

Teacher, Role Model, Facilitator

by Manny Sanchez

Being a youth soccer coach comes with many serious responsibilities. People find themselves in the role of a coach for numerous reasons. Some have played the game when they were young and want to give something back to the sport. But a more common path to the coaching ranks in most communities is being volunteered or drafted to coach because one's children are involved and there is a shortage of coaches.

As we also know, many of these parent coaches who never have played the game fall in love with the sport as a result of their involvement. The fact that they have not played makes it more difficult, but not impossible, to teach an unfamiliar sport. In order for the coaching experience to be positive, coaches should develop their own philosophy of coaching and thoroughly understand the roles and responsibilities of a coach.

Developing one's coaching philosophy is very important. Every coaching philosophy should be geared toward player development. This starts with activities that focus on the involvement of all players with a ball to ensure that everyone has fun. These activities also should be geared to creating success, which will lead to further enjoyment. When the players are having fun, they will learn more. Coaches must establish a good learning environment and give positive feedback to players. The coach needs to be enthusiastic and excited about coaching. The players will feed off the coach's enthusiasm.

One of the most controversial aspects of player development is how a coach measures success. In youth soccer, especially at the younger ages, success should not be measured in wins and losses. Too many coaches' philosophy uses this as the yardstick. As a coach, I would like to recommend that youth coaches focus on four points in terms of measuring success:

- How much my players are developing as players;
- How they are developing as young men or women;
- How much fun they are having;
- How much enthusiasm they develop and show toward the game.

It is important to de-emphasize winning and losing and concentrate on being the best we can be. Not winning a game does not mean a team is not succeeding. And a very important point to remember is that success is never final. Winston Churchill put it best when he said, "Success is a journey, not a destination." Because a player or a team is not at the same level as another player or team does not mean there is no success. These players may be well on their way to reaching that next level of play or development in spite of what their win/loss record says.

The roles and responsibilities of a youth coach are many and extremely important. The youth coach can have a tremendous impact on the lives of the youths with whom he or she interacts. Sadly, many players spend more time with their coaches than with their own parents. This becomes more pronounced when the players get older, play at a more competitive level and train three or four times a week.

One very important function, which must be taken seriously, is that of being a role model. Kids are smart. They are very aware. They see things that their coaches do and think the same behavior is all right for them. For instance, coaches should always demonstrate respect for their team members, opponents, referees, spectators, parents and opposing coaches.

One of the best ways to be a role model is to lead by example. The coach should be professional. That includes being knowledgeable, informed, organized, courteous and look the part of a coach (dress appropriately). A coach should have respect for and show responsibility to the game itself.

A second responsibility of the coach is to understand the players' reasons for soccer involvement. This is a major problem I encounter throughout the state of Tennessee. Other state directors have expressed the same concerns. When dealing with young kids, it is important to realize that they are playing the game because they want to have fun. Kids are not professional players, they are just kids who want to enjoy playing a game. Many kids are scared away from the game at a young age because coaches do not make it fun to play. Most kids who have a bad experience playing soccer when they are young will not return to the game. Thus, we have lost these kids from the game forever.

Fortunately, the NSCAA, the United States Soccer Federation and Tennessee Soccer have developed curriculums that offer material directed specifically at the younger player. We must realize that children are not necessarily identified only by their chronological age. Each individual child will develop at his or her own rate; therefore, each must be treated as an individual. Because a player is not able to compete at the same level as a more mature teammate, coaches must not assume this player is less of a player or less talented.

We also should look at the other side of the coin. The two players may be the same age chronologically, but are maturing at different rates. When a coach makes the mistake of assuming all the players are equal because they are the same age, this creates teaching and communication hurdles and, ultimately, barriers between the players and coach. Between the ages of 6 and 14, there are drastic differences in the physical and cognitive development of a child.

Inexperienced coaches tend to get frustrated and sometimes lose their cool when working with these age groups. These coaches must try to hold back their frustration and realize that these are kids who still are developing. They also must realize that kids at this stage of development are very vulnerable and can very easily become bruised psychologically.

Additionally, the function of a coach is to serve as a facilitator and teacher. This means setting up an environment that is conducive to learning. There have to be standards set and followed. As a facilitator, it also is necessary to eliminate obstacles to learning. Some of these obstacles include fear of failure, over-coaching and teaching techniques incorrectly, leading to bad habits.

Ways to eliminate these obstacles are to permit the players to make mistakes without overreacting in a negative fashion. When players are trying to be creative and they make a mistake, coaches should not emphasize the mistake. Be positive as a coach. If a mistake needs to be corrected, use the sandwich method of feedback to the player. Begin with a positive statement, followed by the constructive criticism, then end with a positive statement. Over-coaching will turn your players off. Keep the coaching to a minimum.

Let them play and enjoy themselves.

The coach, as a teacher, must be able to paint a clear picture, which is by far the most effective way to teach. You can talk to the players at length, and they still may not understand what you want. But if they see it, they will understand it better. This part of teaching can be a problem for a parent coach who has not played. One way to remedy this is by using one of your better players to demonstrate for you. The activities in the practice session need to be well organized and should not be too difficult or too easy, both of which can frustrate or bore players.

One of the most important parts of teaching is being able to make corrections. A coach must be able to react to teachable moments, whether positive or negative, and stop the activity or game to take advantage of these moments. This part of being a teacher comes from experience and being a student of the game.

More education and more exposure to the game by watching soccer will give coaches the experience necessary to achieve success. Coaching schools are a good place to start, but afterward, coaches need to continue to further educate themselves. We never stop learning from this great game. One thing to remember as coaches is that the game itself is the greatest teacher of all. Being a youth coach obviously comes with a lot of responsibilities when someone decides to take on this role. Regardless of motivation, youth coaches must recognize how important their role is in the lives of the kids they teach. Kids will be kids only once. We in the coaching community must see that these kids are given every opportunity within our power to play the game of soccer in a wholesome, fun and enjoyable environment. The kids always should come first when making decisions. We should coach because we love to work with kids and love the game. As long as coaches keep this vision in the right perspective, the sport of soccer will continue to grow not only in numbers, but also in quality.

Editor's note: Manny Sanchez is the former Director of Coaching and current Executive Director of the Tennessee State Soccer Association and is a frequent contributor to Soccer Journal.