

COACHING METHODS



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Reading through this chapter will help you to:

- Appreciate a range of coaching methods and their application
- Use feedback in helping with performance
- Identify ways to improve individual coaching methods

Introduction to Coaching Methods

The purpose of coaching is to develop the individual and collective talents of players. The best coaches use a variety of methods to help players learn new skills and techniques. Defining these terms will help your communication with players and other coaches.

What is Meant by Skill and Technique?

The term skill, whether applied to coaching or playing, refers to an ability to select and implement an appropriate and effective response from a range of possibilities. In other words, a skilled player knows what to do and when and where to do it. This is different from technique, which is a term used to describe a basic action or movement (ie how to do it).

Techniques form the building blocks on which skills are developed, so that players who have refined technical ability to produce a particular turn or dribble can deploy that technique in the right place and at the right time.

What's the Difference Between Learning and Performance?

Watching a talented football team play is a considered experience, not unlike going to the theatre or cinema, because you are watching a performance. Such performances are used to assess how teams' and players' performance compares to that of previous occasions. The performance is the outcome of lots of individual contributions, organised through well-structured rehearsals.

Learning takes place when a new experience or a permanent change in behaviour occurs. The 'behaviour' could be the execution of a skill, or a change in attitude, or an improved understanding. Learning occurs as a consequence of applying the new skill, attitude or understanding repeatedly over a period of time and in different contexts.

As a coach, you are looking to help players to learn, and you use their performances to monitor the effectiveness of this learning. But, remember, variation in performance might not be due to lack of skill or technique — it can be affected by other factors, such as fatigue, boredom, illness or injury. You need to observe consistent changes in a player's performance of techniques and skills to be sure that learning has taken place.

Coaching Methods

The coach creates the best possible conditions for learning. Players learn best when the coach creates opportunities for:

- Problem solving - solutions to real challenges
- Being actively involved and challenged - demonstrating to you and to each other
- Testing out alternatives and asking questions - experimenting with and trialling alternatives
- Practising regularly - setting targets and monitoring improvements over time
- Seeing the point to what they are doing - clarity of overall benefits and successful outcomes

When learning techniques and skills, players benefit from a set of progressive challenges using the above principles. These challenges can be structured by the coach to form a complete or whole experience, or can be broken down into a sequence of smaller parts. In football coaching, it is beneficial for the whole and part methods to be used in combination.

The most effective ways of combining whole and part methods are:

- Shaping
- Chaining
- Whole-part-whole

Each method has strengths and weaknesses, and you should be aware of the right method to use in different situations. For example, techniques are best developed using shaping and chaining, but these approaches can be long-winded and tedious. The whole-part-whole approach promotes more opportunity to test decision making in challenging, game-related situations, but might not promote the development of sound techniques.

Shaping

All players, including children, find big movements easier to learn than small, accurate ones. Running is simpler than hopping; passing the ball with the inside of the foot is easier to develop than a drag-back turn. Shaping makes learning a technique simpler, by leaving out some of the parts to begin with, only to add them in later. When developing a new technique, coaches need to accept a rough version and shape it gradually into the refined model.

Shaping might be a useful method to use when helping players to learn the basic long-passing action (ie using the laces, not the inside of the foot, to make contact with the ball). The movements required to produce the long-passing action are difficult to break down into small parts.

At first, the player should be encouraged to make contact with the correct part of the foot (ie laces) and kick through the mid-line of the ball. Once this form of contact has been established, the placement of the non-kicking foot could be refined, to help in directing the pass. Subsequently, the head, upper body and arm positions can be modified (ie they are refined, rather than added).

When using shaping to gradually refine a technique, rough forms of the movements are an acceptable basis for progression. Coaches often use links to other movements to guide learners towards an acceptable version. For example, players are often encouraged to 'point to the target' when refining their body position in the long-passing technique.

Expert players who wish to modify an existing Expert players who wish to modify an existing technique might use it as the basis for shaping the new one. Shaping can also be applied to decision making and tactical aspects of football. The gradual refinement of players' movements in set pieces or positional play are examples of when shaping from a rough version to a refined model is an effective way to learn.

Chaining

Remember how you learned to swim by initially practising the arms, then arms and legs, and then arms and legs and breathing components? Or the triple jump, by developing the hop, the step and the jump, before trying to piece them all together? Chaining involves breaking a technique down into component parts, so that players can work sequentially through each part.

To use this method effectively, coaches need to know how the parts of the technique fit together. If a technique is too complicated to break down into parts, the shaping approach might be more beneficial to use.

For example, it is difficult to break the basic kicking action into separate parts, so it is best learned as a whole movement. However, the development of a dribbling technique might lend itself to a chaining approach.

When learning a dribbling technique, such as the scissors, more effective learning might take place using the chaining method. The progressive learning of parts of the technique might proceed as follows:

1. Introduce basic ball manipulation with the inside and outside of both feet
2. Establish a start position and walk through the step-over-the-ball movement
3. Add the touch by the other foot to take the ball away to the side
4. Work on changes of pace within the sequence of movements (ie 'slow in, fast out')
5. Add upper-body feints

This example could include simpler and progressive steps, but it shows how the movement is built up through a succession of related parts being pieced together.

These parts are learned in sequence until the chain is complete, and each part is practised as it would be performed in a refined technique.

Unlike shaping, in which initial practice promotes rough forms of the whole movement, the chaining method involves practising distinct but related parts, and then linking them together in a complete action.

Techniques do not need to be learned by using one method or the other, since chaining and shaping can be combined. For example, once the scissors dribbling technique has been developed into a rough version through a chaining approach, shaping could be used to refine this basic action. The use of upper-body feints and a double-scissors leg action could be shaped into a more refined model.

Whole-Part-Whole

When young players are becoming interested in football, they usually want to play some form of game.

'When are we having a game?' is a common question asked by most children after 10 or 15 minutes of practice. In helping young players learn about the game of football, it is necessary to use simplified versions of the game (the whole) that are constructed to promote practice of new techniques or skills (the parts).

To capture players' interest and maintain their motivation, as well as providing a testing ground for new techniques and skills, a game is a useful starting point within a practice session. However, the game should be planned to provide particular challenges that require the performance of specific skills or techniques. If these skills and techniques are not performed effectively, the game can be stopped while practice of these key parts is undertaken. Once players appear to have grasped what is required, they are allowed to return to the game to see how effective the practice has been.

Often called the isolation method, removing a part for specific practice and then putting it back into the whole-part-whole method is common within teaching and coaching. But, remember, the whole-part-whole method might not always be a full version of the game of football. With young players, it is very often a small-sided game situation (eg 3 v 3).

Too often, the whole-part-whole method is used without planning, by coaches who wait to see something go wrong and then decide that every player needs to practise this defective part. It's highly motivational to identify success and to reinforce this success by drawing attention to it. Try to avoid an over-reliance on error spotting.

To work effectively, this approach needs just as much planning as the shaping and chaining approaches, and games should be constructed to encourage the development of specific skills and techniques. It will promote learning if the development of a part is built around more than one practice. Providing a variety of different but related practices should encourage better understanding and maintain motivation.

Using Demonstrations and Providing Feedback

A picture paints a thousand words. Demonstrations are a vital aid to learning for players of all abilities. When working with young players or novices, it is important that demonstrations should be:

- Performed at the correct speed and in a position where everyone can see
- Given in the same direction as the player will perform (not from a facing position, since this provides a mirror-image and can be confusing for younger children)

- Of a higher standard than the players' current level, but not necessarily an expert model
- Accompanied by brief and clear coaching points (eg what to look for, how it should feel)

Often, the players themselves provide the best demonstrations. Children need help in knowing what to look for in a demonstration, and what they should expect to feel.

For example, using simple cues such as 'big toe' and 'little toe' when coaching dribbling and turning techniques is an effective way to help children understand what part of the foot to use. Similarly, asking children to 'scrunch toes' when striking a ball with the laces helps them to feel the foot position and places the foot at the correct angle.



Providing Feedback

Coaches are always providing some form of information to players. This is termed feedback and is usually given verbally, though the use of video replays is becoming another popular feedback mechanism. Players at all levels need time to process the results of their actions, before a coach should offer additional feedback based on observation.

However, inexperienced players and young children are less able to make sense of what happened, so have a greater need for feedback from other sources. As players gain experience, they are more able to compare their own actions with previous attempts, or those of other players.

When providing feedback to young players, coaches should:

- Give verbal feedback when working with inexperienced players
- Add illustrative movements to words, where possible
- Break feedback down into small, easy-to-understand chunks which relate to specific performance improvements
- Keep information short and simple (KISS)
- Be selective – you don't need to comment on everything
- Give them time to process their own feedback (eg what the movement felt like, what was the outcome) before adding to it
- Ask questions to check understanding and encourage problem solving (eg 'what happened?', 'what could you do next time?')
- Encourage them to focus on what their actions felt like, rather than the outcome
- Use feedback as praise, and reward effort as well as attainment

Beware of the commentator's approach to giving feedback. There is a tendency for coaches to want to commentate on everything they observe – this is a commentator's job, not one of the coach's. Providing information after every attempt does not necessarily lead to more effective learning. Intermittent feedback is better for learning and motivation.

Complementary Processes to Augment Your Coaching

Sometimes, it's the little things that make the difference. The following list provides examples that might help your coaching method be more successful and enjoyable for you and your players:

- Try to know everyone's name and encourage them to learn each other's names
- Organise groupings of players and use of space in advance. Try to use groupings that build and progress (eg groups of threes can translate easily into 3 v 3 practices, and then 6 v 6 games)
- Have a method for organising groups that integrates players rather than segregates them into friendship groups (eg if you want four groups, give players a number from one to four and form groups by number)

- Identify a suitable coaching position, so you can observe effectively, yet not be in the way
- Use humour to help build positive relationships and reduce anxieties
- Use a consistent stop and start command, so players respond quickly. A verbal command is more personal (eg 'Stop. Stand still. '), but a whistle is useful when outdoors and when working with large groups
- Seek to have some form of contact with every player in every session
- Try to make practice and game situations as realistic as possible

You will find more information on planning, preparing, and conducting effective coaching sessions in Chapter 8.

Summary

In this chapter, you have been introduced to a range of coaching methods and the factors that influence the effectiveness of these methods. Some of these methods will be demonstrated by FA Level 2 coach educators during the practical learning component of the Level 2 Certificate in Coaching Football.

In addition, the importance of providing effective feedback to promote learning and the value of appropriate demonstrations has been considered in a football context, with pertinent examples.

Further Reading

- Alpress, J. (2004) 'Develop the Person, Develop the Player', The FA Coaches Association Insight Journal, Summer: 11–12.
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- Horn, R. and Williams, M. (2000) 'Introducing Football Skills to Young Children', The FA Coaches Association Insight Journal, Summer: 26–28.
- Hughes, C. (1994) The Football Association Coaching Book of Soccer Tactics and Skills (Revised edition). London: Queen Anne Press. ISBN: 978-1852915-45-2.
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