

Coaching Youth Soccer

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Introduction

Although individuals can be born with natural skills, it is only regular practice that provides the necessary technique to play the game well.

The years from ages 5 to 8 are absolutely vital because youngsters are totally receptive to everything you tell them, and they have not developed any bad habits.

Up to the age of 11, is another crucial period. Throughout this time the emphasis should be placed on having fun and enjoy playing. Too much emphasis is placed on winning at all costs.

Once they move into secondary school, the basic skills of control and passing should be strongly embedded. Unfortunately, that is mostly not the case and too much time is spent rectifying the problems that should have been take care of much earlier.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of practice. Improvement in skill does not just happen, and is unlikely to emerge just by playing games.

The main priority of the West Ham United Youth Team coach and the director of the Center of Excellence is to produce a steady supply of players for the West Ham first team. Every year the continuous cycle begins with a new group of 9 to 10 year olds, who, if coached well, may one day play for West Ham.

Any practice is only as good as the coach employing it. Learning to coach well comes through experience, watching, listening, and, of course, trial and error. It takes time.

It is the simple practices, not the complicated ones, that are important.

As a youth coach, focus on refining players' technique. Initially, teach all the game's basic skills and then, as the players get older, progress more to team play and organization. The young players must be well grounded in the basic techniques if they are to properly progress onward. The players produced should be good all-around, creative players, well equipped for the team's requirements.

Soccer is essentially a simple game of intelligent inter-passing. In order to build confidence and proficiency, avoid using defenses and opponents in the learning stage -- allow the players to focus solely on mastering the skill. Nowadays, possession of the ball is the number one priority in the game. Teach your players never to give the ball away, to value possession and to find teammates to share the ball.

Instill the following basic principles into your players: play the way you are facing, keep it simple, and leave balls playable (give a pass that the receiver can use – right pace).

Diagnosing faults is a fundamental part of a coach's job. Watch carefully and see what is going wrong, explain what you see to the players, and then coach against it happening again. Too many times, coaches are guilty of just setting up the practice and not correcting the faults. A coach needs to know exactly where the problem lies, and then help to correct the fault. Correct only 1 thing at a time.

In my opinion, a great coach is one who has the expertise to break down the game's technical requirements into an understandable form and develop drills to refine these basic skills.

Unopposed play (no opponent or defense) allows players to develop good basic habits, and it is easier for players to perfect these when there is no pressure from defenders.

Passing and moving are the staples of the game. Players must know when to run and where to run. Running just for the sake of running and flying about all over the pitch is a trait of poor players who let their heart rule their heads. Running must be *intelligent* – this can be coached and is based on the philosophy of 'pass and move'.

Technique

The natural starting point in the development of a player -- getting the body into good position to receive the ball, choosing the proper body part to receive the ball, being strong and balanced on your feet, and then applying the proper touch on the ball are all essentials in building a solid foundation for good technique.

Instruct your players to receive the ball on the 'half-turn' as this will give the player many more options. Receiving the ball using the 'back foot' requires the player to position his body, and in particular, his feet when receiving the ball so that he can comfortably and quickly play it on.

When time and space become a premium, players with better technique will have more time on the ball and be more successful with in using the ball.

An absolute priority is to develop a clean first touch. Receiving and position the ball as it arrives, allows more time to release the ball with an accurate, well-timed and well-paced pass. The first touch is the key to becoming a quality player. A good first touch allows you to keep the ball or to play it off first time, thus creating a serious problem for the defender.

Attacking Play

With a solid grounding in technique established, you can now begin to coach your players in attacking play. The greater the control in the final third, the greater the chance to dictate to your opponents. It is especially important to keep the ball and probe for scoring possibilities. In attacking play, all the players must contribute, from the keeper and the backs to the forwards, everyone has a role to play.

Perhaps the key to good attacking play is **passing angles**. Running, passing and looking in straight lines narrows the view of the game and lacks creativity. It is important to pass short and long and to play angles, not just straight lines.

'Third Man' Running

It is more than just the player with the ball one player off it. In teaching player 'third man' running, pay attention to wide angles, avoid straight line running. When you make wide runs, you open up more room to play into. The art of the 'third man' running is in the speed of execution. With constant practice and repetition, this will become automatic when the game pressure kicks in.

Setting up Play

This involves 2 disciplines: first, the delivery of the ball to the front men, and, second, the way in which the front men decide to hold the ball, control it, turn, or deliver the next pass. You must be confident enough to play in to marked players and move opposing defenders around to break down the defense as a whole. It is important to play the way you are facing, to open up defenses by movement and to make penetrating passes.

Assessing Young Players

How do you balance first impression with long-term prospects.

Use the following 6 criteria:

1. Natural ability and technique/skill
2. Knowledge and awareness
3. Courage and bravery
4. Character and mental toughness
5. Speed and mobility
6. Anticipation

Most young players will not be blessed with all 6 of these, so choose from those who have as many as possible --

When playing small-sided games, you will find out if the player sees other players and is aware of what is going on around him. It will be easy to assess his technical ability as well.

Some young players have the natural gift of being able to ‘make things happen’, and make other players play. They have a more advanced understanding of the game. “Lively minds, lively bodies’ reinforces the fact that young players must at all times be alert, ready for any eventuality and seeing to be one step ahead of the opposition.

Later as players get older, collective elements such as team spirit, the will to win, competitiveness, urgency, aggression and mental toughness will become more important to the team building process.

A young player’s technical ability may not be as polished as you may like it to be, however, if he possesses mobility, athleticism and is very quick, it is possible to improve his technical in time.

Although physical speed is very important, ‘speed of thought’ – the ability to read situations – can make up for a lack of real pace. Your brain makes you react to situations, and if you see things quickly your body will react accordingly.

When asked to identify the most essential trait, Ron Greenwood, former West Ham boss, said to him it was *anticipation* - the knack of sensing what is going to happen, knowing where to be when. All the great players have it.

Closing Comments

At West Ham, we work all week on passing and moving. ‘Pass the ball well and pass it quickly.’

At the youth level, results should not be all-important. When dealing with young players you must set high standards and demand that the players meet them.

Creating a winning team takes time, effort, patience and skill. But most of all it requires good practices.

Simplicity and quality are the cornerstones of successful youth development.