

Chapter 2

Getting Organised

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Coaching a squad of young football players involves more than showing up with a whistle, a team sheet, and a car boot-full of footballs. Being a coach kids admire and look forward to seeing all season requires a lot of preparation on your part prior to the first training session.

First, think about why you got involved this season, what you hope to accomplish and what your approach is going to be to help your team get there. Have you assumed the coaching role because you genuinely want to help kids pick up and develop skills in a fun and safe environment, or because you want to make a bid for the league title? What's your take on playing time, motivating players, and creating a positive atmosphere?

This chapter considers those aspects, and many others, which form the basis of your coaching philosophy. Having a philosophy in place and sticking to it as best you can sets the tone for a good season. A portion of your philosophy should also be dictated by the league you are coaching in. That's why it's always important to find out as much information as you can about the league's policies before you step on the pitch. Being involved in a league that promotes the values that you are aiming to impart to your team is critical for everyone's enjoyment.

Developing a Coaching Philosophy

Creating a *coaching philosophy* is fairly simple. Living up to it all season long is the tricky part. What is a coaching philosophy? Basically, it reflects the standards you have set for yourself and your team, and is the foundation of your coaching values and beliefs.

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Entering the season without a coaching philosophy is like driving across the country without a road map. Yes, you'd eventually arrive at your destination, but not without wasting a lot of time and energy with wrong turns and dealing with unnecessary problems and aggravation along the way. A well-thought-out coaching philosophy should reflect a number of considerations, such as:

- ✓ Focusing on the best interests and well-being of every player
- ✓ Promoting the respect of players and coaches on both teams, as well as officials
- ✓ Upholding the virtues of fair play, good sportsmanship, honesty, and integrity
- ✓ Placing safety, skill development, and fun ahead of any personal desires to win.



Even with a carefully planned philosophy firmly in place, you will find it pretty challenging adhering to it at all times. This can be particularly true when Billy's mum confronts you halfway through the season about why the team isn't winning more games; or Jennifer's dad questions why the kids with less ability are receiving as much playing time as the team's best players. (For explaining your coaching philosophy to the parents before the season gets under way, see Chapter 4, which can help you steer clear of many of these potential headaches.)



Your philosophy is going to speak volumes about you as not just a coach, but as a person. So take the time to put real thought into it. You'll be glad you did. Lead your players in the direction you know is right. Strive to instil in them the values that you want your own kids to exhibit throughout their life.

Tailoring your coaching to your age group

Children are continually changing, and one of your responsibilities as a coach is to know what to expect both physically and emotionally from youngsters at various age levels. Being fully aware of these differences enhances your coaching skills and your ability to relate to your team. It also ensures that you don't favour those players on your squad who are more mature and skilled at the expense of those who are less skilled and developed.



No matter what the age or skill level of your players, always be supportive and enthusiastic. Pile on the praise and never stop encouraging them. This approach builds their confidence and self-esteem, regardless of age, and it's a gift that will last for years to come.

Protecting children

When it comes to coaching kids, first and foremost, before skills and drills and games comes the protection and safety of the children. This is why adults working with children in football are required to undergo a Criminal Records Bureau check. A number of other initiatives regarding

child safety and protection are run by the various football associations in the UK, an initiative to ensure that only child-safe goals are used in mini-soccer and other youth football, for example. (Details of all such initiatives are available via the FA website, www.thefa.com (see Chapter 23.)

While each child has his or her own unique strengths and weaknesses, all youngsters possess general characteristics that are dictated by their age. Good coaches are aware of these traits. The following are general characteristics that are applicable for certain age ranges.

- ✔ **Age 6 and under:** Children in this age bracket may never have played football, and this season may very well be their first experience in an organised team setting. Your job is simply to introduce them to football's most basic elements and whet their appetite for future participation. (See Chapter 5, which covers the fundamentals that you can focus on with this age group.) Children at this age generally aren't concerned about how well they are performing football skills compared to the others on their team. They are primarily interested in being with friends and having fun discovering and playing the sport. Competition is usually the furthest thing from their minds, which is why scorelines and league rankings are often not that important at this level.
- ✔ **Age 7–9:** Youngsters at this age tend to start focusing on mastering the basics of the sport. They also crave feedback from coaches and parents on how they are performing certain skills and how they are progressing in a new skill. They begin noticing how their teammates are faring while practising these skills. As coaches praise their peers for properly executing a skill, the child will want to earn that same feedback as well. The desire to compete carries much more prominence for some youngsters in this age range than others, particularly if they have older siblings who they have watched compete in football or other sports and now feel it's finally their turn to display their skills.
- ✔ **Age 10–12:** More than likely, these children have had experience playing football in the past and are continuing with it because it has piqued their interest. Keep the positive momentum going by adding to their foundation of skills and fuel their desire to continue playing by conducting training sessions that are both challenging and fun. Quite often, sports take on added importance at this juncture in their life and they really want to do well. (For more on skills and drills with this age group, see Chapters 10 to 12.) As children reach this age range, many become more

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competitive and seek to perform better than others of their age. When their ability matches up with their peers, or surpasses it, they feel a real sense of achievement.

- ✓ **Age 13–14:** Welcome to the challenging world of the teenager! Children in this age category have already developed many of the basic skills needed to play the sport, and now they want to improve these skills. Be aware that teenage children are typically searching for their own personal identity as well. So, it's a good idea to get to know them on a personal level by finding out who their favourite football players are or what football team they support. Of course, this is a great tip for building special coach-player bonds with kids of all ages. (Turn to Part IV, where we cover forward play and defending for older kids, and drills that challenge them.)
- ✓ **Age 15 and above:** Gaining the respect of your players is always important to your coaching success, and this is particularly true for kids aged 15 and older. These are teens that have developed a real passion for the sport. They attend football tournaments, perhaps play in leagues year-round and, in some cases, may even be more knowledgeable in certain areas of the sport than you are. If you volunteer or get recruited to coach this age group – don't be scared! Don't feel threatened. Instead, welcome the chance to enhance your coaching abilities and embrace the opportunity to coach kids with a deep-rooted love for the game. Be sure to let them know that you value their opinions, suggestions and input regarding the team. A youngster's passion for football is wonderful, and actually helps make your job easier.

Emphasising teamwork

While football is a sport that allows individuals plenty of opportunities to be creative and to run with the ball on their own, you and your team are much better off if you can get everyone to work together as a cohesive unit. Of course, this is easier said than done.

Imagine having 10 kids in front of you. You have one really good toy that they are all eyeing. You give the toy to one child and ask that they share it with everyone. Tough to achieve, eh? The same goes for football. There's one ball that they are all going to have to share in order for the team to be successful. So how do you get the team to that point?

Sure-fire routes to fostering the essence of teamwork among your players don't exist, but the following are some pointers to assist you in your efforts and get the players to begin to see the enormous benefits that accompany working as a team rather than a bunch of individuals.

- ✔ **Give touchline support.** Encourage players not in the game to stay involved by cheering and supporting their teammates. This keeps them involved in the action instead of glancing over to see what their parents are doing or what kind of food their friends are eating.
- ✔ **Allow individual freedom – at times.** While you should allow players individual freedom to run with the ball, it must be done within the confines of the team setting. There will certainly be points during the game where a player's close control skills and ability to dribble the ball down the pitch may be called for, and that's part of the game. But when that player then ignores teammates and isn't willing to pass the ball, the team chemistry is threatened. Remind players that they have teammates for a reason and must be sure to look out for them. (The problem of dealing with a player who isn't willing to pass the ball is covered in Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **Avoid the captain syndrome.** Continually relying on two or three players to serve as team captains throughout the season puts them on a platform above the rest of the squad. By giving every player the opportunity to lead warm-ups in training or be first in a drill infuses the team with that sense that everyone is equal.
- ✔ **Praise team efforts.** During training sessions, make it a point to recognise the efforts of the team whenever possible. For example, if you're conducting a 3-on-1 drill and the attacking players score a goal, you may feel a natural tendency to applaud the end result and acknowledge the youngster who scored at the expense of the others involved in the drill. Be sure to acknowledge the perfectly executed pass that began the move, or the pass that found the unmarked scorer. If your admiration is spread among all the players who played a role in the goal, players begin to understand that setting up a goal is just as important as scoring in the team framework.
- ✔ **Get the kids praising one another.** Encourage the kids who score goals to acknowledge the pass from their teammate that led to it. If you get kids into the habit of giving one another high-fives, or telling one another 'great pass', this forges a bond and strengthens the idea of everyone working together for the benefit of the team.
- ✔ **Recognise the non-scoring contributions after the game.** The kids who scored the goals don't need additional praise after the game because their shot generated cheers and applause from the spectators. How about giving out post-game prizes to the player who began the move with a great pass out of defence? After all, there never would have been a goal without the effort of that child, and it's well worth mentioning that whether the team wins, draws or loses, the whole team deserves the credit and not just any one player.



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Motivating players

Regardless of the age or experience level of your players, they arrive at the pitch with vastly different motivations for playing the game. While some will be strongly motivated individuals who will be real gems to work with, others may benefit from your inspiring words.

Some players should respond positively to the challenges you issue, such as seeing whether they can deliver 10 accurate passes in a row. With others, that approach may actually detract from their motivation to participate. Each youngster you come into contact with is different. Discover for yourself what works for each child to help get the best out of them.

Here are a few general tips that you can employ to help spur your players on to become the best they can be.

- ✔ **Share your love of the sport.** If you have a sincere passion for football and for passing this on to children, your excitement and enthusiasm should rub off on the team.
- ✔ **Set attainable goals for youngsters.** By having reasonable expectations for the kids you are coaching, and setting goals that are within their reach, you will stimulate and encourage them to keep working because the goals are within sight. If a child senses that your expectations are impossibly far-fetched, they are going to wonder what's the point of trying and their play on the pitch could suffer tremendously.
- ✔ **Recognise the good things happening on the pitch.** Stop training to point out when a player has done something really well, not when he's made a mistake. Praise is simply one of the best motivational tools around. Think about it. If your boss tells you that you have done a great job on a presentation in front of your colleagues, you are going to give even more effort on your next presentation. The same goes for kids performing skills on a football pitch.
- ✔ **Do not motivate through fear or threats.** Making a child run a lap for failing to perform at an expected level has no place in youth football. These types of approaches typically handcuff a youngster's ability to perform because they're now afraid of making a mistake that is going to translate into punishment. Children have to feel free to make mistakes in order to improve. Plus, this motivation-through-fear tactic has a strong probability of putting them off of the sport in the years to come.

Fostering a positive atmosphere

Creating an atmosphere in which youngsters are prized, respected and accepted is imperative for any improvement and skill development to take place during the season. Youngsters who are comfortable in the team environment that you have created and genuinely feel that they are valued and contributing members will give you their best effort all season long – and have fun doing so. Here are a few ways that you can help make that happen.

- ✓ **Listen to the young voices.** Let the kids regularly make choices. Letting them select a favourite drill to run during training or choosing the team snack at the next game are great ways to involve everyone and make them feel a real part of what is going on this season. If the league allows it, let them choose the team name and the colour of the strip. Or, to help promote team unity, let players pick what colour shirt everyone wears to the next training session. Seeing all the kids show up in a blue shirt at training is one of those little things you can do that can make a big difference in forging a bond among all the players.
- ✓ **Play the name game.** Let players choose nicknames for themselves. If you feel daring, even let the team come up with a nickname for you.
- ✓ **Give constant recognition.** Applaud good attitudes and strong work ethics as much as a properly executed pass or a good tackle. These are the attributes that youngsters often carry with them for the rest of their lives, long after they have put their shin pads away.
- ✓ **Cheer when mistakes are made.** Yes, even when a child makes a mistake or fails to perform a skill the way you just demonstrated, that's a part of playing football, and they need to be reminded of that. Praising their efforts rather than criticising the result frees up the child to keep trying until they get it. They're not going to fear making a mistake because they know there won't be negative backlash from you. This opens the door to all sorts of development during the season.

Making every kid count

As the coach, your job is to work with, and play close attention to, all of the youngsters on your team, regardless of how fast they run or how hard they can kick a football. Sometimes this can be a lot more difficult than it sounds. After all, those kids that are more athletically gifted than the rest of the team are fairly easy to become enamoured with, and you can end up showering these kids with all the attention, accolades and praise. Spreading the encouraging words around equally takes real focus and effort. Making sure that each child – no matter how big or small their actual contributions are during games and training sessions – feels valued and appreciated for their efforts is the cornerstone of good coaching.

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Providing immediate feedback is one of the most effective ways to accomplish this. While the kids who score goals during games hear the gratifying applause from the touchlines, make the time to acknowledge the efforts of your other players that led to the goal. For instance, recognising the youngster who delivered the pass to the scorer, or applauding the defender who won the ball and started the move that eventually led to the goal, goes a long way towards making each child truly feel appreciated and a part of the team.



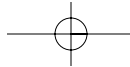
Even less-skilled youngsters struggling to contribute during games can be recognised in a number of ways to inflate their self-esteem and maintain their interest in participating. You can applaud their chasing the ball down, acknowledge their team spirit and enthusiasm, and even point out to the rest of the squad the good sportsmanship that they displayed during the game and how the rest of the team should follow the example they set. Continually recognising players in this way boosts their self-confidence and fuels their interest in giving it their best effort all season long.

Many coaches enjoy handing out awards to their players at the end of the season. If you elect to do so, make sure that you come up with something for every player on the team. Traditional awards, such as Best Player, do nothing more than pile on the praise to a player who has enjoyed recognition all season long. Plus, everyone involved with the team probably already knows who that player is. Presenting awards to everyone ensures that the entire squad feels valued and appreciated for their efforts, and receiving one may be just the nudge that certain youngsters need to continue with the sport next season. Awards such as Best Player in Training Sessions, Most Supportive Teammate, Most Improved Player, and Best Display of Sportsmanship are just some that you can present. See Chapter 22, where these awards, and others, are discussed in greater detail.

Focusing on fun and skill development

As a youth football coach, make sure that you don't let your vision of what is best for your players become blurred by trying to win every game, grab the league title and show off the shiny champions' trophy on your mantelpiece at home. Your team's win-draw-lose record at the end of the season does not define your success as a coach. The true barometer of what type of coach you are is going to be whether the kids acquired skills, had fun doing so, and if they would want to play for you again next season.

Certainly, at the more advanced levels, winning takes on a more prominent role, and the concept shouldn't be swept aside; winning is a part of playing football. After all, doing well in a test in school is a form of winning. Winning is something that we all must strive for in order to achieve a level of success in life.



But when it comes to youth football, coaches must exercise great caution. Children are highly impressionable. If they get a sense that winning is all that really matters to you then having fun and developing skills suddenly become secondary in their minds, and the season begins heading into a downward spiral. Once you start letting this happen it becomes really difficult to alter the season's course and get everything back on track. The younger and less experienced the children on your team are with the sport, the less you should focus on wins and losses and the more you should concentrate on coaching kids in skills and ensuring they are having fun playing and discovering the game.

Children and their short attention spans can make coaching skills difficult to apply at times, but the short attention spans can also work to your advantage. Many youngsters just beginning in the sport are usually going to forget the score of the last game pretty quickly and direct their attention to something else. So even if you happened to lose 9-0, praise them for their effort; congratulate them on how well they passed the ball; provide them with a confidence boost and a sense of accomplishment that they are making strides in their play.



Keep in mind that simply because your team scored more goals than the opposition doesn't necessarily mean that they performed to the best of their ability. A team can turn in a poor or lacklustre effort and still win because the other team played even worse or simply didn't have many talented players. Conversely, your team can play extremely well and still lose the match, but that shouldn't detract from the kids' performance. So, don't turn to the scoreline for feedback on judging how the team played.

Never let scorelines or opposing teams define how much fun you have on the football pitch, or impede your team's progress in picking up the game. The skill development process evolves continuously throughout the season. Use every training session and game as a building block to acquiring new skills, while never forgetting to have fun along the way. With the right approach, your team will surely enjoy the journey with you, every kick of the way.

Modelling good sportsmanship

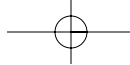
Explaining good sportsmanship to youngsters can be tricky, especially as they are bombarded with images on television of professional footballers swearing, diving and abusing the referee. Good sportsmanship is one of the healthiest and most important ideals you can instil in your young players, though. Here are a few ways you can help to accomplish this and make your squad liked and respected.

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- ✔ **Continually stress to your team during training sessions and before games the importance of good sportsmanship at all times.** While your players are going through warm-ups before training, discuss a game on television that they saw and ask them whether they saw a player display good sportsmanship. Subtly reinforcing the importance of good sportsmanship every chance you get, goes a long way toward instilling these qualities in your players.
- ✔ **Set the tone for good sportsmanship before any game begins by shaking the hand of the opposing coach.** The players, the fans, and the opposing coach should notice, and you will have made a difference.
- ✔ **Be a model of good sportsmanship at all times.** That means no yelling at officials or questioning decisions that you are sure should have gone your team's way. If you aren't a model of good sportsmanship at all times yourself, you can't expect your players to be. Remember, players are going to take their cue from you, so if you rant and rave about a decision to an official, you can't expect your players to show respect for the officials.
- ✔ **During your post-game talk with the team, make sure to recognise any players who displayed good sportsmanship.** Perhaps one of your players went out of their way after the game to congratulate an opposing player who scored a goal or played well during the course of the game. By recognising these displays, your players gradually begin to realise that how they behave on the pitch is important.
- ✔ **Deal with problems.** During the season, the chances are that you may encounter a win-at-all-cost coach who prowls the touchlines yelling and berating his team; or an out-of-control parent who spends the entire game shouting instructions at their child or disputes every decision that doesn't go his child's team's way. See Chapter 19, which includes tips to handle these types of inappropriate behaviour, which have no place in youth football.

Understanding the League You're Coaching In

While several different varieties of youth football leagues exist around the country – same-sex leagues and mixed leagues, indoor and outdoor leagues, for example – for children under 11, *mini-soccer* is fast becoming the dominant game. For children over the age of 11, the choice is often between small-sided games and the 11-a-side adult version. (For more information on mini-soccer, see the upcoming section 'Playing for fun or first place'.



With all the leagues comes the smorgasbord of rules that are a specific to each league. Many adhere strictly to the official rules of the sport and allow for little modification. Some, however, alter the rules to fit the age and experience level of the kids. Mini-soccer has its own set of rules, which you can obtain from the Football Association, the governing body of football in the UK:

- ✓ www.scottishfa.co.uk: Scotland
- ✓ www.thefa.com: England
- ✓ www.irishfa.com: Northern Ireland
- ✓ www.faw.org.uk: Wales

Knowing your league's rules

Reading the league rulebook isn't as exciting as a Stephen King novel or a John Grisham thriller. You're not likely to be eagerly turning page after page. But this book should be bedside reading for you. To be successful at coaching, you have to know the rules of the game, as well as the particular rules your league is enforcing this season, and be able to explain them to your players. If you don't know and understand the rules, there's no way you can expect your team to either.

If youngsters don't know the rules, football can be a pretty frustrating experience. For example, consider a child who has put in a perfect cross to a teammate rushing in on goal. He feels a sense of pride and accomplishment for delivering such a great pass, only to hear the official blow the whistle for offside. If your players don't understand the offside rule it's going to affect their play. (See Chapter 3 for your initiation into the mysteries of offside).

Don't assume that older kids have a firm grasp on all the rules simply because they've played the sport for years. If no one took the time to explain the rules, they may be confused over some of them. You can make a difference.

Don't plunge into the rulebook and attempt to memorise all the rules in a single sitting. Review a few pages every night prior to the season getting under way until you are pretty comfortable with them.



Even if you have an extensive knowledge of football and perhaps have even played it at a reasonable level, looking at the league's rulebook is useful. Consider it a refresher before you take to the pitch. Plus, there's a good chance that the league is using rules that were never applied that way when you first played.

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Rainy days and postponed fixtures

Days arrive when Mother Nature just isn't going to be on your side, and she's going to create havoc with your season. Rainy weather often forces you to reschedule or call off training sessions. Inclement weather on match days may result in your games being shuffled to another day that you normally don't play on, or being cancelled. Certain leagues may even have a week set aside at the end of the season specifically to catch up with fixtures. Being aware of the league policy regarding postponed games alleviates a lot of the confusion felt by parents and team members once bad weather arrives.



Exercise great caution with approaching storms, as well. Waiting for the first sign of lightning before cancelling training or stopping a game is flirting with serious trouble. Get your players off the pitch before lightning threatens the area. Storms should not be taken lightly, and attempting to squeeze in a few extra minutes of training before the storm hits simply isn't worth risking the lives of your players. If conditions become dangerous during a game, don't wait for an official to call the session off. Get your kids off the pitch immediately.

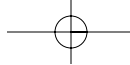
Training, training, training

The age of your team generally dictates how much time you spend conducting training sessions during the season. With most young children, for example, you spend just one training session a week with the kids, so it's important to be aware of the time you have before you put together your training plans.

The time you spend with your team during these sessions is critical for their success. Training isn't a social hour where you roll balls out on the pitch and have the kids knock them around while you stand by on the touchlines watching. You've got to carefully plan these sessions and be actively involved in them at all times. Often, kids won't even be able to recall a game they played in, but they will fondly recall a training session and what you said to them, or a drill that was so much fun they couldn't wait to tell their parents about it. See Chapter 6 to get in-depth tips on running a great training session.

Playing for fun or first place

The two distinct differences that exist between football fixtures are whether they are classified as recreational or competitive. Each type requires vastly different approaches to coaching. Do you know what type of fixtures you are coaching for this season?



Recreational games

If you are coaching football for the first time, the chances are pretty good that you're involved with younger kids in a recreational league. The FA recommendations are that children of five and six do not play competitive football. Indeed, many older children aren't involved in competitive football as such, depending on how you define competitive football.

If your club's team is in a league, it is probably a *mini-soccer league*. These types of league focus on coaching kids in the basic skills of the game. Generally, they have rules in place regarding equal playing time. Often, with kids aged 10 and under, teams have fewer players, and games are played on scaled down pitches to allow each child plenty of touches of the ball. The league may not record results, keep standings or tables, or award prizes for first place. Different leagues have different policies in this regard so make sure that you check.

Recreational leagues also feature rules that have been altered to meet the needs of the age and experience level of the kids. Offsides don't exist in mini-soccer. There may be no indirect free kicks. The game leader or referee may stop to explain and demonstrate the rules from time to time.

Outside of mini-soccer leagues, teams may also just play other local teams for fun, with cut-down versions of the usual football rules. With the younger age groups, there may not even be goalkeepers, and just cones for goals.



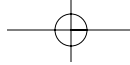
When meeting with the opposing coach before the game, encourage her to provide positive feedback to your players when the action is at her end of the pitch, and let her know that you will do the same when the play takes place near you. At this level, you just want kids running around and getting a feel for kicking the ball and being with their teammates.

As children become older and stay involved in the sport longer, naturally they are going to become more competitive. Winning takes on a more prominent role with a lot of kids around the age of 12. While football is still a recreation, some of the emphasis shifts to winning, but not at the expense of league policies regarding equal playing time.

Competitive leagues

Children whose thirst for competition can't be quenched in local recreational football can usually get a taste of competitive football in a local league.

Competitive football may just be a question of keeping records of results league tables and giving out prizes and trophies. As the children get older, though, it becomes a question of which youngsters have demonstrated higher skill levels than other kids their age.



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At this level, usually not until kids are into their teens, the coach has a broader set of responsibilities including more intensive and detailed training schedules, away games, football tournaments, trials, and team selection. Results become more important and the idea of equal playing time less so.

Coaches are usually only given the reins of a competitive team if they have a strong coaching background and have proven with their experience to be well-versed in all areas of the game. The higher you go, the more likely it is that you will be taking your FA coaching badges to become a qualified FA coach.

