

10 Proven Tips For A More Successful Soccer Season

The art of coaching soccer to kids requires one thing in abundance ... enthusiasm. It's your most important quality. Kids will respond to you if you're an eager, hard working leader. Some kids find learning boring, some don't care about winning, and some can't remember which goal they are kicking towards. But what unites them, what they all want is to have fun and play a game. And that's your job, making learning fun. This is the *Better Soccer Coaching* blueprint for you to get the mix right as a coach.

1 Make Sure Your Players are Listening

If your players aren't listening, how will you get your important message across? Remember these simple points to keep them concentrating when you are coaching.

- No one can listen until everyone is quiet and still. Don't talk until then.
- Hold up your hand to gain attention.
- Don't hold a ball while you are talking (unless you are demonstrating something) – for some reason nothing is funnier than the coach dropping the ball.

Make sure your players know their tasks

PLAYER 1



SUPPORT, COVER,
PASS, FILL IN

PLAYER 2



LINK, COVER,
WIDTH, PRESSURE

PLAYER 3



SHIELD, HASSLE,
SCORE, BLOCK

Signs of the overhearing coach



- Make sure all balls are on the ground.
- Make sure the sun is in front of you, not behind you. Players need to look at you as well as hear you to gain understanding, so if they have to squint, communication is less effective.
- Face your players away from any other activity to avoid distractions.

“There’s a history made up by each of us, that leads us to that final victory. It’s that history, in it’s entirety, that turns us into champions”

Jose Mourinho, former Manager of Chelsea Football Club

2 *Plan Your Sessions and Make Them Fun*

Possibly the most important key to successful youth soccer coaching is making training sessions fun for everyone – including you. You can only do this with careful planning. Always think about what it is you want to achieve beforehand.

Your training session plan should take into account the ages and capabilities of your players, but generally your sessions should follow this pattern:

- A warm up to raise the heart rate, stretch muscles and get players focused on the session.
- A quick and simple demonstration of the skill or technique that you want them to learn. (Important. Don't forget to ask them what they think is the best way to pass or shoot or keep the ball, rather than tell them why you think they should do it that way).
- Some fun games that will allow them to practice what you've just shown them.
- A small sided game to finish.

You should always consider an individual session as part of a larger training schedule. How do your sessions progress from week-to-week? Variety is important in order to keep your sessions fresh and

interesting while coaching young players new skills and techniques.

While it's important to plan your sessions, be careful not to make them too rigid. Be prepared to adapt according to what you see and hear on the practice field. Above all, don't be afraid to let your players play! Don't try to pack too much in – remember to allow time for discussion, setting up, drinks, and even arguments.

DON'T persevere with a plan that isn't working. Have a couple of tried and tested alternatives up your sleeve and work out what went wrong afterwards.

DON'T use drills that involve children standing in lines for more than a few seconds – they'll soon get bored and bored players are trouble!

DON'T train children on your own. Always have at least one assistant, even if all they do is tie laces and fetch balls. There is also an important health and safety consideration here: who will look after your players if you have to take one of them to hospital?

DO treat your players with respect. They like you to listen and take notice of their feelings and opinions. Find out what they want from you and agree some clear ground rules.

“The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don't play together, the club won't be worth a dime”

Babe Ruth, Major League Baseball player

3 *Teach the Basics First: Shielding the Ball*

Shielding the ball



Some skills are absolute “must-haves” for all players – and are so important that you should teach them first. What’s the most important?

Not everyone will agree, but for me the number one skill for a soccer player to possess is ball-holding.

If you teach your players ANYTHING, teach them the skills to keep possession. Once they realise that they have the skills to keep an opponent from stealing the ball, they will gain the confidence to lift their heads up and find another player to pass to.

How to coach it

In your coaching sessions, start with two equal-sized players with a single ball in a grid about three-yards square and have them work on holding the ball by using simple rolls, pullbacks and other touches to shield the ball.

Before they gain this confidence, you can expect terrible passing simply because they will get flustered at the first hint of pressure (and might even “feel” panicked at pressure which is ten yards away). Until your players can hold a ball 1 v 1 in a grid for a count of around 7-8 seconds, they are not going to have enough confidence to do very well on the field.

So how is it done? The first step is to bring the ball under control quickly. Then, you get your player to use his/her body and legs to get between the opponent and the ball to protect it. They can either step over the ball to shield it, or roll or pull the ball back behind them or to their side to protect it.

The rolling and pulling of the ball requires some work, as the player needs to learn to use both feet – and to switch feet. However, one of the key factors is for them to learn to bend the knees, get the arms out, and use body weight to push back into the opponent.

Get them to keep their bottoms down, bend the knees and push hard back into the opponent. Keep body weight on their support leg to be able to free their far foot and use it to roll the ball around.

“If certain players do not carry out their tasks properly on the pitch then their colleagues will suffer”

Louis van Gaal – former manager of Ajax, Barcelona and The Netherlands

4 Use Small Sided Games in Training

It should be a FIFA policy that soccer coaches use small-sided games for training before players reach the age of 13. The 4 v 4 system speeds up development of technical ability and game intelligence.

4 v 4 is the smallest sided game you can have that has all the elements of a real soccer match without any of the confusions that surround learning soccer.

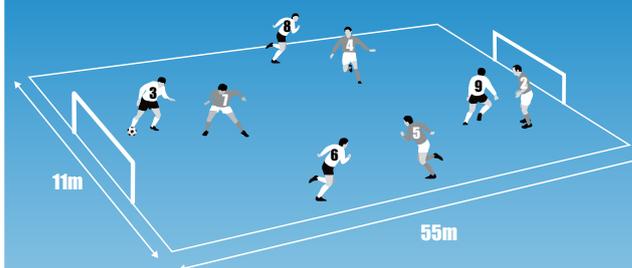
In a real soccer match children have the option of passing the ball forwards, square or backwards. Three children cannot do this because one of the directions will be missing. With five the extra one duplicates one of the elements, which clutters the picture.

4 v 4 also provides the minimum numbers needed for all of the parts that make up a soccer game. One player is up front for penetration. Two are needed for width and one holds back to supply depth. In 4 v 4 the responsibilities are very clear. All tasks are covered and none are shared which keeps things simple.

The benefits

- Technique is improved because players have a far greater number of ball contacts.
- The emphasis on control, passing and shooting provides the fundamental building blocks of soccer.

Rapid break from defence to attack



- It is fun for all the players, they are all involved, they attack and defend.
- The number of passes is increased and therefore the one touch control, one touch pass, sequence is used all the time.
- It is also a good indicator of players' fitness because players are constantly running and playing the game.

4 v 4 is soccer learning at its best. It is fun, creates match situations and promotes an extremely effective learning environment. Small "pictures" are clearer for children and space and options are more compatible with their abilities.

"Failure happens to me all the time. It happens every day in practise. What makes you better is how you react to it"

Mia Hamm, former soccer player, US Women's Team

5 *Invest Time in All Your Players*

A successful team is often a stable team. You may have a very clear idea of the particular soccer skills and qualities that your players possess, but what do you know of them beyond that?

By gaining a greater understanding of your players as individuals you can help improve your ability to understand and motivate them.

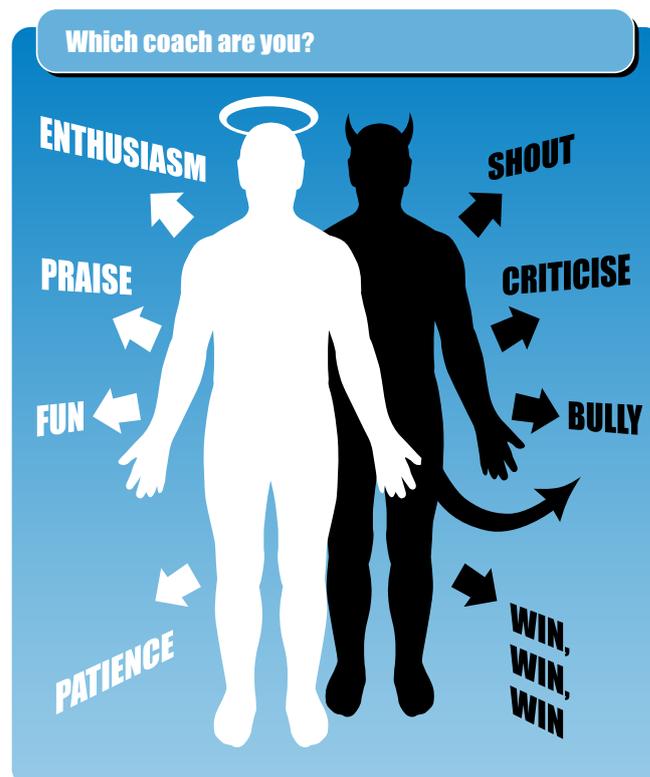
Players care about what you have to say when they know that you care about them.

Encourage the players to be as honest as they can. Emphasise that it helps build effective teams and encourages clear communication.

Most importantly, once you have collected this information – use it!

Making the effort to get to know the player, and not just their soccer abilities, can pay dividends when trying to understand their wider motivations.

The process of asking is a classic motivational tool for the player – it shows you care.



“Soccer is not about justice. It’s a drama – and criminally wrong decisions against you are part and parcel of that”

Pete Davies, soccer writer

6 *Reward Your Players*

Small rewards make an enormous amount difference to players (of all ages). And the beauty of sweets is that a small bar of chocolate or candy can be used to encourage even the weakest player who has perhaps tried the hardest.

Have only one or two rewards for each week. Share the rewards around over the season (and try to keep a record).

Make the rewards for different things each week, for example best tackler, hardest worker in drills, best piece of skill – in this way you can pass the rewards around without prejudice.

How about a small trophy for “Player of the Week”, “Man of the Match” or a “Best Effort” award for the player, not necessarily the most talented, who has put in the greatest amount of work during a match or training session.

Teamwork is the first step to winning



In a winning culture everyone works for each other, everyone enjoys it, everyone knows their role within it.

Recognising the achievements of one your weaker players in this way will prove to be a great incentive for the other less talented players.

Remember, small rewards are not replacements for continued positive feedback from a coach. If you continue to encourage and inspire your players you will be surprised at how far your words can go.

“The big secret in life is that there is no big secret. Whatever your goal, you can get there if you’re willing to work”

Oprah Winfrey

7 *Make a Difference on Match Days*

You CAN make a difference on match day. Whilst every coach has a different style, they all share a common goal – to get the best out of their team when it really counts. Follow these simple do's and don't's, and you WILL make a difference once the game is underway.

DON'T micro-manage the game. It is easy to talk particular players through every move, but this is potentially destructive because it stifles their instinct for the game. Positive encouragement gives players confidence. Psychologists tell us that it is better to say “hit the target” than “don't miss”.

DO find the right moment. Information needs to be given when players are most receptive i.e. when they can concentrate on what YOU are saying – NOT in the middle of a play.

DON'T get distracted. Talk to spectators and the other coaches afterwards. Your players need your full attention. Create a bubble for you and your team. Make sure at half time the bubble continues. Youth teams suffer the most from a babble of comment from parents, confusing the main message you want to deliver. Your team needs to avoid conflicting messages.

DO watch first, worry later. Keep your emotions under control – keep panic, anger, frustration and fear out of the equation. Players depend on the coach to be the coolest head on the pitch.

DO watch from as many different angles as possible. This will enhance your perspective on the game. For example, the shape of a team is more discernible from a distance, speed easier to gauge from the side and physical fitness more apparent when standing close up.

DON'T argue with the referee. It distracts the players. It is also unlikely to have a positive influence on the outcome of the game and is not in the spirit of the game anyway. Referees will rarely change a decision once it's been made and your intervention may turn them against you.

When the whistle blows for the start of the match, it should start a concentrated period of thought, action and reaction for the coach. Having spent significant time preparing a team for this moment, the coach also needs to be prepared, mentally and emotionally. Whether you can find glory in defeat, humility in victory, can you say you made a difference on the day?

“The secret of winning football games is working more as a team, less as individuals. I play not my 11 best, but my best 11”

Knute Rockne – soccer coach

8 *Make Every Second Count at Half Time*

Strategy, tactics and organisation have to be reinforced or in some cases changed in just five minutes. However, there are only three broad objectives:

- To motivate your players.
- To give them the best chance to absorb information.
- To let them recover whilst taking on water.

Get ready for half time

PLAYERS ↓ Motivate - remember your body language Re-hydrate - water not fizzy drinks Re-organise - remind them of positions	 COACH	TACTICS ↓ Substitutions - Is it time to make a change? Strategy - Defence or attack need strengthening? Planning - Plan ahead so you are ready with two or three main points
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When outlining a poor aspect of the team's performance deliver it in a productive manner. If the defence has gaps, try not to blame players or dwell on it. Instead warn players not to get sucked in and to concentrate. Players are not motivated by being told what they did wrong, but more by how they can improve and resolve problems.

To ensure a well-planned, consistent half time structure you need to:

- Keep your substitutes close and warm just in case of injuries.
- Decide on the next step for the team and be confident and focused on what you are about to say.
- Be in the best possible position to deliver a clear and logical viewpoint.

As soon as the first half is over, move to your players. Don't make them move to you. Make sure you stay a good distance from the opposition.

- Know that you have everyone's attention.
- Provide two or three major points.
- Be clear, positive and constructive.
- Don't talk until everyone is listening.
- Don't concentrate on negatives.
- Don't allow too much player input all at once.

Remember, players of all ages will lose interest if they are on the receiving end of a lecture at half-time. Keep your comments concise and try to allow players the opportunity to express what they feel has gone well or poorly.

"The fewer rules a coach has, the fewer rules there are for players to break"

John Madden, American soccer coach and commentator

9 *Run Your Team on the Right Fuel*

Nutrition and diet is an area you can improve on and as coaches we are in a strong position to influence players to become healthier. In simple terms, what we eat and drink provides the fuel for us to train, play and recover from training. What we need to know is what is the best fuel?

Carbo education for the benefit of the players

Carbohydrates are recognised to have the most immediate affect on the players' performance, so educate your team to eat better to operate better. An appreciation of the benefits will help them choose better options.

Low fat carbs for low fat players

Despite the horrors outlined by some trendy diets, there are many staple foods which provide excellent sources of carbohydrates e.g. potatoes and pasta. The key though, is to avoid high carb foods with high fat content. This will mean that high consumption will also lead to weight gain. For example, crisps and pizza are two hazards to be avoided.

What's good to eat?

Some good, low fat, high carb foods are: rice, popcorn, breakfast cereals, fruit, toast and honey, potatoes, pasta. Some treats as well: sweets e.g. fruit gums, chocolate and even Coca Cola (though this drink is not a substitute for water).

Baked potatoes and sandwiches are good "whole" meals, with fillings which avoid too much fat making an even healthier option. So cut down on the butter, cheese and mayonnaise and use baked beans, lean meats and low fat cheeses.

Keep the balance

A diet cannot consist of carbohydrates alone, but also requires protein, fat and water. It is worth asking players what they are eating and drinking, if only to help them make their own more informed decisions.

FACTS BOX

On average, carbohydrates makes up at least half of a player's total energy intake.

In soccer, the intensity of the sport means that carbohydrates are the primary energy source.

All milk has the same carbohydrate content, but differs in fat content, therefore soccer players would do better to drink semi skimmed or skimmed milk rather than full fat. There is little evidence to suggest any difference in performance on whether a player should eat complex carbohydrates (such as pasta or potatoes) over simple carbohydrates (such as sweets and fruit) on matchdays.

"Don't let anyone steal our dreams"

Michael Jordan

10 30 Minute Warm-Up

Sometimes, due to poor directions, or traffic, or just plain bad timing, teams stagger onto the pitch just before the whistle blows. And boy does it tell.

Within a few minutes of kick-off because your team wasn't ready to play, physically or mentally, you're on the back foot, the coaches are cross and shouting and you're picking the ball out the back of the net just as the last boot lace is being tied.

Encourage punctuality by preparing a routine and making sure that every player and parent understands its purpose. If a player is late he doesn't start the match. Match day information should include a time for warm-up, so parents know what time to arrive.

Make sure directions are correct and include parking arrangements. A routine that takes 20 - 30 minutes should be adequate. Teams playing at an unfamiliar field should allow extra time for traffic and vague directions.

The countdown

30 minutes

Make sure the players are properly dressed – shinguards, boot laces tied, an extra layer or two in cold weather, and so on.

25 minutes

Loosen up. As players arrive, take the time to have a word with each of them. "Is your ankle still sore?" "Going to add to your goal tally today?" "Did you enjoy the match last week?" Talk to your keeper about how well he is playing. Take the team to an area where they can pass a ball around in groups of threes. Get them working on one, twos and dribble and turn. Keep them moving. Get them to focus on what they are here for, to play soccer!

20 minutes

Get your captain to lead dynamic stretching. All at an easy jog pace. Jog backwards, shuffle side-to-side to the left, and then to the right. Hit outstretched hands with knees. Kick open hands behind your back with your heels. Bend down, touch the ground with left hand, then right hand, then both hands.

15 minutes

Everyone get a drink of water. Introduce calm static stretching. Sort out the starting line-up. Don't change it if players show up a few minutes before kick-off even if they are the best ones! Make a mental note to bring them on during the half.

Give encouragement to your keeper, backs, midfielders, and strikers. Try to keep your remarks to under two minutes.

10 minutes

Step up a gear. Get the team into game mode. Organise shooting practice with the players lined up outside the penalty area. Serve the ball to the first in the line. The player should control, then shoot. Limit the shooting distance and number of touches before the shot according to age and skill. Encourage low shots on target, put away rebounds. Parents can help collect missed shots or kids have to chase their own high and wide ones. Keep the line moving.

5 minutes

Captain to the fore. Captains are called out for the coin toss. When they return, bring the team together for a very brief pep talk. A big cheer, and starters take their positions on the field. Now you're ready to kick-off.

Get out there and have fun!

"Overcoaching is the worst thing you can do to a player"

Dean Smith, US basketball coach and coaching Hall of Fame member