



From the Dugout



Coaching - What's it all about?

'Victory is in the quality of competition, not the final score'

I was chatting to the grandparent of a player this week about the club and how delighted we were to be continuing to make rapid strides. We only began 4 years ago, but we have come a long way on and off the field. They were particularly complimentary about the way we were nurturing young children and asked what it was that I felt was making us successful. I didn't bore them into submission at the time, but this week, it has reminded me of some coaching notes I made once when reflecting on the very same question. Here they are (if you have 10 minutes to read them!)

The core elements of a good junior rugby league coach:

1. They're kids – expect that they will play like that

It is vitally important that we take time to think carefully about what we are expecting from the players. It is highly likely they don't have our knowledge of the game, it is highly likely that they don't have the experiences of competitive sport that we have and it is highly likely that they don't have the skill or physique that we have either. They will be flawed in a range of attributes, but they have turned up to training and games because, for the majority, they simply want to have fun and do better.

They will have periods of time where they look disinterested – they may well be trying to make sense of what is around them. They will have periods of time where they make mistakes – just like you as a coach. They will have periods of time when they are outstanding – sometimes this will be a fluke or they get the run of the play, so they won't be able to recreate some of those magic moments for a long time, however hard they try. Kids will, essentially, behave like kids. Many kids are good listeners, work hard and are respectful, but if you let them, there are some who will disrupt the session and undermine your control of the group. There's nothing wrong with having firm rules and sticking by them, but always give the children the chance to atone for their shortcomings when they have fallen short of your expectations.

2. Praise the positives during the game, work on the negatives in training. Ultimately, the time to most effectively develop young players is through high quality coaching. It is very rarely that this can be done effectively on the field of play during a game. Therefore, the best coaches back themselves to identify areas for development that come from a game and put in place sessions that allow the players to practice those skills in training.

There are plenty of scientific papers in the public domain which categorically confirm that shouting and barking at kids from the touchline has far more detrimental worth to the development of a player than any other aspect of 'coaching'. Such are the timescales involved in decision making in active sports, all a coach is doing when barking out instructions is taking away the natural decision-making development of the players. It should be no surprise to them that the same things happen over and over again if the children themselves are not making the decisions. Furthermore, the confidence the players lose as a result of that will itself be damaging.

Kids need to feel that they are improving all the time. It is essential that good play, sound decision-making, commitment etc are praised wherever they arise. I know these days, not just in rugby league, it is quite uncommon and widely scorned if it happens, but there's no place for berating players who make mistakes, or for substituting them in a game immediately after making an error. What is important is that the kids know where they can improve and are given a chance to do this through good coaching. Pulling them off the pitch or giving them a roasting is not going to resolve that.





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3. Value commitment in the same way as you value skill/ability

Every team is likely to have players who sit at a range of points on the ability continuum. It is worth remembering that, whilst they all have different things to offer, the team cannot function without each constituent part. There are some who are naturally gifted; this needs to be nurtured and supported. However, there are also those who are new to a sport, less physically developed, less fit, less experienced in any form of sport. Their commitment will be vital to a team somewhere down the line and in my experience, it is often these players who stick out the first few years and become better players than you might ever have thought.

I have seen teams lend players to the opposition, selecting them because they are the least effective of their own players. Why would you even do that? Why would you put your least developed players directly up against your best ones, whilst asking them to play for a team they didn't sign up for representing in the first place? What message is that going to give to the players and their parents? Sure, if the kids are up for pulling on the opposition shirt to even up the sides, that tells you a lot about the positive environment they already play in.

If you show respect as a coach, the players and their families will give it back in spades. Many children enter team sport because they fancy a crack at it, or their parents have identified a characteristic they would like their children to develop. As a coach, (and a club) you are offering a service to these kids (and their families), every bit as much as you are to the better-ability/ more experienced players.

Coaches who simply play to win will often tell you that there's no point taking part if you don't want to win. It is such a narrow-minded view. What they really mean is; win at all costs. That's where kids suffer. Winning is an important facet of sport, but winning off the field is as important as winning on it. Successful coaches model integrity, respect and patience. Unsuccessful ones model poor sportsmanship, disrespecting officials and seeking unwarranted, instant gratification – often only for themselves. Happily this is rare **these days, but I am** sure we all know coaches who we have seen do this in the past.

4. Ask yourself; would I want my own child's coach to be like me?

It is ultimately the question I find myself asking when I self-reflect after a game or training session.

I want my own kids to feel valued, to be encouraged and nurtured, to be respectful and sporting, to look forward to their next session or game, to be disciplined and hard-working, loyal and committed, to come home buzzing about something the coach said to them that made their day, to walk with their heads held high and their hearts married to their club and their sport. If I can do that myself as a coach, I am onto a winner.

