

Over-coaching: Try to resist the urge

By Dave Simeone

Most of the sports that are currently predominant in our culture involve the coach as an active participant. Although the coach is along the touch line, in the coaching box or on the bench, the opportunity for being overly involved with the players constantly exists. These opportunities are aside from the usual timeouts or substitutions. These typical stoppages in play already contribute to many sports being coach-oriented rather than player-oriented. Combine the standard loud encouragement (i.e., screaming and yelling) with animated cheerleading and you have an excess of over-coaching.

Soccer is different than most sports. The involvement of the coach is secondary to those participating in the game — the players. While coach-oriented activities (basketball, baseball, American football) demand, and allow for, a high degree of involvement by the coach during competitive games, soccer is different. It would be more appropriate to contend that soccer coaches do their work and prepare their teams during the week. By the time it comes to the game on Saturday morning it is up to the participants to act, make decisions and play!

It is essential that the youth soccer coach understand his/her role. If continuous over-involvement during the game is not the best way to assist the players then the coach has a responsibility to alter his/her behavior and learn to take a different approach.

Sports such as baseball and American football are what we would refer to as "setup" sports. Between pitches (baseball) or plays (American football) time and opportunity exist for diagrams to be drawn or the coach to reposition an outfielder. Soccer does not allow for similar stoppages since play is continuous and fairly uninterrupted. Players must be allowed, and ultimately enabled, to think and make decisions on their own. They must learn to solve problems during the game.

This self-sufficient type of thinking necessitates that players learn from the game and utilize any and all information that they receive and process toward finding solutions to the problems they encounter.

The games that youngsters play on Saturday mornings in their local leagues and associations should be viewed as a vehicle for learning. The same is true concerning their one or two days a week in practice. The acquisition of playing ability is a long-term process that begins at the age of 5 or 6. It is unrealistic to expect youngsters at 10 or 11 years of age, and younger, to have an adult perspective on the game. Because of their maturity level youngsters are learning about the broadest parameters of play. They are at a stage where development is the priority since the acquisition of skill, elementary decision-making and an appreciation and passion for soccer are sounded.

Young players learn from, and are a product of, their experiences. They learn more from their experiences (games, activities, the environment) than they do from the coach. The role of the coach is to then organize and set up games and activities that the players enjoy and benefit from.

Unfortunately, the majority of over coaching occurs with youngsters who are between the ages of 5 to 11. It occurs, in part, because of the "profile" of the average parent/coach. Generally he/she brings little practical soccer experience. At the same time the coach is learning about soccer he/she is learning about coaching.

The availability of coaching education throughout national (NSCAA, U.S. Soccer), regional and state associations, combined with the information that is presented in the courses, simplifies coaching. Once youth coaches are exposed to this information they can assume their role with greater effectiveness.

While coaches are somewhat responsible to educate the parents of their players, parents in turn should evaluate the effectiveness of the coach: Is my

child learning to play soccer or is the coach preoccupied with drills that only permit the players to play at soccer? Parents should evaluate the demeanor and approach the coach takes towards games: Is the coach willing to allow youngsters to play the game for themselves or is he/she absorbed with his/her active, but unnecessary, participation? Is the coach most concerned with making decisions for the players rather than accepting that the players must make decisions on their own?

Overall, there should be uniform agreement and understanding between the parents, coaches and league or association administrators on this matter. This shared responsibility helps ensure that play remains a leisure activity with a long-term interest of player development. Remember, play is a key word in player development.

Editor's note: Dave Simeone is the director of coaching for the North Texas YSA and a frequent contributor to Soccer Journal. He also serves on the NSCAA Board of Directors as the youth boys representative.

Are you over-coaching?

Take this test

Take some time to evaluate whether you might be over-coaching by answering the following:

- ❓ Do you find that you are hoarse and your voice is strained following a game?
- ❓ Is the information that you give your players during halftime emotional but non-specific in terms of assisting them to solve the problems they encounter? ("Try harder! Run faster!")
- ❓ Do you utilize catch phrases such as "suck it up, boys" or "no pain, no gain" in attempting to motivate youngsters?
- ❓ Do you find that you are sweating and running just as much during the game as the players?
- ❓ Are your pre-game, half-time or post-game speeches similar to the president's State of the Union address?
- ❓ In addressing the players do you ramble and cause the players to wonder "What's the point?"
- ❓ Are your remarks and instructions made during the game and to players repetitive and redundant? Is this information general, nonspecific jargon and cheerleading that has little impact on players' performances?
- ❓ Are you reluctant to allow players to make their own decisions during a game? Are you constantly barraging players with instructions during the game?
- ❓ Do you coach in absolutes such as always or never?
- ❓ Do you choreograph and arrange players into strict positions with instructions such as "Never go out of your zone" or "Defenders never cross midfield"?
- ❓ Have you instructed players to refrain from passing the ball to certain teammates because their present level of ability is, from your adult perspective, inadequate?
- ❓ Do you spend an excessive amount of time in practice on throw-ins, kick-offs, corner kicks or penalty kicks?
- ❓ Are you utilizing methods of training that do not allow for players to acquire and improve technical skill, tactical decision-making, physical stamina and confidence? (i.e., dribbling through cones, standing in lines awaiting a turn)
- ❓ Are your practices static? Do your practices produce the same degree of movement/stimulation as a soccer game?
- ❓ Are you attempting to improve the team's level of fitness by minimizing the time the players have contact with the ball? Do you view the game as a contest based only on fitness that leads to a preoccupation with running?
- ❓ Are you openly emotional or upset when addressing the players to the point that they stare at you while thinking what is he/she so disturbed about?
- ❓ As the coach, do you have difficulty accepting a realistic approach to winning and losing? Do you believe that winning is synonymous with player development?
- ❓ Do you enjoy and have fun coaching youngsters? Are you consistently aggravated and apprehensive about coaching?