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COACHING YOUTH FOOTBALLERS

CHAPTER



Chapter 3

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a stage of development marked by dynamic biological and psychological changes, and requires adoption of specific coaching behaviours if young adolescents are to realise a socially fulfilled and worthwhile outcome from their involvement in Australian Football. Coaches not only occupy an influential position in the football setting but their influence can extend into other areas of the player's life as well.

Key areas of consideration are lifestyle and time management, progression to higher levels of competition, developing rapport between coaches and players, developing trust and mutual respect, setting limits and enhancing discipline.

APPROACHES TO COACHING

The following recommended coaching approaches are aimed at assisting coaches to respond effectively to some of the social needs of adolescents. Coaches should view the list as a collection of alternatives to be used at their discretion. The manner of delivery of each behaviour should also be determined by the coach and will be strongly influenced by the interpersonal attitudes that are typically unique to each coach/player relationship.

TIME MANAGEMENT

As a coach of adolescent footballers, you are faced with many problems throughout a football season which are quite unique to the teenage group. Unlike the majority of senior footballers, teenagers are still deciding what their priorities are in terms of their sporting, social and academic careers. This can cause problems in time management whereby they try to fit in too many commitments appropriate for their lifestyle. Eventually, something needs to give.

The challenge coaches face in this situation would be to assist the player with these extra demands. The ideal situation would be for players to manage their time so that commitments are met and at the same time maintain interest and enthusiasm for football. However, this is not always the outcome. The reality is that at some stage coaches will need to deal with low attendance rates at training and even struggling to field a team on weekends. These problems will always be perennial issues, but the following steps may help minimise the effects they might have on your team.

1. Identify potential disruptions

These may include:

- Injuries and illnesses.
- Work – full-time and part-time.
- School demands.
- Family holidays.
- Other sports.
- Cost.
- Travel.
- Family problems.

There may be many others which relate particularly to players, the coach and the club.



2. Establish a club procedure

Discuss this with your players and together come up with a policy for dealing with such situations.

This may include:

- Prior notice must be given.
- Attendance at training re selection.
- Rehabilitation re injuries.
- Penalties re non-compliance.

This is an opportunity to discuss team rules and expectations for the season.

3. Develop strategies

Always try to be pro-active to situations that may occur.

Some strategies may include;

- Preparing a monthly calendar which highlights:
 - Upcoming games.
 - Training nights.
 - Social events.
 - Other important reminders.
- A reduction in the number of training-nights/weeks off.
- Providing variety to maintain interest:
 - Indoor training/swimming/basketball/touch football.
 - Social activities.
 - Team-building activities, e.g. triathlon competition.
 - Going to an AFL game together.
- Taking an active interest, ask questions.
- Continue with planned training programs.

Potentially disruptive players especially should be assisted to overcome behaviours that will impede their learning or the learning of others in the team. Ignoring these factors that can disrupt the team and impede learning can result in the teaching/coaching role becoming more and more difficult and contribute to player dropout.

Behaviour problems can destroy the coach's aim to provide enjoyable learning experiences. Most problems can be avoided if training sessions are well planned and a clear code of behaviour is established and reinforced from the outset. A knowledgeable coach who provides training sessions that yield fun, active participation and development of skills, and that allow all players to achieve personal success, will not be confronted with disciplinary problems very often.

PROGRESSING TO HIGHER LEVELS OF COMPETITION

Win or lose-enjoy the contest

Win or lose, remain composed throughout a season, teach players that the contest provides the excitement and enjoyment while the outcome provides a guide for assessing strategies and skills in relation to the opposition. Also, by setting up competitive activities at training, the coach can observe how players react and therefore intervene if necessary. At training, the coach is able to remove a player from a game to provide feedback about the player's composure during the contest. At all times it is appropriate to stress good sportsmanship, fair play, support for teammates, clever play, teamwork, concentration, maintaining effort when being beaten and focus the players' game analysis on the application of skills and strategies rather than the outcome.

Playing competitive sport with friends

One of the important reasons why young people participate in sport is to be in a team with friends and enter a competition against other teams. Sometimes coach, club and organisation strategies, designed to improve the competitiveness of teams, prevent players from realising this need to be with friends.

Adjusting to the pressure of competition

“Did you win?” is the question often asked by parents and friends when young people are involved in competitive sport. Those on the sidelines become more intense and begin to question umpires and criticise opposition players and coaches. Players feel the pressure of the need to win, not just for themselves, but also for obsessive adults, and this can become a huge responsibility. As young players enter into the environment that is the product of competitive activities, they need to be protected from the often irrational behaviour that others display, particularly at the game. Football has developed codes of behaviour to guide players, spectators and officials. Coaches are advised to refer to these continually and lead by example to help young players develop a frame of reference for what is acceptable sporting behaviour.

As with the teaching of skills, introducing competitive elements should be developmental. This developmental process will be different for each player. However, all coaches would be aware of the difficulties young players have coping with the various situations that arise in their competitive activity. Some coaches prepare lists of these elements and sequentially deal with them throughout a season. This list might include:

- How to cope with winning and losing.
- Accepting selection policies.
- Accepting umpiring decisions.
- Supporting teammates when they make errors.
- Supporting team strategies.

Gradual introduction of competitive elements, consideration for each player's reasons for playing, emphasising the process rather than the outcome in the initial stages and providing players with mechanisms for coping with external influences are ways in which the coach can help players adjust to competitive activities.

DEVELOPING RAPPORT

One of the perceived effective ways for a coach to develop a rapport with players is to train them to do as they are directed. However, today this approach is no longer so effective. It is often justified because the time and coaching skills required to implement sophisticated coach/player interaction strategies are not available in most junior sporting contexts.

A coach may have a squad of 25 players who, for each week during the competitive season, the coach only sees for three hours at training and two hours at the game.

For most of this time, the players are involved in activity and therefore are not available for individual counselling. In this situation, having players who will accept the coach and who will comply without question to every direction, often sacrificing their own development to facilitate the development of others, tends to nullify the need for sophisticated strategies for maintaining rapport between coach and player.

The ‘do as you're told’ coaching strategy always seems to be tolerated when players are winning the majority of their games. However, the rapport between players and coaches can often become strained if players exposed to this coaching strategy lose the majority of their games.

Adolescents of today are being educated in school to question, interpret and process information as well as role learn and apply information. Subsequently, the adolescent player will bring these questioning skills to their sporting context. Even if the team is winning, these players will be considering the wisdom of some of the directions that emerge from the coach's ‘do as you're told’ coaching strategy.

As a result, the emerging interplay between these coaches and questioning players is often critical to the rapport developed between the player and the coach, and subsequently critical to the morale of the team. Despite the powerful proposition that life requires people to learn to cope with ‘doing as they are told’, this management approach is no longer a one-way dialogue. Today's leaders are having to learn to cope with the needs of the informed masses who can quickly deplete the power of a leader who lacks the ability to manage the attitudes and opinions of his/her charges by using collaborative approaches to the implementation of training, practising and competition.



The following are approaches that coaches can adopt with adolescents to nurture the rapport between coach and player.

1. Physiological awareness

Develop an understanding of the physiological changes that typical adolescents will experience while they are under the coach's control. Dramatic changes occur in muscle fibre types, the presence of the hormone testosterone and the growth of lean body mass. Changes to muscle fibre type are almost completed in early adolescence, which means that a player's potential for endurance versus speed has been determined. Knowing whether a player is capable of speed and not endurance can affect a coach's expectations in game and training situations.

2. Psychosocial awareness

Develop an understanding of the psychosocial changes that will confront the adolescent during the time they are under the control of the coach. Adolescents become increasingly interested in establishing an identity as well as defining their role as a future independent adult. As they move through a myriad of opportunities that confront them, they begin to make choices based on experience and a confirmed belief in their abilities. When coaching these players, it is essential to recognise the importance of supporting the choices they make about their role, particularly in the sporting context.

It can be demoralising for an adolescent who has been encouraged to expect to be played in a particular role to then find themselves relocated accordingly to the policy of 'do as your told'. The scenario can manifest itself in situations such as a player not being selected as captain or being told to shift from defence into attack. Each of these situations has the potential to erode the rapport between player and coach. All can be productive events provided the coach has prepared the athlete to accept the alternative roles that may confront them and their team.

Being able to predict possible management strategies and player reaction to those strategies is one of the attributes of an effective coach. It is recommended that coaches present their coaching philosophy to the players on the day that they start their player/coach relationship. They should also be capable of providing players with the necessary rationale for making decisions about changing the player's previously defined role.

3. Awareness of self-responsibility

- Show respect for the player by acknowledging their every effort and by entrusting them with positions of responsibility. This begins by making every role in the team as important as the other roles.
- Adopt a non-threatening posture when the player's body language may suggest a lack of support for the coach. It is often worthwhile when players seem to be ignoring the coach, to make an effort to informally interact with the player about any topic which is known to be of interest to the players. The icebreaker approach may be enough to curb a potentially strained relationship from negatively affecting the quality of the players' performance and subsequently the team's performance.
- Be noticeably consistent in supporting the worth of each player's goals and roles. This may require making a mental note of the comments made by significant others who are close to the player and can provide useful inside information about the player's needs and wants.
- At all times, the coach should avoid making the player feel as if they are being constantly analysed. Adolescents should expect that they have intimate discussions with those people who necessarily affect their lives. No matter how intriguing a particular player's situation may be, managing their personal domain is not part of a coach's role unless directed to do so by the player.
- Understanding and respect from adolescents can only be developed through knowledge of their unique characteristics. However, it is also important to acknowledge that adolescents must understand the importance of being able to 'do as they are told' when part of a team.

DEVELOPING TRUST AND MUTUAL RESPECT

Coaches seem to be aware that an adolescent's commitment to a training program and/or performance strategy will be greatly enhanced if there is mutual respect and trust not only between the players and their coach but also between the players themselves. Developing both types of respect is largely the responsibility of the coach.

How do coaches develop mutual respect?

There are many opportunities for coaches to gain the respect of their players. There are also opportunities for coaches to lose the respect of their players. On occasions, this loss of respect may be due to the input of a 'significant other' such as a parent, previous coach and/or friend. The player may not even be aware that there is a problem until a significant other chooses to criticise the coach. Therefore, the strategies coaches use to gain the respect of their players must consider the degree of influence that significant others will have on the player.

Establish codes of behaviour for effective team function

Codes should include parameters for attendance, dress, demeanour, teammate support and attitude. Each of these codes should be stated, clearly defined and any code violation linked to appropriate consequences. For example, players who do not comply with a stated code may be:

- Spoken to by the coach.
- Requested to carry out certain duties.
- Act as a reserve for a period of time.
- Asked for a special effort at training or during competition.
- Required to apologise to those whose participation has been disrupted by the offending player.

The severity of a consequence will greatly depend upon the offending player's control over the situation and the previous history of the player. Obviously, with adolescents, their late arrival at a training session or a competition can be caused by factors outside their control such as parent transport being delayed. A poor attitude may result from a lack of consideration given by teammates or other aspects of their lives being in disarray. Coaches must be sensitive to the various factors that may cause a player to stray from the expected standards.

Use a consistent approach when delivering the consequences

- Avoid allowing personalities to affect your decisions.
- Act immediately when an infringement of the code occurs.
- Consult with parents if a situation with a player is becoming unmanageable.
- Be calm and objective when applying a consequence to behaviour.
- Speak with the offender in private whenever possible.
- Create a policy for team, strategy and/or event selection.

This policy can be as simple as 'players will be selected in positions that the coach considers will give the team its best chance of winning, given the circumstances of the competition (i.e. playing conditions, opposition ability and availability of players)'. This policy should be clearly articulated to the players and, in the case of the younger adolescents, to the parents as well. Should there be a need to vary the policy, then it is advisable to conduct a team meeting to communicate the reasons for the change.

Establish the worth of every player's contribution

This is achieved through the consistent reinforcement of effort. Some guiding principles include:

- Ensure that the player who has the least ability and can contribute only in a minimal way feels worthwhile. For these players, the sport may not be a priority in their lives, however they give a maximum effort. A coach lacking in empathy may unintentionally burden these players with feelings of guilt. Public acknowledgement of their contribution is encouraged.
- Challenge the high-ability and totally involved players to measure their performance against a higher standard rather than against that of their less-involved peers. Make certain that all involved are aware of the contribution talented and committed players make to a team and how difficult it is for them to cope with the high expectations of others.
- Give equal consideration to players who fit between the two extremes. Take time to discuss their ambitions and roles. They are not the captains of the ship or the porters, they typically work in the engine room and often go unnoticed.

Open discussions about the relative worth of each participant can ensure that young adolescents develop empathy for their peers and the various situations that they themselves must face as players.



Identify acceptable comments for players to make in most team sports

Basketballers have developed a supportive slap of hands to signify support for their teammates. This usually occurs either after a mistake or good play. Comments such as 'What do you think you were doing?' or 'You idiot!' have no place within a team and should be replaced with 'Keep it up', 'We're with you' and 'Hang in there'.

Coaches should attempt to anticipate when a player may be troubled and then create an opportunity for a discussion to occur. It is not advisable to do this when emotions are high but rather before the anticipated moment of tension or at a time when those involved have calmed down. Having regular times for review often relieves the anxiety between individuals who may not be able to resolve their differences and/or disappointments.

Trusting the adolescent player

Effective coaches not only set goals for the performance of their players but also for their own performance as coaches. One of the critical performance indicators is the harmony between the players and between the coach and their players. Good coaches will have supportive and striving players even when they are not winning. Although, all things being equal, the coach who develops mutual respect with and between players will eventually be a winner.

Setting limits

Another important role for coaches of adolescents on their journey to adulthood is to set limits. Setting limits has a number of important consequences for young peoples' development:

- Protection and safety.
- Socialisation and consideration of others.
- Developing a sense of obligation.
- Maintaining order and peace in the team.
- Self control and discipline.
- Learning moral values.
- Establishing expectations.
- Assisting in defining their roles.
- Giving them a sense of security.
- Letting them know we care about them.

It is normal that these limits will be tested. Make allowances when negotiating them. Mistakes will be made – this is part of the learning process. Present outcomes as consequences rather than punishments.

PLAYER DISCIPLINE

Player discipline is an important factor underpinning learning, development and performance. ACT Academy of Sport Psychologist Michelle Paccagnella produced the following framework for enhancing player discipline.

Enhancing player discipline

A disciplined player is one who is in control of their behaviour and conduct, adheres to training protocols and consistently trains and performs to a required standard. While good discipline is not a prerequisite for achievement, it is certainly an ingredient that can make the life of both the player and coach a lot smoother. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the player, however a good coach can greatly assist them to instigate and maintain good discipline.

How to identify the disciplined player

Discipline can apply to both commitment to off-field issues (for example, organisation, healthy diet, etc.) and during the course of training or competition to adhere to team plays or control emotions. Good player discipline incorporates a high level of commitment, responsibility, motivation to train and perform, meeting all requirements (such as administration), organisation and good focus. At the more elite levels, this entails a certain level of professionalism, including ownership of goals, self-control and maintaining good life balance.

Benefits of player discipline

There are some obvious benefits of player discipline.

These include:

- Setting the scene for a good work ethic.
- Providing structure.
- Not relying on talent alone.
- Helping to put players in a position to achieve their goals.
- Facilitating leadership when other players rely on you.
- Assisting in adhering to team plays (players put team goals before their own).
- Increasing coachability of the players.

Educating your players

The first step in enhancing player discipline is education. Do your players know what discipline is, or how it can enhance their performance and enjoyment of football? Does your players' understanding of discipline match your own? These questions can form the basis of an education session to help you and your players embrace and understand the concept of discipline. Education sessions can take the form of group brainstorming sessions, formal workshops, informal discussions or individual player meetings.

Strategies for enhancing player discipline

Once players have a good understanding of discipline, there are many things a coach can do to further support and enhance player discipline. The following approaches will help to establish an environment where discipline problems are largely avoided and where the few discipline problems that may occur are managed well.

- Provide concrete training rules, particularly with young players. Establish the rules and the consequences of breaking them. Allow your players to help with the establishment of rules and consequences so they have ownership of them.
- Create the kind of culture you want.
- Have set routines at training and competition.
- Provide a structured, consistent training environment.
- Lead by example.
- Encourage the behaviour you want and reward it.
- Teach your players to believe in themselves.
- Learn what enhances your players' motivation. Help them discover this for themselves.
- Be supportive and flexible.
- Make training fun/enjoyable.
- Maintain a process orientation where you focus on performance, not outcomes.
- Be aware of other influences on the player (for example, other sports, school demands and talent programs).
- Do not give up on undisciplined players. Find a way to get through to them. Think creatively.
- Allow for flair/creativity/spontaneity (both yours and your players).
- Encourage your players to set and review their goals.
- Be a role model/mentor or provide them with role models. Provide examples of other player discipline (how they train, live etc).
- Maintain a good coach-player relationship and communication.
- Enhance players' ownership of their training/program.
- Know when to be autocratic and when to be democratic.
- Encourage player honesty – how are they really feeling/coping?
- Encourage your players to keep log books or training diaries.
- In dealing with unsatisfactory behaviour, focus on the behaviour not on the individual as a person. Do not insult or embarrass a player.
- Intervene at the earliest signs of misbehaviour so players can easily redeem themselves before things get out of hand and are less easy to resolve.
- Early intervention strategies include issuing clear reminders of expectations, introducing a 'diverting' activity, inquiring if there is something wrong, discreetly informing the offender that his/her behaviour is getting out of order, and other 'low key' reactions signalling that the behaviour has been noticed and that it should stop.
- Discipline firmly, fairly and consistently.



Mental discipline

Discipline can be applied to players' thoughts and emotions, as well as their on and off-field behaviour. Teach your players to review their goals, discover their optimum level of arousal, control their self-talk, replace negative thoughts with positive ones and deal with their emotions.

Unfortunately, many players don't learn how to be disciplined until they experience real failure, disappointment, adversity or injury, forcing them to improve their discipline. However, through education and a commitment to enhancing player discipline, you may be able to help your players learn this valuable lesson sooner rather than later.

RECOMMENDED COACHING BEHAVIOURS WHEN WORKING WITH YOUTH PLAYERS

- Establish and consistently apply participation rules and regulations for players.
- Work with each player to determine their personal goals.
- Be enthusiastic and show enjoyment for the task of coaching.
- Promote the value of each player and the role that they have in the team.
- Encourage players to evaluate their own performance and discuss their evaluation openly.
- Show concern for the physical and mental well-being of each player.
- Learn to identify player anxiety and help the player cope.
- Be an appropriate role model for players to follow.
- Always publicly support players and the system, including officials and administrators.
- Emphasise effort and enjoyment as well as winning. Do not emphasise winning to the exclusion of effort and enjoyment.
- Ensure that all players have an equal opportunity to participate.
- Maintain some distance with players while encouraging a calm, congenial atmosphere.
- Learn to identify and understand the physical changes that can occur during early adolescence. Help players to adjust their sporting involvement to allow for these changes.
- Use reward systems to maintain discipline and only occasionally use predetermined and high-impact disciplinary strategies.
- Promote and insist on fair play and good sportsmanship.
- Use each player at various times to take responsibility not only for the conduct of training and competition but also the conduct of the club.
- Assign individuals to coaching and management roles with younger teams and/or players.
- Allow players to take risks and explore the options in their sport.
- Assess players according to their commitment and ability, not their personality.
- Have a thorough knowledge of the rules, techniques and tactics of football.
- Focus on all aspects of individual growth – developing physical and social skills and promoting attitudes such as fair play, sportsmanship, consideration for others, work ethic, striving for success, overcoming adversity and having fun.

If included in a coach's coaching repertoire, these approaches will enable them to help adolescent players satisfy their social and psychological needs through football more effectively. In particular, coaches should strive to:

- Nurture the self-esteem of young adolescents.
- Raise their sense of responsibility.
- Confirm the worth of consistent and enduring relationships.
- Promote sportsmanship, fair play and an honest effort.
- Create a convivial and supportive environment.