



So When Do We Talk?

“Coach speak” has become a malaise in our profession

Coaching schools throughout the soccer world are concerned about when a coach should talk and not talk during a training session and what should be said. It is a concern for our soccer society: The coach must teach in a training session, and there is not enough teaching going on today. There are many useless, superfluous comments, but not too much teaching.

I think we all agree that negative comments are counterproductive. It seems many coaches think it is their job to find out what is wrong with a player or session or team. When you focus on what went wrong, the comments usually are negative. So if negative comments don't work, are positive comments productive? Or do players simply tune out both positive and negative comments from the coach after a while and not listen to anything said? Research shows that players tune out positive comments as well as negative comments.

Too much talking is another problem. Many coaches talk because they think they should. The talk is positive, negative, informative and nonsensical. “Good job boys!” means nothing. “Everyone find a man” means nothing. “Come on guys!” is useless. But many coaches believe that they earn a paycheck and should be saying something...all the time.

If the game is the best teacher, should coaches talk at all? In this country I don't think the game is the best teacher. If our players are doing “things” the wrong way over and over, all they are doing is learning the wrong thing! In other soccer countries where the young players have an innate understanding of the subtleties of the game, perhaps the game is the best teacher...but not here. So it is the coach's job TO TEACH and help our players learn the game.

In the 1970s two educational psychologists, Ronald Gallimore and Roland Tharp, wanted to determine how the best teachers communicate/teach. They chose legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden as their subject. They considered coach Wooden a master teacher. They identified each type of communication used by coach Wooden and coded every type of communication that was used in 30 hours of practice in the 1974-75 basketball season. The results may surprise you.

There was no “over the top praising” or even “over the top negative” comments. The vast majority of comments were informational (teaching); only 6 percent were purely positive, and 6 percent were purely negative comments. They found that his teaching comments were short, punctuated and numerous. There were no lectures, no extended harangues. His comments were frequent and in rapid-fire order. He rarely spoke longer than 20 seconds at one time. But he spoke (taught) often. When he did stop practice, there usually was a short demonstration of the required skill.

Subsequent studies of very good coaches in a

number of sports concurred with this research. On average, the coaches studied used informative/teaching comments twice as much as any other type of comment. There was, on average, an increase in positive comments of up to 17 percent.

One of the common denominators of all these good to great coaches was that they created opportunities to teach by organizing the practice session (this does not happen often with soccer coaches!). Said coach Wooden, Everything was planned out each day. In fact, in my later years at UCLA I would spend two

the experience phase. In the learning phase (usually at the beginning of training) the coaches are active and make corrections as needed. In the experience phase, the coaches observe, and the players play. Some KNVB coaches will even leave the area or turn their back on the field because it is the player's time.”

Manni Klar of *Success in Soccer* reported on how the DFB handles communication in a training session: “I observed a session at the Sport School in Cologne last year. The coach stopped the session multiple times to make corrections. That session dealt with

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hours each morning with my assistants organizing the day's practice session – even though the practice might not last two hours! He created teaching opportunities to teach by planning these opportunities into the session.

As one former player suggested, “...Had the majority of coach Wooden's corrective strategies been positive (e.g. “Good job”) or negative (e.g. “No, that's not the way”), I would have been left with an evaluation, not a solution. Also, corrections in the form of information were not personal. The information was aimed at the act, not the actor. John Wooden was a master teacher. He taught his players in every practice. Do you?”

How do other soccer coaching schools or federations treat communication?

The NSCAA tries “to maintain a balance between over talking and under talking with over talking the wrong choice,” said NSCAA Academy staff coach Jeff Vennell. “At the beginning of practice there will be more instruction and stopping play. The coach should not narrate the exercise, but be as silent as possible while the players ‘do’ the exercise. There is usually some verbal encouragement and minor corrections on the fly, but there must be a time when the players are on their own to solve the problems presented in the session. As the practice continues, the coach should stop the practice less frequently with less instruction. At the end of practice, the Academy would say to be as silent as possible with a minimum of freezes.”

Terry Michler offers this assessment of communication, as suggested by the KNVB: “They have two parts of the training session; the learning phase and

the tactical part of the game. At the younger ages, the DFB encourages coaches to always allow free play at the end of training, but they also allow moments of correction. But the coach should not freeze the game every two minutes.”

Dick Bate of the English FA says, “Coaching is communication.” He understands the importance of what the coach says, how the coach says it, what the coach says with their body and how it affects the players. He proposes his “Two Minute Drill.” He suggests that the coach start the training activity after an explanation. The coach then steps off the field and observes – no talking. Is the team getting it? Are the players doing what I want? Are there changes to be made? After two minutes the coach steps back onto the field, which is a signal for the players to stop. The coach makes suggestions and changes and steps off the field. He believes this impacts the players far more than continuous “coach speak.”

So it seems that most soccer coaches believe that “coach speak” should diminish as training goes on. John Wooden is an exception. He talked a lot during his sessions. How you communicate with the team is your choice. Your personality and philosophy will impact your decision on how and when to communicate. Whether you follow the example of John Wooden, Dick Bate, the NSCAA, the DFB or the KNVB doesn't really matter. What matters is that you coach the team and the players. Give information that is useful. Help the team get better. Help the players get better. “Well done boys” just doesn't cut it anymore. We need coaches who teach and coach! Are you on of those coaches?