

Article from Steve Watson – Footy for Kids

I took a team of U11 to a tournament last Sunday. They are virtually a school team (all but one are from one class in a village school) and they were up against some strong city-based teams. But they did well, reaching the semi-finals where they lost 2-0 to the eventual winners.

That's a cause for celebration you might think. But my players were very disappointed. So much so, they forgot to shake hands with the team that beat them, and some were in tears.

I sat them down and told them they should be proud, not sad. But they didn't seem to hear me. Most of them were staring at the ground. Nothing I said lifted the mood (I even tried a few lame jokes!) and eventually they left with their parents.

They all looked so miserable it made me wonder if it was worth playing in summer tournaments. But losing is an unavoidable part of football (as it is in life) and we shouldn't shield our players from the lows. If you don't experience losing, how can you really appreciate winning?

Part of the problem on Sunday was the parents. After the group games I overheard them telling their children they could (should?) win the tournament and were only two games away from lifting the trophy. **This put pressure on the players and I expect some felt that they let their parents down by losing.**

I think I need to remind the parents and their daughters about why we play football. *"...the game of football is just that - a game. It's not about how many wins and losses are accumulated. And it is not about how many trophies are collected. It's not about how many goals we score or concede. It's all about enjoying the game and, at the same time, learning and developing football and life skills."*

That's easy to forget... especially in the heat of a tournament!

Yours in football,

Steve Watson, Editor

Understanding why children participate in soccer

By: Dr. Colleen Hacker, NSCAA National Academy Staff Coach and Professor of Sports Psychology at Pacific Lutheran University; Tacoma, Wash.

Understand why children participate in soccer

The majority of the reasons children participate in sport are intrinsic.

The top priorities are:

- To learn and improve their skills
- To have fun
- To be with friends
- To experience the excitement of competition
- To enhance their physical fitness
- To demonstrate their competence

Notice that the extrinsic goal of winning and beating others is not at the top of the list.

Similarly, when children drop out of soccer, their withdrawal can be traced to the inability of the sport experience to meet their primary motivations for participation.

The common reasons are:

- Failing to learn or improve their skills
- Not having fun
- Not being with their friends
- Lack of excitement, improvisation and creative opportunities
- Lack of exercise, meaningful movement and fitness improvements
- Lack of optimal challenges and/or consistent failure

Practical suggestions for coaches:

Encourage players to measure their performance by improvements in their own, personal levels of proficiency and ability rather than by comparing themselves to other players or to other teams based on the game outcome.

Because children have several reasons for participation and not just one, design practices to meet as many different participation motives as possible (i.e. learning, fun, friendship, fitness, challenge, etc.).

Utilize the K.I.S.S. principle (**Keep It Short and Simple**) when introducing new skills:

- Give short effective demonstrations while briefly explaining the new skill or concept use picture cues liberally;
- Focus only on one or two important aspects critical to performance success (avoid "paralysis by analysis");
- Decrease time spent in transition between activities, drills and games. Keep practices short, clear and well planned.
- Utilize a positive approach to skill instruction by focusing on what the athlete did correctly ("**catch them being good**").

Make practices meaningful, fun challenging and exciting

- Avoid static line drills;
- Encourage creative improvisation by players;
- Optimally challenge all athletes throughout the full range of abilities (avoid coaching only the mid-ability performer
- Eliminate "elimination games" because players most in need of improvement and repetitions are usually the first to be eliminated;
- Be fully focused on the players and the activity (coach the players as well as the game).

Plan time for the children to meet and make new friends (ice cream stops after practices, pizza parties, watch a video, free time before and after practice).

Focus on teaching players the active, ever-changing game of soccer rather than the static, predictable soccer drills.

Utilize dual function fitness activities that concurrently enhance fitness and also improve soccer skills (i.e. soccer tag with a ball) and/or psychological dispositions (players are having so much fun they don't realize that they are conditioning too).

Provide competitive challenges for athletes that can help define success not only by comparison to others but also by improving one's own standard of accomplishment.

Know the Factors That May be Stressful for Youth Players

Coaches and parents can do a great service to children by helping each athlete develop self-confidence, a sense of personal worth and mastery, and a constructive attitude toward failure and adversity. **Behaviour that adults view as encouraging can often be perceived by athletes as stress producing and pressure-filled.**

Kids will freely choose to participate in activities that they view as worthwhile, enjoyable and fun. The challenge for adults is to maximize the inherent joy of what Pele calls "the beautiful game of soccer" and minimize experiences that increase children's anxiety and likelihood of burnout.

Practical suggestions for coaches:

- Avoid a "win at all cost" attitude.
- Transform parental pressure into parental interest, support and encouragement.
- Avoid over training, long, repetitive practices and excessive time and travel demands.
- Avoid using perfection as the standard for judging an athlete's performance.
- Don't associate a player's worth or value as a person with their performance and ability on the soccer field (i.e. winning or a great performance means that I like you more).
- Make sure that your non-verbal behaviours are congruent with your words and that the coaching is consistent across situations (i.e. sulking after a loss even though the team played well or being happy following a poor performance by a winning team).

Realise That Effective Feedback is the Breakfast of Champions

The familiar coaching adage that "**what you do speaks so loudly that no one can hear what your saying**" is especially important to remember when dealing with athletes. Players benefit most from coaches whose actions reflect both their implied and stated values. The ability to **observe, analyze** and **communicate** are three of a coaches most valuable assets. A word of caution, however, is that the beneficial effects of verbal instruction decrease in direct proportion to the amount given. Remember: **Keep it Short and Simple**. Take time to videotape yourself coaching, not only at practice but also in games. Observe yourself as others see you. Frequently there is significant difference between how coaches think they are talking, acting and communicating and what athletes perceive.

Practical suggestions for coaches:

- Give specific, performance-contingent feedback to athletes rather than general comments lacking performance-related information.
- Be liberal with praise. **Most athletes prefer coaches who shout praise and whisper criticism** rather than visa versa.
- Tell athletes what improvements need to be made, why and most importantly, how to make those corrections successfully and consistently.
- Observe and provide meaningful feedback to every athlete at least once each training session and game.
- Combine verbal praise with consistent non-verbal forms of encouragement (i.e. a pat on the back, smile, a high five, etc.).
- Maintain your credibility as a coach by being accurate and sincere in your feedback and praise. Ignoring errors, giving excessive praise for mediocre performance or excessive praise for performance on simple tasks conveys to the athlete that either you don't know what you're talking about or else you have very low expectations of them as performers.
- Correct performance errors in non-threatening and non-punitive ways. Finding problems is the role of a critic not a competent soccer coach. Good coaching requires the ability to not only recognize problems but also to solve them through effective, practical and successful solutions.
- **Reward effort as much as outcome**. Repeated effort, especially in the face of failure and adversity, is one of the most important ingredients for future success.
- Use the "feedback sandwich" when correcting youngsters. Find something the player did well and praise it. Next tell the athlete what they did incorrectly, what they need to do to improve and why. Finish with a positive, encouraging or motivational statement.
- Foster an environment that allows for trying new skills, approaches and strategies without the fear of reprimand and punishment. Mistakes are integral to sport improvement. Ridicule, sarcasm and fear are impediments to both immediate and future performance successes.

Putting it All Together

Athletes learn the game of soccer not only through the directed learning experiences that coaches provide in practice and game play but also through indirect means by observation and imitation. As a sport leader, you are a powerful and lasting role model for athletes by your thought, word and deed. Parents and coaches can serve as a player's greatest ally or worst nightmare depending on the attitude, behaviour and motivation adopted for sport involvement. Remember, the game is for the kids. It is not for the ego or bragging rights of adults. Our role, as coaches, is to provide an opportunity for participation for all interested youngsters, access to appropriate and safe environments for instruction and competition, exposure to caring and competent leaders, holistic consideration of the child's entire development (physical, cognitive, social and psychological) and an unwavering belief in the worth and ability of children to succeed at their own unique level of accomplishment. When coaches expect every athlete to succeed, it's amazing how many of them really do.

Rather than measuring success in terms of numbers in the win/loss columns, perhaps the ultimate standard of our success as coaches should be judged by our ability to teach children to love and enjoy the game of soccer, to feel more confident and self-assured in their abilities and knowledge of the game, to experience mutual respect from both team-mates and coaches, and most importantly, to feel appreciation and pride in the opportunity they had to play a sport they love under your direction as their coach. Perhaps the most appropriate summary can be found in the "Bill of Rights for Young Athletes" (NASPE, 1977) written by medical, physical education and recreation experts in the hope of creating guidelines to maximize the beneficial effects of athletic participation for all.

Bill of Rights for Young Athletes

- **Right of the opportunity to participate in sport regardless of ability level**
- **Right to participate at a level that is commensurate with each child's developmental level**
- **Right to participate in safe and healthy environments**
- **Right to have qualified adult leadership**
- **Right of each child to share the leadership and decision-making of their sport participation**
- **Right to play as a child, not as an adult**
- **Right to proper preparation**
- **Right to equal opportunity to strive for success**
- **Right to be treated with dignity by all involved**
- **Right to have fun through sport**

What Makes a Good Coach?

If I had to single out the three most important qualities a good youth football coach needs, they would be:

- Patience.
- Kindness.
- A sense of fun.

You will notice that knowledge about football techniques and skills are not in the list. In my opinion it's far more important to be good with children (for example, to be patient, fun loving and kind) than it is to be an expert on football.

You also need to know what makes children 'tick'.