



By, Sam Snow

A fun environment during training sessions helps to open a player's mind. We want to avoid automaticity in our players. Automaticity is putting your brain on autopilot and giving the usual responses, even if you aren't in the appropriate situation. Too often we teach players things like, 'There's a right way and a wrong way to do everything, regardless of the circumstances.' What we should teach them is how to think flexibly, to be mindful of all the different possibilities of every situation and not close themselves off from information that could help them.

The best players in the world put thought and energy into developing techniques and styles of play best suited to their individual talents. We are rarely taught conditionally. Being mindful, *using imagination and creativity to learn what works best for you*, is what makes the difference between an average player and a champion. When players see that there's more than one technical or tactical solution to each situation, they become mindful.

The way you cultivate mindfulness is to realize that information about the game, around and in you, is endlessly interesting and it looks different from different perspectives. But many coaches and players operate mindlessly, pursuing routines (drills) rather than looking for new details around them. The results can be disastrous!

It's important for players to be in control of their game and the way to be in control is to be in the active process of mastering some aspect of soccer. It's in the mastering that mindfulness comes to the player. If players and coaches realize that much of the burnout they experience is the result of mindless over rhythmization, turnover goes down by a third. If all you think about is how you're likely to fail at a challenge, you probably will. But if you ask yourself 'What are ten ways I could succeed at this?' your chances of success are much greater. Just noticing new things keeps you alert.

Players learn more when they are having fun and are engrossed with the challenges of a proper training session. Having fun doesn't mean a laissez-faire approach to practice. A training session can be organized, purposeful and still be fun. Many practices are either a bore or drudging work because the coach believes some myths about how players learn. Let's reconsider some of these popular notions.

⇒ **No Pain, No Gain**~~true, but not necessary. Players are at their most mindful when they are at play; their senses are fully engaged, their physical and mental prowess is at its highest. If we [*coaches & players*] find ways of enjoying our work (soccer) – blurring the lines between work and play – the gains will be greater.

- ⇒ **Learn The Basics**~~so well that they become second nature.
FALSE! There's not just one "right" way. The old coach's axiom of 'It's my way or the highway' is false. What works in one situation may not work in another. Ask: "What's right for me?"

⇒ **Trying To Know Everything**~~will make you smart. FALSE!
Intelligence isn't the same as knowledge. Acting intelligently is being open to new ideas and using what you already know.

Using activities that are "game-like" at training sessions helps to develop skillful, physically fit, tactically aware and passionate players. Using drills stifles development, lends to player dropout and dulls player creativity. A coach can tell the difference between a drill and an activity by using the activity checklist. Whenever you put together a lesson plan for a training session ask yourself these questions.

- ✓ **Are the activities fun?**
- ✓ **Are the activities organized?**
- ✓ **Are the players involved in the activities?**
- ✓ **Is creativity and decision making being used?**
- ✓ **Are the spaces used appropriate?**
- ✓ **Is the coach's feedback appropriate?**
- ✓ **Are there implications for the game?**

Coaches can use a variety of "game-like" activities to create a challenging environment during training where learning, excitement and imagination are present. The cornerstone of player development is founded in the PRINCIPLES OF YOUTH COACHING.

- ◆ **Developmentally appropriate**
- ◆ **Clear, concise & correct information (demonstration)**
- ◆ **Brevity, clarity & relevance**
- ◆ **Simple to complex**
- ◆ **Safe & appropriate training area**
- ◆ **Decision making**
- ◆ **Implications for the game**

Soccer coaches at the youth level {19 and younger} should think of themselves as *teachers* of the sport. The task then is to develop players who can play at highly competitive levels as adults or participate in soccer as a lifetime sport. Therefore these teachers of soccer need to understand the elementary concepts of soccer and teaching.

Soccer is a game played between two teams. When one team has the ball they try to score by dribbling it, running with it, kicking it, heading it and passing it from one player to another so that finally the ball is played through, past or over opposing players to score a goal. The team not in possession of the ball tries to prevent shots at the goal which it is defending by tackling for the ball, blocking shots, marking opponents and by kicking, passing, heading or dribbling the ball away from danger areas near the goal. At the highest level, eleven players in a team play the game and there are seventeen simple rules, which say how the game will

be played. Younger players, however, learn to play the game by playing small-sided games with fewer and simpler rules.

To inexperienced coaches or novices to the game, soccer may seem a complicated, clever and highly technical sport. It is true that soccer involves a considerable range of techniques but they need not worry you.

Soccer coaching, the preparation and organization of lesson plans for training sessions, can be complex or simple but there are four principles to be observed by coaches at all levels:

- 1) *Children's interest is best maintained by offering them frequent planned opportunities to play the game so that each player will have the maximum opportunity to touch the ball HIM/HERSELF. The larger the teams the fewer the opportunities to do so. THE SMALLER THE TEAMS THE GREATER THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT.*
- 2) *Once the coach has decided to teach something, he or she alone is responsible for making sure that it is understood, practiced and assessed.*
- 3) *Coaches must EVOKE the imagination of children and CHALLENGE their ambition.*
- 4) *Finally, coaches must present all games so that analogies can be drawn and demonstrated between intelligent, skillful and fair play and the integrity, honesty and fair-mindedness which we are duty bound to inculcate in the minds of children in all social situations.*

Many children, some of them very young indeed, have learned the skills of the game---individual and group skills---to levels never attained by their coaches! These relatively high levels of skill have been achieved through the powerful attraction that the game has exerted at five, six and seven years of age. Now the game has become a dominant play interest in their lives. In other words the child spends a great deal of time playing with a ball with other children or alone. What an intimidating challenge! How can it be possible to teach children who seem to know more than the coach? This is a very real problem. Unfortunately very few coaches try to solve it. The majority take the easy way out by simply organizing eleven-a-side games. This is in no one's interest. The majority of the children will be uninvolved for long periods, their contact with the ball will be minimal and they become bored. Soccer development can be simply a matter of setting and solving problems. Clearly the coach who can set problems and also guide a player towards appropriate solutions has an advantage. But any coach with imagination can set problems and guide players towards possible answers. This involves understanding the principles of youth coaching, which certainly will be within the general experience of any coach. Following is a play-orientated scheme, which makes almost no demands on knowledge and very few demands on organization. Training sessions can be on technique (ball skills) or psychomotor development (fitness) or cognitive development (psychology). Try to conclude each training session with small-sided games. This could be

anything from 3 versus 3 to 8 versus 8. Small-sided games should take place during the last ten to twenty minutes of practice, depending upon the age group.

Soccer is easy to teach to children because many of them already know a good deal about it and many are so keen on it. Simple principles, professional organization, appropriate incentives, unlimited encouragement--any coach worth the name can hardly fail. Even more important, he or she will gain enormous gratification from the pleasure and satisfaction gained by the children.

The training session will go from simple to complex activities.

- Warm-up (1st activity)
- 2nd activity – alone & in small groups
- 3rd activity – group activity on cooperation
- 4th activity – group activity on competition
- 5th activity – 4 v 4 games with conditions
- Cool-down

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Rule # 1

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