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Coaches all strive to get the most from their teams. They all have goals regarding the development of each player and the overall success of the group. So what do successful coaches do to achieve their goals? For me, it starts with practice.

First, what is the topic? Most coaches assess the most recent game and then pick one topic from that game that needs improvement. Once the coach knows what to work on, they need to figure out the "how." How can I have a positive influence on my team and make a meaningful adjustment before our next competition?

Teaching soccer is not unlike teaching any topic in school. The lesson must be interesting, challenging and accessible to all the participants. The coach must also present the lesson in a logical way, using simple ideas at the beginning and building into more complex ideas at the end. Finally, a good coach is organized and stays on topic to keep players focused.

To start, I like to arrive early and have my players involved with the ball as soon as they step on the field. With ninety minutes to train, every minute counts. Warming up usually means a partner exercise or a ball skill activity. Between each skill, I like to add in an active stretch to get the kids bouncing and skipping. This phase of the session typically lasts 10-20 minutes, depending on the length of the session and the variations I provide to keep the players interested. Loosely organized activities such as free-style juggling or structured drills like triangle passing are all relevant depending on the topic of the lesson. My goal in the warm up phase is to set the tone and get my players switched on both mentally and physically.

The second phase of practice is a small-sided activity. The drills should ask the players to perform specific skills within the context of the session. For example, if I am coaching passing, the small-sided game will emphasize passing or possession. If I am coaching shooting, the activity should ask the players to shoot. The biggest difference between this phase and the warm up is pressure. By adding opposition, the players must now perform the skill more efficiently. Games involving small numbers of players and more pressure also provide me with opportunities for correction and instruction. Within this phase, it is always good to have a variation in the activity. If possible, add more challenges and make the game closer to open play.

The final phase should almost always be playing. An open game of soccer with limited interruption from the coach is what every player on the field wants. That is why they come to practice. Does this mean no coaching? Absolutely not. Now I need to use other methods to make my point. When the ball goes out of play, natural stoppages provide time for interaction. Coaching within the flow of the game is also a common practice. If there are extra players, making substitutions and speaking with players individually is always good too.

The finer points in coaching also deal with creating a flow for the players. Long breaks, interruptions, and over-coaching can easily take away from even the best-laid plans, so part of my lesson also deals with organization. During the break, I ask my players to form teams and put on their training vests. They are almost always ready before I am, so organizing the cones and training vests is a must if I want to keep the group on track.

Finally, I do my best to stay on topic. Every session could easily be stopped countless times to correct every detail, but that is not productive. To put this in perspective, students taking a math class are not randomly quizzed on Social Studies or American History. The teacher sticks to the topic. As a coach, I do my best to coach within the context of the lesson plan. If we are working on shooting, that is what we talk about. Dribbling pointers will have to wait until the next practice.

Don't Over-Coach

"Pass! Turn!! Dribble!!! SHOOT!!!!"

How many times have you listened to a coach on the sideline tell each player exactly what to do again and again? I often wonder who is really playing the game. I have fallen victim to "over-coaching" myself, particularly in a game setting. With so much experience playing, watching, and coaching, often the average coach wants to give each player all the answers... but is that what is best for each player?

I would argue that it is not. In fact, I think it is the role of each coach to develop problem solvers and thinkers. Every coach would agree that really good players already know how to deal with game situations. They are rarely surprised by any scenario on the field, and they know how to react to and even anticipate game actions. In most cases, these players were never given all the answers. They gained an understanding through playing the game. These players can truly express themselves on the field because the only voice they really hear is their own.

Therein lies the challenge. How can I, as a coach, create an environment where my players can solve problems with limited instruction? Of course each coach must teach and share his or her knowledge, but what will each player do when the coach is not there? Will they relax and enjoy the game or will that player always look to the sidelines for help? For me, I hope that my players can play any style, in any system, for any coach. I hope that my players understand how to think about the game critically and analytically while simultaneously "feeling" the game by using their intuition to overcome each challenge they face.

Here are some suggestions for creating tactical problem solvers:

1. During practice, try not to give absolutes. Avoid "never" and "always," as those situations are uncommon in soccer (Example: Telling defenders never to go past midfield. That kind of absolute makes very little sense for developing a player).
2. When players ask you questions, in return you might ask them what they think and why. They probably have the answer already. If they don't, ask some leading questions. Allow them to feel empowered, as though they figured it out themselves.
3. Free play. At the end of every practice, be sure you allow the team to play with little or no instruction. Just play. Let the players choose teams and see what happens. Encourage independent thinking. At the very end of the session, you can briefly sum things up.
4. Do NOT punish young players for experimenting or for making mistakes. Making mistakes is part of the learning process. If you scold a player for missing a shot, the next time that player has an opportunity to score, he or she will feel anxious and may elect to pass. This is not a good way to encourage players to develop.
5. Put down the remote control! Soccer players are creative and should be given room to play. Other sports rely heavily on coaching and the coach makes all the decisions--not in soccer. Soccer is a player's game. Telling them how to think (particularly during a game) will only make them dependant on you for answers. It is also very distracting. If you need to coach that much during the game, you probably need to do a better job at practice.

In the end, a good coach can strike a balance between instruction and freedom. For me, I try to find moments to give the game back to the players. Allow them to be creative. Promote independent thinking. Help each player listen to his or her own voice, rather than yours. Your players will thank you. Good luck!