

Are you Coaching or Directing

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by Coach Steve Bender
Are you a Coach...or a Director?

Pass the ball! Go down the line!! Spread out!!! SHOOT!!!! AUGGGHHHH!

Have you ever been to a youth soccer match and not heard cries like that? Perhaps, but only if your club was participating in Silent Saturday. It seems that every season coaches and parents are worse than the season before. The time has come that we stop and think about this question: What do the players hear? While parents and coaches are constantly yelling out instructions, correction, criticism and praise, do our young players actually hear what we are yelling at them?

Some coaches believe that every word they scream is vital to the outcome of the game and the players who pay attention to them will succeed. Others bemoan the fact that the players never seem to hear what they are saying. Still others don't really pay much attention at all to a player's response. Like the Energizer Bunny, they just keep yelling and yelling and yelling....

Other coaches have parents who insist on doing the same thing. They constantly give instructions to their child- and others- about how they should play. Frequently, their suggestions are completely counter to what the coach would like for them to do.

It is my opinion that "coach" isn't the appropriate word to describe their behaviour. They are directors. It's really no different than movies and theatre. If you saw Dustin Hoffman in Rainman, you were impressed by his ability to play the part of an autistic savant. Hoffman was so successful because he had a coach work with him one-on-one to perfect his skills. But when he walked on the set, he was under the control of the director. When the cameras roll, no one does anything except what the director wants them to do. If it doesn't go right, they do it again. In the theatre, the same sorts of corrections take place during the rehearsal period. But when the curtain goes up, the director shuts up. At most performers off stage are given a word or two of encouragement. But those on stage are on their own. Could you imagine trying to watch a performance with the director constantly yelling to the cast to orchestrate their every move? Yet we allow sideline screamers to go on and on week after week. They are not coaches, fine tuning individual skills and teaching game tactics. Rather, they are like noisome directors, attempting to control every aspect of the game from a touchline vantage point.

At this point, I want to clarify that I am not a 100 percent supporter of Silent Saturday. I believe that it is healthy for the children to hear the spectators cheering for them when they do things right. I welcome enthusiastic and loud cheers for what has happened and what is happening. But-not for what will happen. I prefer to let the players decide how to respond to each given situation, based on how I have coached them. Off-field direction should be limited to short warnings such as "Man on!"

The following monologue, taken from a videotape of a U-10 game, is the perfect example of what not to say: Control it...good, good job! You've got space dribble up the line, use the space. Watch her, she's attacking...go around-around her...NO!!! Not that side!! You'll lose it! Oh, nice job getting around her. Push up, push up, Jane is open...pass to Jane, pass to...pass! Pass! PASS! You've got to pass sooner! Now, run back you're on defence now-they've got the ball. Next time, listen to me and pass when I tell you to!

What do players hear? Young players are often so focused on the moment that they simply don't hear the directions from the sideline. Even when they do what they are asked, they are usually just making the right choice, not doing it because the coach said so. Even were I to shout their name until they looked right at me, ask them to do something, and get their acknowledgement, I know that I would soon be watching them process my instructions like a Dis-poz-all while continuing to play their own way.

But I have seen words get through and sink right into the heart. Last fall I had a 5th grader on my team who would without question rank first among the 140 girls in the entire league, whether in goal, on defence, at midfield, or up front. She was truly a complete soccer player, and I will not be surprised to see her playing in the 2011 Women's World Cup. She was playing sweeper and at one point attacked exactly when her keeper told her to. The ball was crossed to the weaker of the two forwards and the keeper saved a good shot.

A man I had never met, but who turned out to be her father, told her that was a stupid way to play and she ought to know better than to listen to a goalie who doesn't know how to play the position. But it didn't stop there. The more he rode her, the more mistakes she made. The girl was so upset by his words that she was having trouble holding back the tears, and I switched her to striker, where she scored the only goal of the day to win the match. By the way, that keeper played 4 regular season shutout halves and was selected to play in goal at the regional all star tournament. There she allowed only one goal in the preliminary games (when the sweeper went down face first in a mud hole) and none in the championship game (including two overtime periods).

So how do we, as coaches, learn to coach, and not direct? There are several things which can help you alter the way you coach:

- Cheer a lot! Make all your statements a compliment about something they have already done, rather than something they should do next. Constant compliments may not always register, but it will keep you from saying the wrong thing.
- Coach on the bench, not from it. Give tactical instructions to the players on the bench and send them in. Take the time to explain it to them and make sure they understand. When the others come off, have a similar talk with them. If you need to get a specific change communicated without a sub, call a player over to the sideline and explain it to them there, and let them tell others.
- Teach players to make decisions for themselves. Encourage young players to make a decision without thinking about whether it is the right one. Sure, they will make wrong ones-maybe even costly ones. But they will learn faster. In practice, take the time to talk about a decision every once in a while. The more they make them on their own, the fewer wrong decisions they will make.
- Teach players to talk to each other. Unlike calls from the sideline, young players do a very good job of hearing each other most of the time. Make name calling a part of practice. They must practice letting each other know where they are so that they will do it in the game.
- Set clear rules for parents. At the beginning of the season, lay down the team rules for parents. The staff does the coaching, and parents don't. My parents are asked at the beginning of the season to let me know if they think something is wrong with their daughter (several have asthma) or if they need a break and I'm not seeing it. I know that they will watch their own player more closely than I will. They also know that I don't want them to tell their girl what to do. The same rule of thumb I mentioned earlier applies to them too: Talk about what has happened (keeping it positive) and not about what should happen next. This should go without saying, but it doesn't: Parents should NEVER yell at a ref about a call.
- Find the quiet parent. Every team will have at least one parent whose personality is such that they can calmly watch anything. Put that parent to work. First, they are your accountability partner. He or she should be given the right and responsibility to come to you if you ever cross one of the lines laid out above. They should also be free to talk to other parents for you, allowing you to stay focused on the game.
- Finally, if all else fails.... Take a roll of duct tape to every game. As every man knows, duct tape can fix any problem, including this one. However, just make sure you remembered to shave before the game.