

Coaching in the USA, are traditional coaching methods appropriate for soccer?

By Rod Thorpe

(The term parent here is used to include carer)

As an Englishman looking at ‘**traditional American sports**’, as purveyed on the television, I am immediately struck by the nature of the games and the input of the coaches. Football (gridiron), Baseball, Basketball are all **characterised by stoppages**, particularly at key stages, at which **point the coach can provide direction and advice**. Moves, strategies, tactical formations, individual player instructions can all be called by the coach, particular when the game allows substitutes to leave the game and then re-enter. **Soccer is not like that** – a coach can affect the game at half time, by the introduction of a substitute (but remember once a player is off the field they stay off) and to some small degree by shouts from the sideline or perhaps during an injury stoppage, BUT play is on-going for 45 minutes, a shouted instruction, if heard, can often be misinterpreted.

Simply it leads me to the conclusion that a major role for the coach of soccer, more so than most other games, is to give the players the confidence to recognise patterns of play, to make decisions for themselves, etc. It is my opinion that a coach who is too directive does not allow these qualities to appear. (You will see later that I do not believe the coach as director is the best way to develop players for any sport).

It would be quite wrong to suggest that all coaches of the ‘traditional’ USA sports are didactic (very directing/controlling), there are many documented examples of coaches who seek to develop players more broadly, it is just that the image of the coach often observed, not least by the parent, is the ‘vocal, sometimes emotive, director’. This is important to understand, **because should coaches** feel it is inappropriate to coach in this very didactic way for most situations, as I do, and **fail to explain** why they are not quite so active, why they are not telling their child exactly what they are doing wrong and what they should be doing, **the parent will view this as a poor learning environment**. I will present the case it might be the very opposite.

I would add that I think the **attributes of perception and decision making**, so important in soccer, take as much time to develop as the technical skills and hence **it is the coach of the young player who has a responsibility to develop these aspects as well as the technical**.

If like me you hold the opinion that **it is our responsibility to ‘empower’ players** to learn for themselves as part of the process of developing the whole person (a legacy from my Physical Education Teacher days) traditional coaching methods do not always fit. Interestingly many coaches are now looking at empowering players, not for ethical reasons, but more because they realise that to get great performances we need players who have ‘intrinsic’ motivation (they want to do it for themselves, they are not doing it for the coach, or for money, etc.), who to take responsibility on the field.

If, like the United Kingdom, children are learning their sport in organized sessions run by adults, we should not be surprised that they fail to practice outside these sessions. I think we are in danger of developing people, **player and parent alike, who expect the coach to cause the changes in the player. Sorry it won't happen.** Only the player can make the change – the coach has to be far more aware of how people learn, and match their coaching to the learning challenge.

It is interesting to note that to play soccer; all you need is a ball, 3 or 4 friends, a bit of space and something to put down as a goal. Travel in some of the poorer countries of the world is revealing every patch of ground has youngsters playing soccer, with no sophisticated equipment and no coach. **I became a reasonable soccer player and I never had a lesson in my life,** (I used to practice, shooting, passing, keepie/uppie {juggling} for hours because I loved the game) **perhaps if I had had a coach** who encouraged this 'play' but added some key advice, gave me interesting challenging games and practices, etc, **I would have been a great player.**

It is often the case, particularly with the talented, that a young player watches a 'hero' or a slightly older player do something and immediately copies it – if the coach then steps in using words, breaking the skill down, often the fluidity of the movement just revealed disappears. The role of the coach with this sort of player is to ensure the player can see the role model at the right time (s/he is ready to move to this level – judging readiness is the greatest, perhaps the hardest skill of coaching) and has the facility to practice.

The key here is to encourage learning to occur and this may be by structuring the learning environment and then stepping back. This example illustrates why it is important for coaches to talk to parents – to explain that most people learn best by observational learning and that this does not always mean an 'obvious demonstration', it can be incidental by playing with other youngsters who have the skills. Explain why a little game of practice may be structured to include particular children. **Good coaching is usually more about structuring a session, than barking out information.**

We know that **to be good at something you have to do it many times**, there is just **no chance in a once a week session** for significant improvement. Ask all the great soccer players and the vast majority will say they used to practice on their own, or with friends in playful, but purposeful games and activities. It follows that **the key issue for the coach is to engender 'intrinsic motivation' by providing lots of good fun games and practices that the players can take away and do alone or with a few friends** – why not set homework?

Of course the criticism is made, that if we do not get the youngsters practicing the techniques, they will not have the skills to exploit the tactics and so we see sessions with youngsters passing the ball back and forth, dribbling around cones, shooting at targets; isolating the technique. There is nothing particularly wrong with this, unless they stand in queues waiting their turn, but one has to ask if it is fully challenging the perception, decision making and response links. Equally if this formal drill is at the expense of a fun game and the children see it as a chore – the coach is already building up a resistance to practice. Perhaps more surprisingly people studying the development of these techniques are beginning to realize that a reason the technique does not transfer into the game is that the perception, decision making and response are 'coupled' in a more complex way than we thought, **and it would seem wise to**

practice technique in as realistic a situation as possible. Rather than reduce the drill to the simplest form, once the concept of the technique is gained (the general idea of what to do) keep as much of the game in the drill. **Of course if you are unsure why not play a modified game in which the particular technique is used.**

Interestingly, we keep returning to the value of games, not 11 v11, but all forms of games. I have become convinced over the years that for the beginner coach of children in games like soccer, the key is to gain the confidence to organize a group, check they are safe and provide them with a range of proven games, selected by more experienced coaches. Once the children are playing stand back and watch carefully; first for safety, second for involvement and then start to note how individuals are working, note what they might need. This done, then make the biggest decision a coach ever has to make – shall I stop the activity, can I really do something useful, or if in doubt leave them playing. The advantage of several small sided games going on is that the beginner coach might feel confident to stop one game and help, perhaps the less able with whom the help is obvious. **It may be that the talented youngster knows more than the beginner coach, why stop them if they are in purposeful practice.**

Over 30 years ago, a number of people at Loughborough University in England, were looking seriously at Games Teaching – noting that traditional methods of teaching games were not motivating children; the talented went unchallenged, the less able found it embarrassing – technical teaching was often aimed at the average child and was always very teacher/coach determined. The whole tactical understanding was neglected, and players were told where to stand, and what to do. The most common comment during the lesson was ‘When are we going to have a Game’. In 1982 two of the staff at the centre of the initiative David Bunker and myself, presented a model for teaching games, which became known as ‘**Teaching Games for Understanding**’, further developed, with a little help from myself, in Australia as ‘**Games Sense**’.

Simply put the player always enters a Game – the Game is a well thought out game, suitable for the players level of development. (The younger the child, usually the smaller sided the game, but remember even the senior player enjoys 3v2s, etc. This is not just about giving them any game – each game has clear outcomes – it might be designed say with two goals, near the corners at each end to encourage players to ‘spread the play’ to ‘utilize width’. It could be played in a smaller than usual area to ‘challenge close control’.

The model follows the following pattern

Game Form – carefully selected

Game Appreciation – check they really understand the purpose

Tactical Awareness – thinking about what we might have to do to achieve purpose, based predominantly on understanding space and time.

Decision Making – What to do and How to do it at any given situation in the game (this may be personally determined {a fast player may push the ball by a player and sprint, a skilled dribbler might commit the player to the tackle and check back}, etc.)

Skill Execution – always individually assessed, how well did the players do their chosen skill?

Performance – this is the outcome of the previous elements – recognizing the interconnections.

It is important to mention the coaching style that tends to be used in this approach. There is little doubt that the predominant approach is questioning, perhaps most coaches would lean toward **'Guided Discovery'** – asking questions that lead to a particular determined answer – the coach leads players to discover the answer they determined. In some situations the more open **'Problem Solving'** style can be interesting, this is setting the situation and seeing what occurs – do not determine the answer.

For those who use questioning already two thoughts;

The tendency is to ask for a verbal response, the same more articulate players always give the answer – have you ever tried asking the question and then saying 'Don't tell me, go back to your game and show me'

Do you realise that the games set the questions and can challenge technical, tactical, mental and social aspects – can you design games that you merely set up and let the players learn without you?

It may be great learning but would players, parents; other coaches accept this as good coaching? We are back at the start of the article – people fail to recognize that the great coach is one who maximizes personal improvement – I think we need to change people's perceptions.