on and beat an opponent," both in practices and in games. In real soccer games at any level, there are many 1 vs. 1 duels that occur all over the field.

Players must be made to feel comfortable with a ball at their feet. If they do not have confidence, they will just boot the ball away and will never develop. A significant amount of time during the season should be spent developing individual skill (technique) and taking that into the 1v1 arena (individual tactics).

Below is an example of a **1 versus 1 tactical progression**:

WARMUP - At the start of practice, place the players in a large grid (30 by 30 yards), each with a ball at their feet, practicing their various dribbling moves.

1) UNLIMITED SPACE - Divide players into groups of two, with each pair having one ball. Have the player with the ball put on a fake around the other player and dribble by him. Start with the defender being stationary at first to ensure the success of each move. After awhile, have the defender play at 50 percent effort, not trying to get the ball, but just putting a limited amount of pressure on the attacker.

2) CONFINED AREA (first for **possession**, then with **direction**) - Place each pair in a 10x10 grid. First, have each pair play keepaway for 30 seconds with each player trying to maintain possession of the ball or regain possession of the ball. Be sure the players switch partners and compete against different players. Since this is quite strenuous, have them work for 30 seconds, then rest for 30 seconds. Progress to having the player with the ball try and dribble the ball from one side of the grid to the opposite side of the grid (this adds the element of direction to the competition).

3) PLAY TO A SINGLE GOAL - Divide the players into groups of three, give each group a pair of cones to use as a goal. Have one player in each group be a goalie. The player with the ball plays 1v1 against the third player, trying to beat the defender and take a shot. Play stops when a goal is scored, a save is made, the ball goes out of bounds or when the defender wins the ball.

4) ADD A COUNTERATTACK GOAL - Lay down another pair of cones 25 yards away from the goal. If the defender steals the ball, he tries to dribble through the cones. The attacking player should be taught to immediately try to regain progression of the ball if he loses it.

5) PLAY TO TWO GOALS - Divide the players into groups of four. Set up two goals, twenty yards apart. Place several balls in each goal. Each team has one goalie and one field player. The two field players play 1v1 against each other for a minute. When a shot goes over the end line, the goalie immediately gets another ball out of the net and passes it to his teammate. This allows play to continue right away rather than wait for the ball to be retrieved. After a minute, switch the goalies and field players. This will allow the players to rest from the strenuous 1v1 work and also work on their goaltending skills.

NOTES ON 1v1 TACTICAL DEVELOPMENT:

- Be sure to have SEVERAL groups playing at once. Never have a large group of players off to the side, waiting for their turn. If your team has 12 players, there should be four fields setup, each with 3 players. This allows two players to play 1v1 in each grid while only one gets a chance to be rest.
- Be sure to have many practice sessions emphasizing 1v1 work. This is the most important aspect of youth soccer and will provide maximum player development.
- Have the players play 1v1 to goal. It is not enough to just possess the ball in a keepaway game, they must be able to practice getting PAST the defending player and shooting.

AN EXAMPLE OF A SMALL GROUP TACTICAL PRACTICE

As mentioned before, the most important aspects of soccer for youth coaches should be having FUN, the development of **proper technique** and the **ability to play 1v1** (individual tactics). The 1v1 aspect of play is the most important tactic as far as player development. At some point, coaches need to develop small group tactics. For our younger players, this means the development of 2v1 tactics.

On offense, the player with the ball is called the "1st attacker" while the teammate closest to the ball is called the "2nd attacker." All other attacking players share the role of "3rd attackers." Similar roles are defined for defenders (1st defender, 2nd defender and 3rd defenders). For younger age groups, the concept of the 3rd attacker is way too advanced so 2v1 is often as far as the coach wants to go in small group tactics (except possibly 2v2). Team tactics are too advanced for the younger players.

Below is an example of a **2 versus 1 tactical progression**:

1) UNLIMITED SPACE - Divide players into groups of three. Have the players play 2v1 keepaway with the requirement that the defender only be allowed to WALK. After awhile, switch the players around so everyone has a chance at being the defender. Be sure to have the player with the ball pass and then quickly run behind the defender for a return pass (the "give and go" play, also known as the 1-2 or wall pass). Also, allow the player with the ball to make a fake pass and dribble by the defender.

2) CONFINED AREA (first for **possession**, then with **direction**) - Set up a 20x15 yard grid and continue the activity above. Playing within the grid adds the pressure of the sidelines into the attacker's game. Depending on the skill level of the players, have the defender WALK to steal the ball, jog or play at full speed. The coach must control the amount of pressure by the defense in order for the attacking players to experience **success under pressure**.

Progress to having the two offensive players try to beat the defender by taking the ball from one sideline to the opposite sideline, under control. The defender tries to steal the ball and dribble across the attacking team's sideline under control. Rotate the role of the players.

3) PLAY TO A SINGLE GOAL - Set up a goal with cones, place a goalie in the goal and have three field players play 2v1. The two attacking players try to score on the goal. Be sure to have several balls available for each group so they don't have to spend much time chasing the ball. Allow the players to decide whether to make the pass or dribble to goal.

4) ADD A COUNTERATTACK GOAL - Using a pair of cones, set up a second goal about 25 yards from the goal for the defender to try to dribble through when he steals the ball. Be sure the attackers try to regain possession before the defender can dribble the ball through the counterattack goal.

5) PLAY TO TWO GOALS - Divide players into groups of five. Setup two goals, about twenty yards apart. Each team has a goalie and one field player. The fifth player is a "neutral player" who always plays on the team in possession. This makes the activity 2v1 at all times.

NOTES ON THE 2v1 TACTICAL DEVELOPMENT:

- The success of the 2v1 work will depend on the age and technical level of the players. It is up to the coach to determine the parameters of each activity so that the attacking pair can experience success while being challenged. If it is too difficult, the coach can make the playing area larger, limit the pressure of the defender by requiring him to walk or even hop on one foot after the ball. Alternatively, an extra neutral player could be added into the activity.
- The development of the tactical progressions discussed for 1v1 and 2v1 can be applied to more complex tactics such as 3v1 or 3v2. Coaches of very young players should not work on such complex tactics.

VARIABLES THAT MUST BE ADJUSTED TO ENSURE SUCCESS IN AN ACTIVITY

The practices described in the preceding pages will be effective for some teams but not for others. Older, more advanced teams might find the activities too easy and the players getting bored. Younger, less experienced players might find the activities impossible and the players getting frustrated. Every soccer team is different. The coach must make an educated guess about what activities will work for his team.

There are several parameters that the coach has control of that can turn an unsuccessful activity into a successful one. In each activity, the coach must **observe** the activity, **decide** whether it is too easy or too difficult and then **adjust** the activity as soon as possible.

Below are some of the parameters a coach must initially decide on and then adjust as necessary:

1) THE SIZE OF THE GRID OR PLAYING AREA. If the players are younger and have less skill, they will need a larger grid to allow them more time to control the ball and make decisions. Older, more experienced players will need smaller grids to force them to make better touches on the ball and make quicker decisions. Remember that the boundaries of the grid add to the pressure that the player with the ball is faced with.

2) THE NUMBER OF PLAYERS involved in the activity. To ensure success, the coach must decide on how many offensive players and how many defensive players are to be used. A 3 to 1 ratio might be too difficult for younger players so the coach would have to change to 4 to 1. Older players might find the activity too easy. A better ratio might be 3 attackers vs. 2 defenders or even 3v3.

3) THE EFFORT OF THE DEFENDERS. To make an activity easier, defenders might be required to walk, be required to grab their socks when running or might be required to carry another player around piggy back style. Reducing the pressure of the defenders will give less experienced players enough time to perform the activity properly and with success. Alternatively, the coach could serve as the defender to control the pressure in the activity. As the players improve, the defensive effort **MUST** be increased in order to develop faster thinking and better technique.

4) THE NUMBER AND ROLE OF THE NEUTRAL PLAYERS. The concept of neutral players in activities (and also in scrimmages) is a very important one. A scrimmage of 2 versus 2 with two neutral players (2v2+2) allowed the team with the ball to always have a 4 to 2 numerical advantage. Less experienced teams might require more offensive neutral players.

Top notch older teams might require DEFENSIVE neutral players to force the players on offense to play and think under pressure. As an example, a 4v4+1 scrimmage could be set up where the neutral player tries to steal the ball from whoever has the ball and tries to keep the ball away from everyone else. This role for a neutral player should only be for older, advanced teams.

5) THE SIZE AND LOCATION OF THE GOALS. Some activities require players to dribble or pass the ball through the goal. This requires the goal to be much larger than a standard goal. Some games are played with no goalkeepers. This requires smaller goals. Some games can be played with four goals, each team shooting at two goals. The goals could be on the same endline or on all four sides of the field.

6) THE NUMBER OF GOALKEEPERS. In a shooting activity, resting players can serve as goalkeepers. This allows resting players to still be a part of the action. Teams could have 2 or 3 players playing goalie at the same time. Some activities are better off having no goalkeepers.

Coaches must **OBSERVE** each activity and adjust the above parameters. Each activity in a practice must be set up to accomplish the following:

- The attacking team must experience a high degree of **SUCCESS**.
- As they experience success, they must experience it under more and more pressure.
- Players must be allowed to make **THEIR OWN** decisions (**TACTICS = DECISIONS**).
- Defensive pressure is necessary so that attacking players learn to make quicker decisions.
- Skill development must always be a major priority.
- **LAST BUT MOST IMPORTANT:** All players should enjoy every activity. It must be **FUN**.

THE PHYSICAL ELEMENT AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ELEMENT OF COACHING

Of the four pillars of soccer, we have covered technical and tactical so far. We have seen several examples of activities that employ the concept of "Economical Training" (all or most all of the four pillars are involved). We now focus on the other two pillars, physical and psychological.

THE PHYSICAL ELEMENT: We only have a limited amount of time during the season to work with the players. This time should be spent developing skill. Coaches of younger players (pre-teenagers) should NEVER spend any significant time working solely on fitness. Youngsters get enough of this from gym class and from playing with their friends.

Players should never stretch before going through a warming up. At the start of a practice, the players should be first do some type of **movement with a ball** (the Fundamental Stage). After a warmup, teenagers and adults need to spend time stretching. Pre-teenage players rarely pull muscles and do not need to be as concerned with stretching. Pre-teenage players will not need to stretch but do need to warmup at the start of practice, especially in cold weather or early in the morning. Pre-teenage players often try to be "competitive" about stretching and are likely to do more harm than good to themselves.

Teenagers and adults need to stretch all major muscle groups 15 seconds at a time with no movement (this is known as "static" stretching). Players should NEVER bounce up and down when stretching. They should find a "comfort" zone in each stretch and maintain that position for at least 15 seconds.

Pre-teenage players should NEVER be made to run laps or sprints. This does not develop soccer skill and probably turns them off mentally. The successful coach will be able to employ a successful warmup by incorporating **movement with a ball** (each player dribbling his own ball or passing a ball back and forth with a partner while moving) into each practice and pre-game session.

Successful soccer activities involve plenty of running but this running is done while developing technical and tactical skills. Youth coaches should let this running be the work for the physical pillar. Coaches should concentrate on technical and tactical development. The physical element will find its way in during skills development without the players even being aware of it.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ELEMENT: Many higher level soccer coaches in the game today rate the psychological element as the MOST important of the four soccer pillars. Why? Quite simply, because it has the greatest long term effect on each individual player. How? Because if the coach does not make the soccer environment fun and enjoyable, players will quit the team and drop out of soccer. If the coach makes the environment fun and enjoyable for all the players, they will WANT to develop technically and tactically and will want to pursue soccer as a serious hobby.

If you as a coach feel you are not well qualified to develop a player technically or tactically, reread the above paragraph. If you can make things **FUN** for the player in practices and games, the player will want to go out and develop his skills on his own, or will want to go to a soccer camp to develop or will want to play at a higher level in the near future and he will develop those skills that you felt you couldn't teach.

Remember that the number one goal is to **instill a love of the game in each player**. If you accomplish this, everything else will fall into place.

If a coach feels totally inadequate in his knowledge of the game and unsure about how to develop players skills, he should run practices in the following way: divide the players into small groups and play many small sided games. Let them have FUN competing (kids love to compete). You will most likely instill a love of the game in each child and you will be able to consider yourself a COACHING SUCCESS!

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH YOUNG PLAYERS

- Treat each player as an individual. Do not treat all players alike. The team clown must be treated differently than the young player who lacks self confidence. The team bully must be treated differently than the quiet, little, non-athletic player.
- Get to know each player. Coaches often find themselves making new friends this way, even if they are only a fraction of his age. Many coaches find that youngsters are a lot more interesting than adults and a lot more enjoyable to be with. Try to make time to talk with each player individually, but more important, try to make time to LISTEN to each one individually. Often times a player will come from a less than ideal home situation. You might be the only adult who has time to listen to the player express himself. The coach does not have to have an answer to his problems, just an ear for them to talk in to. Act interested!
- Know each player by NAME and call him by his name. Never call a player by his jersey number (unless you like being called to by your social security number!)
- Keep the majority of your comments to players POSITIVE, be sure to minimize the negative comments. If you make a NEGATIVE comment to a player about his play, be sure to follow it up with a solution to HOW it SHOULD have been done. Don't be critical unless you are able to offer a solution to the problem.

P.N.P. PSYCHOLOGY (Positive - Negative - Positive)

The best way to make a negative comment to a player is by using the P.N.P. method. This means that the coach should try to surround the Negative comment with two Positive comments. As an example, to get a player to look up to pass more, the coach might make the following P.N.P. comment:

"Your dribbling skills have gotten real good. You got around several players. You might try to look up sometimes and try to pass the ball when an opponent is guarding you since they seem to be crowding you because of your great dribbling skills."

CARING FOR INJURIES

When a player is injured, **stop play IMMEDIATELY** and check out the injury. Have the other players STOP playing with the ball and sit down (this will prevent them from accidentally kicking the ball and hitting the injured player).

The majority of times when a young player falls down, he is just scared and needs to be calmed down. Let the child stay on the ground until he is ready to get up. Have him **take SLOW and DEEP breaths** until his breathing is under control. When he starts to calm down and his breathing is close to normal, try to get him to laugh by telling a quick joke or by making a funny comment. Don't resume play until the injured player has been properly cared for. Do not carry the player off the field if it is a potentially serious injury.

For a more serious injury, use the R.I.C.E. treatment as follows:

- R REMOVE** the player from the game and have him REST.
- I ICE** the injury - place the ice in a bag or wet towel, don't apply ice directly to the skin.
- C COMPRESS** the injury - apply an ace bandage or other type of wrap to reduce swelling.
- E ELEVATE** the injury so that it is above the heart.

Ice should be applied to the injured area 20 minutes on, 20 minutes off, then 20 on again, etc.

Be sure you bring a **list of all the players' phone numbers** to every practice and game. If you do not have a cell phone with you, be sure you know where the nearest phone is to use in an emergency.

Bloody nose - Have the player lean forward and pinch the upper part of the nose to stop the bleeding. Calm him down, have him spit out any blood that goes into his mouth. Do not have him lie on the ground face up, he will choke on the blood.

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS TO DEAL WITH DURING PRACTICES

- Keep players active as much of the time as possible. Minimize the amount of time that they are inactive.
- "Practices should have as many players working as much of the time as possible."
- NEVER have players standing in lines waiting to perform a skill. Keep them busy.
- Have as many balls in use at one time as possible, be sure each player brings a ball to practice to maximize the ball:player ratio.
- When developing technique (skill), be sure they practice the skill both right footed and left footed. Soccer players should be TWO footed, not one footed.
- Practice activities should replicate the game as much as possible to maximize player development. Silly games that have no resemblance to real soccer games should be avoided.
- Start with the simple and progress to the complex. Don't make an activity more complex or difficult until the players have mastered the activity in its current state.
- Players must be put into competitive situations as much as possible. Not only do they enjoy it, but they learn to make decisions and learn to play under pressure. Be sure to have as many activity as possible where players play under pressure of an opponent.
- At high levels of soccer, the biggest problem of soccer is the ability to "finish" (score) under pressure. Much emphasis should be placed in the goal mouth where players try to put the ball in the goal while pressured by an opponent.
- Coaches must set up activities where there is just enough pressure for the players to experience **SUCCESS WHILE UNDER PRESSURE**. Coaches must adjust the coaching parameters to ensure that activities are not too easy (boring) and not too difficult (frustrating).
- Heading should only be briefly introduced. It does not become a big part of the game until the teenage years. Don't spend much time on it. Just teach proper technique for safety reasons.
- ALL players should be taught the technique and tactics of goalkeeping. Goalkeepers should be taught to move throughout the ENTIRE penalty area. They should not just stand back on the goal line and be a shot blocker. The more mobile goalie becomes a "shot preventer." Goalies should be encouraged to play outside the penalty area as an extra field player.
- Have a preset plan for each practice but be flexible. Anticipate the number of players, the size of the practice area, the number of balls available, the length of the practice and the equipment needs (cones, markers, etc.) when planning your next practice.
- Have each player bring a white shirt and a dark colored shirt to ALL practices so that you can make easily distinguishable teams for activities and scrimmages. Be sure they ALL bring shin guards to ALL practices and games (USSF regulations).
- Be **the first person to arrive** at practice and **the last person to leave**. If this is not possible, be sure another responsible adult handles this. Do not leave the field until you know all players have gotten a ride home!
- **The genius of a coach is to keep things simple in practice and keep things moving.**

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS TO DEAL WITH WHEN COACHING IN A GAME

- Be sure each player is able to play several different positions. No player should be just a "defensive" player", an "offensive player" or a goalie.
- Rotate all players in the goalie position throughout the season. Do not have a "goalie" specialist who is your regular goalie during the year.
- At the beginning of the season, let all the parents know that they are **not** to yell instructions to the players (especially to their own child) during the game. Parents are often well meaning but often hinder their child's decision making development. Explain this to the parents and ENFORCE IT.
- "Psychological rewards are more important than material rewards." This means that players should be wanting to do well in games for personal pride and team pride as opposed to trophies, ice cream for scoring goals, etc.
- Coaches must encourage players to want to possess the ball. Players should not be told to get rid of the ball once they get it. Young players should be encouraged to play a "SELFISH" type of game, **players must be made to feel comfortable holding the ball**. This develops a player's individual skill in the fastest way possible. They should establish the attitude that "when I have the ball, I am the master."
- Keep tactics to a minimum. Don't expect them to understand tactics (decision making) at a level beyond what their age allows. Tactics are more easily taught to older players. Younger players should spend the majority of time developing technical skills.
- The coach's job is at practice and pre-game warmups, NOT during the games themselves.
- Have your players arrive to a game 30 minutes early (with their soccer ball). Use this time to do some more skill work off to the side of the field while the game before your game is in progress. Having this extra practice time will double the amount of touches on the ball that a player makes during the season.
- A very important job for coaches on game day is to observe his team and decide what things will need to be worked on the most at the next practice session. At the end of each game, determine your players' biggest needs and then put together a plan for your next practice.
- Be sure ALL players get plenty of playing time in games. In intramural soccer, all players should get an equal amount of playing time, regardless of whether they are the star player, the weakest player, the coach's child, etc.
- In order for players to develop, they must be allowed to make mistakes. Don't preach a conservative, defensive oriented "safety first" style of play. Instead, let them try to beat opponents 1v1, let them try to dribble the ball upfield. Encourage all players to take risks.
- Do not let players simply kick the ball out of bounds when on defense. Encourage them to try and work the ball up the field by either dribbling or passing.
- At halftime, be sure the players can get plenty of water. Then, bring the players together, away from their parents and BRIEFLY comment on two or three (and no more) items from the first half. Make suggestions on how they can improve their play. Again, have them face away from any distractions (the sun, the crowd, another game going on, etc.)
- Do NOT introduce new concepts or ideas just before the start of a game or at halftime. Only introduce new concepts and strategies at practices. If you haven't worked on something in practice, do not try to work on it during a game.
- Also at halftime, take a couple individuals aside and make individual comments about their play. Be sure to keep the comments positive and make sure they feel good about their play. Avoid comments such as "You shouldn't do...." Instead, use comments such as "You will do even better if you..."

GENERAL ITEMS OF INTEREST FOR A YOUTH SOCCER COACH

- Remember that you are a role model for your players.
- Come to practices and games in soccer attire. Do not come dressed up in street clothes or work clothes. Do not wear your socks up to your knees to look like the players who are wearing shin guards. Do not dress up in a soccer uniform that is the same as the players uniform. Players generally laugh at coaches who try to dress up like the players.
- Never smoke near the players.
- **BE ENTHUSIASTIC!!!** If you appear to be having a fun time being at a soccer field, then your players will be more likely to have fun being on a soccer field.
- Do not yell at or bad mouth the referee. Do not let your players do this either.
- If you have a child on the team, treat your child like the other players. Do not show any favoritism towards your child. Often times, the other players will pick up on this and will hold this against your child.
- "Minimize talking, maximize action." Youngsters get bored by lectures and often don't listen to them. Keep comments brief and to the point. Get the players doing this as much as possible.
- Let the players make their own decisions. Don't tell the player with the ball what to do with it. Let him solve his own problems. Do not make any comments until he no longer has the ball.
- Be yourself, don't try to pretend to be someone else. If you try to act as someone other than who you are, the players will pick up on it and not respect you.
- Players must be able to execute and understand TECHNIQUE before they can attempt to execute TACTICS. Keep tactics to a minimum until technique has been mastered. Remember the saying "Tactics will always break down in the absence of technique."
- This paper did not discuss in any detail the proper techniques used in soccer. Coaches who are not familiar with proper technique can educate themselves through soccer coaching books and soccer coaching videos. Coaches can improve their abilities greatly by not only knowing the components of proper technique, but by being able to properly DEMONSTRATE the proper techniques. Coaches do not need to be able to demonstrate under pressure of an opponent, but should be able to demonstrate the skills.
- No matter how much soccer you think you know, you can always learn more. There are plenty of soccer coaching books available in local stores and plenty of coaching videos put out. Coaches can always learn more by educating themselves. The more a coach educates himself in both SOCCER **and** SOCCER COACHING, the better his players will develop. Coaches should try to attend local coaching courses and seminars offered by the United States Soccer Federation (USSF), Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer Association (EPYSA), the National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA) and other organizations.

Karl Dewazian, Co-Chair of the United States Youth Soccer Association Coaching Committee said: "The outcome of the children is infinitely more important than the outcome of any game we will ever coach."

Always remember the TWO PRIMARY GOALS OF YOUTH COACHING:

- 1. Instill a love of the game in each player.**
- 2. Instill a desire to master the ball in each player.**

If you are able to accomplish these two things, you will be able to consider yourself to be a successful youth soccer coach. Best of luck to you and your players.