

## **THE COACHING ROLES**

### **A tough task indeed**

**By Gordon Miller, VYSA Technical Director**

The present day youth coach has a lot to do in order to run a successful soccer team. Whatever you do with the team, on or off the field, the attention to detail is an integral aspect that will place you in a position to succeed. From organizer to communicator, from trainer to psychologist, from technical expert to strategy implementer, your plate is more than full - if not completely running over. However, amongst the many tasks that you have to perform, two clearly stand out above the rest: 1) running a quality training session; and, 2) effective game management.

While we know that both tasks are invariably linked, the two components still require a complete and different set of skills all together. The former requires you to construct realistic training sessions based on match observations or long term planning. You need to, amongst many, plan a realistic session, have progressions, increase pressure, insist on quality repetitions, and implement goals (targets) for a desired outcome. You must also be able to provide quality and timely feedback to the players as they go about the activities.

During the game you are attempting to take training ideas from the practice field and put them straight into the game. Are they working? Why not? Is there something else that is going wrong that wasn't planned for? Some coaches are terrific trainers but can't coach in the game very well. Yet others are good "game day" coaches, but have difficulty running a quality session. To be highly skilled at both requires a lot of practice, coaching education and time.

The more difficult one of the two is the game day management. During the training session you have the luxury of slowing things down or stopping the session all together in order to make a point. You can reconstruct, allow repeated movements and manipulate the play in order to get the desired outcome. During a game, you are observing two teams of players who are competing at speed and contesting every ball. Trying to figure out what is going on with your team, as well as what the opponent is trying to do to you, and subsequently giving relevant information in a timely manner, is an extremely difficult and challenging skill.

This is where a good assistant coach comes in. The characteristics and role of the assistant are key during the ebb and flow of the game. I have my assistant look exclusively at the opponent while I like to concentrate on my team's individual and collective performances. If you don't divide responsibilities, then both individuals will be relaying what could be contrasting information at the same time.

The assistant coach must be able to read the head coach and give him information based on how and when he takes it in - not on when the assistant feels the need to give it. He must understand the "game personality" of the head coach and give him precise observations so the head can process it and then make the final decision. Or non-decision.

He can't give the information in a machine gun, non-stop chatter format. The head will simply tune him out or relevant material will get lost in his diatribe.

The assistant coach should have a pad with him, observe the small details as dispassionately as possible and then jot down notes regarding the opponent on the following items:

1. What is the opponent's starting line-up, system of play and list of positional jersey numbers?
2. Identify who the key/influential players are, at what positions and how are they influencing matters. What is the key player's individual strengths/weaknesses? E.g., Does their key midfielder like to play the ball over the top to a key forward or does the forward like it at feet? Does the key midfielder not like to get tackled and is only right footed?
3. How does the opponent like to attack? For example: through the flanks, long ball, slow build up.
4. How does the opponent like to defend? For example: zonal, high pressure, low pressure.
5. Tendencies on attacking set pieces. E.g., Do they hit corner kick to near post all the time? Do they have a player that bends the ball exclusively in a certain manner? Do they have a long thrower?
6. Tendencies on defending set pieces. E.g., Is their front post covered during a corner kick? Does their wall go from high to low? Do they zone on a corner? Match-ups?
7. What personnel and system changes did the opponent make at half time?
8. How is the opponent adjusting throughout the match? E.g., subs, system changes, players tiring or not dealing well with game's demands, players gaining confidence and thus starting to now influence play.

The head coach takes in the assistant's information, processes it, and decides, based on the overall picture, what the next steps (if any) should be. The assistant must also take the time to reiterate the points to the head coach at half time. The head should then be the one to give the information to the players and make the adjustments. You should know exactly what the assistant is going to say and how he is going to say it. You can't, off handedly, ask someone to address your players and not know the content or force in which it is going to be presented, especially when you don't have a lot of time to get the adjustments right. Delivery of information and the manner in which it is delivered is critical to the overall objective of winning the game.

Not all of us have the luxury of having an assistant. But if you do, choose wisely and don't select someone who will go along with everything that you say and agree with every choice. On the flip side, you don't want a combative personality who thinks he would make a better head coach than you. Find the balance, be very clear on instructions to this individual and then allow time for the relationship to develop. The emergence of a quality working relationship is one to keep an eye out for. When a coaching staff is prepared and on the same page, your players will be that much better for it.

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