

What Makes a Coach Effective?

By Lawrence Fine

What makes a coach effective?

There could be as many answers to that question as there are coaches in this country. To stimulate thought and discussion, I would like to offer some of my perspectives.

One frequent point of discussion on this topic is whether a paid coach is better than an unpaid coach. To address that issue, let me relate one of my experiences. A club I am familiar with had a number of unsuccessful, unqualified volunteer coaches. Other clubs in the area were hiring paid coaches, so they decided to do the same. The easiest way for them to get paid coaches simply was to pay the unsuccessful, unqualified coaches who already were working with their teams. The only thing that had changed was that the organization now could say that it had paid coaches! The moral of the story is that a coach's effectiveness and success cannot be measured by whether or not he or she is compensated for coaching; it's the level of knowledge brought to the game and how well it is related to the players that matters.

Many times when people refer to volunteer coaches, they mean parent coaches. Points of argument here include favoritism by the coach (either for or against the coach's child) as well as the perceived advantage of parent coaches knowing how to relate to children (since they have children) as opposed to the professional coach, who may not have children and therefore may be ill-equipped to deal with them.

The problem with the argument against parent coaches is that without them, many teams would cease to exist. While there may be a few regions of the country experiencing a coaching glut, most are desperately seeking anyone willing to coach to meet the ever-growing demand for participation in the sport at the youth level. This is the way many people find their way into coaching -- if they didn't step up as a volunteer coach, the team wouldn't exist and their children would be deprived the opportunity to participate.

For the game to progress, we *need* parent coaches to continue coaching, providing the foundation on which the sport can continue to grow. However, this does *not* mean these same parent coaches shouldn't be trained in as many ways as possible.

Conversely, the argument that a parent coach has advantages of working with youth oftentimes is false. The thought is that because of their relationships with their own children, the parent coaches are better able to educate and interact with young players. Just because a person is a parent, it does not mean he or she is qualified or able to teach others. Let's face it, the qualifications to become a parent are not very stringent! While almost anyone can be a parent, to be a good parent and a good educator (which are not the same thing) is very difficult. The frequent examples of lack of discipline and respect by young people in society today are evidence that not all parents have the capacity to interact effectively with their own children. In the end, I think it boils down to wanting to have a person who is good with children dealing with children, regardless of whether or not he or she is a parent.

As to parent coaches demonstrating favoritism toward their own children, that certainly is an issue, one that I have seen examples of many times. However, I don't know of any coach, parent or otherwise, who doesn't have favorites on his or her team. There is a vast difference between "having" favorites and "playing" favorites. The difference is that when playing favorites, some players not only are liked more than others, but also preferential treatment (in a positive or negative way) that results in unfair situations.

I can't think of any team I have coached where I didn't have a favorite player or two. Most of the players usually know who my favorites. Inevitably, they are the players who work the hardest and also have a personality. Do my favorites get more playing time than the other players? Usually, but that is because, in most cases, the players who work the hardest for me turn into the best players, so it all works out in the end.

I do not believe a coach who says he doesn't have favorites. I almost think it's best when a coach recognizes that he or she has favorites, because that coach will be more careful about treating all players fairly. Note that I said "fairly," not "equally." I do not believe it's right to treat everyone the same, but it *is* important to treat everyone

fairly.

Another topic of debate when discussing effective coaches is the value of the coach to having a lot of playing experience. While I do believe that it helps to have played the game, I don't think it's the most important factor, nor do I believe that a lack of playing experience prevents a person from becoming a good coach.

Frequently, top players do not go on to successful coaching careers for the simple reason that they are not able to relate to the average player. My guess is that Pelé would not have made a successful coach because of his frame of reference. He would have had a difficult time understanding why his players didn't work as hard as he did as a player and why they weren't able to perform at the same level he did. This seems to hold true in all sports: the most successful coaches are the ones who had to work harder to achieve playing success because they had to become a true student of the game to offset their physical limitations. They used their mental abilities to overcome what they lacked in physical gifts.

While there have been the notable exceptions (such as Franz Beckenbauer), being a top player does not necessarily make someone a good coach. Often, former players assume they can step in and coach the game without a problem. This frequently doesn't work out because, while they might have a tremendous understanding of the game, they may not know how to *teach* the game.

To be a coach is to be an educator, and this is where many former players fail. The ones who know how to teach the game, motivate players and read the game are the ones that prove to be successful. The advantage to the coach being a player (or former player) is having faced similar situations as the players, as well as the ability to demonstrate the skills. However, non-players can acquire the ability to demonstrate fairly easily. While there are certain advantages to having played the game, if that is a person's only qualification, he or she probably won't succeed as a coach.

In the U.S., it appears that one of the most important coaching qualifications is being from a different country. For some reason, a person with an accent is assumed to have played the game his or her whole life, and therefore also can coach the game. However, the same concept applies to them as it does to the former player. Without the knowledge and ability to teach the game, having grown up around the game becomes inconsequential.

If anything, the foreign-born coach may face a greater challenge. If he or she hasn't been in this country long, they face the dual challenge of learning how to teach and learning a new culture at the same time. It takes a special person to be able to do that. Does that mean internationals are not good coaches? No. The point is that growing up in a country with a strong soccer tradition is not a valid characteristic for determining whether or not a coach can be successful.

While I am a fan of coaching courses as one way to become a better coach, having a coaching license or certificate does not necessarily mean a person is a good coach. It may mean he or she is a better coach than if they did not go to a coaching course. There are some terrible coaches who hold an A license, and some excellent coaches with no license at all. Just because a person has a license does not mean they can coach; it does mean they have enough interest, time and money to get a license.

If I were a college student and decided to go into coaching as a profession, the first thing I would do is build a curriculum that included classes in education, psychology and business. Through this, I would gain a better understanding of how to teach, motivate, organize, interact and much more. The soccer element would be secondary. One thing we frequently forget is that soccer actually is a simple game. With the skill set from these other areas firmly in hand, our sport can be coached very easily.

While taking all of these classes I also would try to be an assistant with as many different coaches as possible to experience as many different coaching styles as possible. Being an assistant is a tremendous way to learn to coach, even if you are learning what *not* to do). I would then take some coaching courses and then, and only then, would I consider being a head coach. Unfortunately, while there are many people who seem to be interested in getting into coaching as a profession, there don't seem to be as many willing to actually prepare for it as a profession.

When people start taking the art and science of coaching more seriously, we will be more successful as coaches and will help develop better players.