The Environment We Create

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The environment created by coaches directly impacts the experience players have. Furthermore, it is that experience – positive or negative – which dictates whether or not they continue to participate at all. One telltale sign that a good, positive environment was created during practice is when you hear that the players want to come back and do it again. No matter what age, the environment as a whole (inclusive of field, space, activity, teammates, opponents) must be age appropriate. And it is our job as coaches to be mindful to tailor that environment to be age-appropriate and to acknowledge that the environment will look different depending on the age of the players.

U.S. Soccer believes that first and foremost youth soccer is a sport that players should experience and enjoy as a game with a focus on individual experimentation and development. They encourage creating soccer environments that will help promote the players’ lifelong love of the sport. These environments should allow for the creativity, spontaneity and experimentation that the game of soccer naturally encourages. Too often, children are put into situations where development is secondary to winning, which often leads to burnout and stifles individual skill development.

In my opinion, the most important thing we can do for our players is to set up an environment that is safe. Although vital to the sport, here I am not referring to literal life-safety measures such as making sure there are not manhole covers, sprinkler heads popped up, or goals improperly anchored. Instead, in this use of the word “safe” I am referencing the importance of creating an environment in which it is safe for players to make mistakes, a place where failure can and should happen. As coaches we should strive to set up a safe-zone wherein the players can explore their environment while making mistakes; a place where failing is encouraged in order for them to learn and grow.

How do we do this? US Soccer suggests that coaches allow players more control of practice, a great way to achieve this is through free play. Give kids simple instructions and allow them the chance to figure it out. When I was a young coach and I noted a mistake in play, I was quick to freeze the exercise, solve the problem and give the answer thinking that this approach would help my players learn. What I found out with experience is that the opposite is true. Younger players must be given more time to come up with their solutions and see situations play out. And while it is not always a neat and easy process, the player emerges stronger and more confident if given that opportunity. The best coaches implicitly rather than explicitly guide their players toward the common goal - player development and advancement of the game.

 Sounds doable, but it’s not quite that clear cut. We need to tailor our plan some more. The player’s age and level of play influences the environment in a big way. For instance, the amount of space and time appropriate for a player is directly related to that player’s age and ability. No matter the age/ability, there is a common objective – to keep the level of play high and to keep players engaged mentally and physically. In order to achieve this, the challenge of the activity needs to meet the ability of the players.
If the challenge is too high compared to the ability of the players then frustration sets in; and on the other side, if the challenge is too low for the ability of the players, the result is boredom. It is the coaches’ responsibility to know who it is they are coaching and to fine tune as necessary to keep their players engaged and motivated.

Kids come to play, not to wait to play. They come to move, kick a ball and score goals. Setting up an environment where players are waiting their turn only reduces their opportunities for enjoyment and their chances to learn. In preparing for a coaching session, the coach must put thought into how players can be kept active and involved for the majority of the practice session. All players, no matter their age, require a certain amount of uninterrupted play allowing them time to experience soccer first hand. And as previously touched upon, they should be allowed the opportunity to experiment, succeed and fail.

Including the players in the process and engaging them cognitively increases the chance that they will learn. This can be easily achieved by asking questions and then having players show or demonstrate what it is that you are asking. The trick is to guide them to the solution versus just giving them the answer and moving on. (Remember the best coaches are implicit not explicit in their approach.) If we give the players time to develop their solutions to the problems, they will be better prepared in long-term. Players learn and master the soccer problem by repeating a movement, skill or decision. A tool that a coach can use to better assess what players are absorbing is to check for understanding. By simply engaging players to either repeat what was just said in their own words or to demonstrate what the game is asking in their own actions, a coach can get a real sense of the players’ understanding of the game. Instead what we often do as coaches is seek affirmation by asking “Does that make sense?” or “Do you understand?” and for better or worse, the common response among players is to nod or say yes. Unfortunately, that nod is rarely reflective of the teams’ collective understanding of what we as coaches had hoped to convey.

What is our objective? As coaches, above all else it is our responsibility to inspire and ignite interest within our players, to create an environment that cultivates their development and forges their life-long love of the sport. We must give players an environment that they love and want participate in actively so that they continue to come back to this place where they feel safe, where they are empowered to both succeed and to fail and that leaves them feeling thoroughly engaged and hungry for more. If we can do that, we have given our players the best gift we can give as coaches, the opportunity to find self-fulfillment and that gift will take them far beyond the lines bordering our fields.