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(Coaching Advice for) When the game begins

By Don Norton Jr., SoccerAmerica.com

Always remember soccer is a player's game and not a coach's game. Youth soccer must always be about player development and enjoyment. It must never be (just) about winning and losing. Our youth players should never play a game afraid of making mistakes.

Unlike other sports, soccer coaches cannot script out the exact play in front of them. Those coaches can signal for a bunt, screen pass or jump shot. We can't. During the game we should value our player's creativity, flair and imagination just as much as their hard work and commitment. We must allow our player's the freedom to think for themselves and display their talents within a team concept without constant harping from the touchline. Coach, but don't overcoach.

- **Keep your comments to a minimum during the game** so that it carries more weight spoke. Give short tidbits of information to your players. Always be positive. As your players get older, you can talk to them in more detail. I'm not saying you can't speak to your players once the game has begun. You can, and in most matches you will need to. But you should realize that it's very difficult for young players to understand and then act upon your comments in the "heat of battle." If overdone it may go in one ear and out the other. Sometimes less is more. It carries more weight.
- **Try to focus your game observations to the big picture.** Do my players need more technical work? The technical mistakes you see will determine the focus of your upcoming training sessions. If they are passing poorly, then work on passing. For younger players their technical abilities must be the primary focus of your comments (and training). Sadly, many coaches often get so worked up during the game that they are unable to see the forest for the trees.
- **Relax and have patience.** In a very real sense you are the teacher, your players are the students and the game is the "exam." What you observe in the game will dictate what you need to work upon in future training sessions to improve upcoming "exams." All youth players (as do students) need plenty of time to develop and learn the game.
- **Keep a small note pad and pen with you** so that you can record your observations. This will help you to remember those key points to stress to your team moments before the game, at halftime, after the match and to guide your upcoming training sessions. Note everything from injuries to equipment needs!

Your notebook pad will ensure that you don't forget a coaching point during the match. In time, it can grow to become a valuable resource guide. After some reflection, write down additional thoughts about the match later that evening or the next day. Keep your note pad(s) going for all your training sessions as well.

- **During the match quietly observe** your strikers, midfielders, defenders and goalkeeper. How are my players performing individually? As groups, collectively? Do they complement each other's play? What are their technical, tactical and physical levels. How do they (and you) respond to the countless game situations that arise every match such as different scores, formations, styles of play, changing tempos, skill levels, field conditions, and time management, etc.

Again, how your players respond to what the game presents them will determine the focus of your comments at halftime, after the game, and will be a factor in your preparation for upcoming training sessions. With very young players, your comments are always directed to their ability to master the ball and enjoy the game in safe conditions.

- **Explain to the parents at a mandatory preseason meeting** that they are not to make negative comments or yell instructions from the touchline during the game. These types of comments serve no purpose and are a distraction to players and coaches and are disrespectful to referees. They also do nothing to promote soccer in this country and make the world's greatest game less enjoyable for players, coaches and referees.

- **At halftime take your players to an area just close enough to your team bench, but where there are no distractions.** The coach always takes the sun on his/her face. Don't speak until you have every player's undivided attention. As I say to my players, "If you can't see my face, you're in the wrong place." Make a few brief points about the first half. Speak slowly and clearly using words your players will understand. The younger the player, the shorter the attention span.

Be positive. Make sure all players sip water or a sports drink. Stress two or three areas that the team needs to focus on for the second half. Again give good information. Young players tend to have an abundance of emotions and are eager to learn. Give them positive feedback about their play and what they can do to improve it rather than solely a pep talk.

From time to time players will give a comment or idea at halftime. Respect these comments and the spirit in which they are offered. After all, they are competing on the field and can see things that no one else can. The more our players feel a part of the team the better. If a player is struggling, look to briefly take him/her aside after you have spoken to the team and offer some words of encouragement. It only takes one shot; pass etc. to go from a poor first half to the second-half hero.

- **Strive to give all players equal playing time.** Gradually rotate your players during the season to different positions. This will (hopefully) force the left-footed players to use their right foot by placing them in a situation that requires them to use their right foot. Rotating your players takes them out of their comfort zone and demands them to think differently about their role on the field.

Gradually they will begin to better understand the ever-changing roles and responsibilities within the game. Rarely does one player play solely one position from youth to senior adult. Some of the world's best defenders were once strikers, etc. In today's modern game defenders must be able to attack and strikers must be able to defend. If they have never been exposed to other positions they are being denied a chance to further develop a more well-rounded game. Also for young players it is fun to play new position and this adds to their enjoyment of the sport.

- **Are the players communicating or just talking at each other?** There is a big difference. We want our players to rapidly communicate valuable information to each other for the entire match. That information must be precise. Many times when things aren't going well players talk at each other instead of talking to each other. In Scotland they have a saying that when the game ends the players should be "daffy." Meaning they should be mentally fatigued as well as physically spent.
- **Sportsmanship matters.** When a player is injured the ball must be kicked out of play immediately. Players should never talk trash. When the game ends everyone shakes hands. This type of behavior promotes the game we all love and want to grow in this country. It also teaches our children valuable life lessons. Inappropriate language and behavior before, during and after the match by coaches, players and parents can never be tolerated.

Respect the game and everyone associated with it. If a coach is out of control during the match how can we expect his players to play under control?

- **You are a role model to your players.** The words you choose, your appearance, it all matters. Young players are influenced by their coaches and often continue those same traits if they become coaches. There is no better feeling in life than to have former players come back and thank you for making a positive difference in their life.

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