




It's all about the players!

Tips on coaching a youth soccer team

by **Don Norton Jr.**, Men's Assistant Soccer Coach, Haverford College (USA)

Soccer is a player's game, not a coach's game. Youth soccer must always be about player development and enjoyment. It must never be (just) about winning and losing. Our youth players should never play a match afraid of making mistakes. Coach, but don't overcoach!

Unlike coaches in other sports, a soccer coach cannot script out exact plays. Other coaches can signal for a bunt, screen pass or jump shot. In soccer we can't. During the match we should value our players' creativity, flair and imagination just as much as their hard work and commitment. We must allow our players the freedom to think for themselves and display their talents within a team context without constant harping from the touchline.

Coaching during the match

The following guidelines will insure that your coaching helps your players.

Less is more

Keep your comments to a minimum during the match so they carry more weight. Give your players tidbits of information. Always be positive. As your players get older, you can talk to them in more detail. Realize that it is very difficult for players to understand and then act on your comments in the heat of battle. If coaching is overdone, it may go in one ear and out the other. Sometimes less is more.

Focus your observations

Think about how your game observations fit into the big picture. The technical mistakes you see will determine the focus of your upcoming training sessions. If players are passing poorly, then work on passing. For younger players, technical ability must be the primary focus of your comments (and training). Sadly, many coaches often get so worked up during the match that they are unable to see the forest for the trees. Relax and have patience.

Record your observations

Keep a small notepad and pen with you so you can record your observations. This will help you to remember those key points to stress to your team just before the match, at halftime, after the match and during your upcoming practice sessions. Note everything from injuries to equipment needs! After some reflection, write down additional thoughts about the match later or the next day. Keep your notepad(s) going for all your practice sessions as well.

Observe your players

During the match, quietly observe your strikers, midfielders, defenders and goalkeeper, asking yourself the following questions:

- How are my players performing individually, as groups and collectively?
- Do the players complement each other's play?
- What are their technical, tactical and physical levels?



- How do they respond to the countless game situations that arise in every match, e.g. different scores, formations, styles of play, tempos, skill levels, field conditions and time management?

How your players respond to what the game presents them with will determine the focus of your comments at halftime and after the match and will be a factor in your preparation for upcoming practice sessions.

Coaching at halftime

At halftime, take your players to an area close to your team bench where there are no distractions:

- Always take the sun on your face.
- Don't speak until you have every player's undivided attention.
- Make a few brief points about the first half. Speak slowly and clearly, using words your players will understand. The younger the player, the shorter the attention span. Be positive.
- Make sure all players sip water or a sports drink.
- Stress two or three areas that the team needs to focus on for the second half.

Young players tend to have an abundance of emotions and are eager to learn. Give them positive feedback about their play and what

they can do to improve it, not just a pep talk. From time to time, players will offer a comment or idea at halftime. Respect these comments and the spirit in which they are offered. If a player is struggling, try to briefly take him aside and offer some words of encouragement after you have spoken to the team.

General demands

Pay attention to some general demands in your work with players and their parents.

Parental behavior

Hold a mandatory preseason meeting and explain to parents that they are not to make negative comments or yell "instructions" from the touchline during the game. These types of comments serve no purpose, they are a distraction to players and coaches, and they are disrespectful to referees.

Playing time and positions

Strive to give all players equal playing time. Gradually rotate your players to different positions during the season. Rotating your players takes them out of their "comfort zone" and demands that they think differently about their role on the field. Gradually they will begin to better understand the ever-changing roles and responsibilities within the game. In today's modern game, defenders must be able

to attack and strikers must be able to defend. If players have never been exposed to other positions, they are being denied a chance to further develop a more well-rounded game. Also, for young players it's fun to play new positions, and this adds to their enjoyment of the sport.

Communication

There is a big difference between just talking at each other and communicating. We want our players to rapidly communicate valuable information throughout the entire match, and we want that information to be precise.

Sportsmanship matters

When a player is injured, the ball must be kicked out of play immediately. Players should never "talk trash." When the match ends, everyone shakes hands. This type of behavior promotes the game. It also teaches our children valuable life lessons. Inappropriate language and behavior by coaches, players and parents can never be tolerated.

Coach as role model

Be aware that you are a role model to your players. The words you choose, your appearance — it all matters. Young players are influenced by their coaches and often perpetuate the same traits if they become coaches themselves.

SUCCESS IN SOCCER DVDS



Modern Youth Training

DVD 1: Playing and Practicing with Five- to Six-Year-Olds. **102 min., \$29.99**

DVD 2: Playing and Practicing with Six- to Eight-Year-Olds. **104 min., \$29.99**

DVD 3: Playing and Practicing with Eight- to 12-Year-Olds. **94 min., \$29.99**

Set of all three DVDs: **\$74.99**

Modern Defending

DVD 1: Individual Defending: 1 v. 1 / 1 v. 2 defense. **40 min., \$29.99**

DVD 2: Group Defending: 2 v. 1 / 2 v. 2 / 2 v. 3 defense. **55 min., \$29.99**

DVD 3: Team Tactics: Back four, 4-3-3 / 3-5-2 formations. **48 min., \$29.99**

Set of all three DVDs: **\$74.99**



Total Goalkeeping

This DVD includes demonstrations of a wide variety of exercises by the goalkeepers of the German U16, U17 and U19 national teams. Topics include: goalkeeper-specific warm-up, coordination, goalkeeper gymnastics and technique/reaction training. **45 min., \$29.99**

To order, contact SUCCESS IN SOCCER: tel. (888) 828-4263 (U.S. only) or (505) 889-3680; fax (505) 883-4577; web: www.successinsoccer.com