



The Coach's Role in Creating a Positive Environment in Youth Soccer:

It's About How to Coach, not What to Coach



BMO Financial Group – The Bank of Soccer in Canada

Justine Fedak

Senior Vice President of Branding,
Advertising & Sponsorships

In 2011, BMO approached Dr. Jean Côté, a pre-eminent expert on youth sports and coaching, who is the Director of the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen's University, to work with us on a report entitled *More Than A Game: The Power of Soccer for Youth Development*. This paper got to the heart of the crucial influence of those that are often on the side of the soccer pitch, cheering, encouraging and strategizing. The report underscored four positive outcomes that result from sport participation, the 4Cs: Competence, Confidence, Connection, and Character, and offered guidelines for coaches and parents on how to achieve these outcomes.

BMO has remained committed to youth development through soccer and in the past two years has also worked with Leger Marketing on research that explored parents' perceptions and experiences with youth soccer in Canada. Data from this survey confirmed statistics from the Canadian Soccer Association that soccer is the largest participatory sport in Canada. Parents recognized, in this survey, that soccer has the potential to promote developmental assets in youth that are larger than just the increase in physical activity and the development of sport skills.

Dr. Côté's new report, *The Coach's Role in Creating a Positive Environment in Youth Soccer*, looks at the four pillars of a positive environment in sport: 1) team pride, 2) spirit, 3) community commitment, and 4) passion for the game which are at the core of BMO's Team of the Week Soccer Program, and provides practical recommendations for coaches on how to achieve these outcomes and complements the 4Cs.

As the Bank of Soccer in Canada, BMO supports soccer at all levels, from youth players in local neighbourhoods and communities up to the professional level with the Toronto FC, Vancouver Whitecaps FC and the Montreal Impact. As a partner of the Canadian Soccer Association, BMO also supports Canada's Men's and Women's National teams and also has a soccer venue title sponsorship (BMO Field).

It is our hope that soccer coaches, parents, policymakers and media will find Dr. Côté's recommendations useful.



Biography

Dr. Jean Côté

Director, School of Kinesiology and Health Studies,
Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

Dr. Jean Côté is a professor and the Director in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen's University in Kingston (Canada). His research interests are in the areas of children in sport, coaching, positive youth development, and sport expertise. He has published more than 120 papers on a variety of youth sport topics and given over 300 scientific presentations.

Dr. Côté holds cross appointments as a visiting professor at Northumbria University, Newcastle in the UK, and in the School of Human Movement Studies at the University of Queensland in Australia. He has been invited to present his research in the United States, Mexico, France, Denmark, South Africa, Malaysia, Brazil, Greece, Scotland, Israel, Australia, Ireland, Belgium, England, Finland, Israel, Japan, Qatar, and Taiwan. He has delivered 95 invited talks and 33 keynote addresses at major national and international conferences. His most significant keynote addresses were delivered at the AIESEP 2008 World Congress in Japan, the 13th Commonwealth International Sport Conference in Australia, The European Launch of the European Year of Education through Sport in Ireland and The North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity in Savannah, USA. In 2009, Dr. Côté was the recipient of the 4th EW Barker Professorship from the Physical Education and Sport Science department at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. Dr. Côté, in collaboration with Dr. Ronnie Lidor, has recently completed the first comprehensive book on talent development in children's sport which was published in 2013 by Fitness Information Technology.

Through his research, Dr. Côté has developed a model of development in sport that has been adopted partially or comprehensively as a directive framework for sport organizations in countries such as Canada, Singapore, France, Portugal, Australia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. The Developmental Model of Sport Participation presents postulates about sport participation, drop out, and performance that can be objectively verified through retrospective analyses of children's involvement in sport. Dr. Côté's research on athlete development, coaching, and parents in sport have helped inform sport policies to keep youth engaged in sport and performing better.

The Coach's Role in Creating a Positive Environment in Youth Soccer: It's About How to Coach, not What to Coach

Jean Côté, PhD

Organized youth sport programs could not exist without the support and involvement of volunteer coaches. As youth sport programs have grown, the role of the coach has become increasingly complex, and even confusing, as coaches are faced with multiple pressures to win, develop skills, and curb health problems related to inactivity¹.

Although youth sport coaches are bombarded with conflicting ideas on how they should structure their programs, there is one principle common to all coaches that has endured the test of time and is supported by extensive research. This principle relates to building positive and supportive adult-youth relationships – essentially, the “how” of coaching rather than the “what” of coaching.

In other words, coaching is more than teaching skills or delivering specific content - youth sport coaches need to pay attention to “how” they interact with their young players. If youth soccer coaches build supportive relationships with their players that are guided by solid moral values they will create an environment that empowers young people.

One of the most important roles of a coach is to use sport as a microcosm of what happens in the real world to help young people differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, implement and respect rules of fair play, and learn harmonious behaviour for resolving conflicts, while thriving to achieve personal and team goals. By paying more attention to the relationship aspect of sport, coaches will boost children's competence, confidence, connection, and character and at the same time make an enormous impact on the further development of sport and society.

This paper builds on a body of literature on youth development through sport, and on initiatives put forth by BMO Financial Group (BMO) in the last few years that focus on youth development through soccer. It also provides practical recommendations for youth soccer coaches to help them emphasize and build on team pride, spirit, community commitment, and passion for the game as they work with their teams. The recommendations are based on research findings and are closely linked to the 4Cs of positive development (Competence, Confidence, Connection, and Character) from my 2011 report.

¹ Côté, J. & Gilbert, W. (2009). An integrative definition of coaching effectiveness and expertise. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 4,307-323.

How Coaches Can Maximize Player Personal Development

Instilling Team Pride:

Studies have consistently shown that when team members understand their roles, accept their roles, and invest effort to fulfill their roles to the best of their ability, several positive things happen – one of which is becoming more cohesive as a team². Team pride is closely linked to many team concepts and one particular C of the 4Cs - Connection.

Coaches have the power to promote team pride and connection when they foster an environment in which everyone feels valued. To enhance team pride, coaches need to follow two key steps³. First, they need to work with their players on an individual basis to determine clear and realistic roles that can be regularly and individually noticed, acknowledged, and rewarded. For example, offensive, defensive, or leadership roles can be assigned to each player in practices and games. These roles should be adapted to the strength of each player while remaining realistic and challenging. Second, coaches need to appreciate the contribution of the players when they fulfill their assigned roles. Signs of appreciation can be done verbally or through special gestures such as thumbs up.

A feeling of pride develops when all individuals on sport teams have clear roles, devote some effort to fulfill their roles, and are ultimately recognized by others for doing so.

Promoting Positive Team Spirit:

The development of moral values through sport is an area of research that has received a lot of attention over the years⁴. It means focusing on the spirit of the game and recognizing that playing according to agreed upon rules and behaviours are an integral part of sports. Viewed from this perspective, “team spirit” becomes closely aligned with the idea of Character development through sport – another C of the 4Cs model.

In any contest, rules are established to serve moral purposes, promote fairness, and reinforce the positive spirit of the game; however, rules have inherent ambiguities that often need to be interpreted. Because of their leadership role, coaches often become the “interpreter” of rules; their interpretation can teach their young players about respect and responsibility or, conversely, about taking advantage of others and cheating.

² Eys, M. A., Schinke, R.J., & Jeffery, S. M. (2007). Role perceptions in sport groups. In M.R. Beauchamp & M.A. Eys (Eds.), *Group Dynamics in Exercise and Sport Psychology*. New York, NY: Routledge.

³ Ibid

⁴ Shields, D.L. & Bredemeier, B. L. (2009). *True competition: A guide to pursuing excellence in sport and society*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

For example, a coach might react to a bad call from a referee during a game by yelling at the referee and letting his players know how incompetent the referee is. Alternately, the coach could choose to tell his players how difficult it is to referee a game, and the importance of respecting others. Through their behaviours and reactions, coaches can have a definite impact on their young players' perception and response to ethical and moral dilemmas that occur in sport.

Coaches have the ability to impact moral development through sport and maintain a positive spirit by discussing personal responsibility with their players and creating positive codes of behaviours on three levels: 1) team rules, 2) game rules, and 3) referees and opponents⁵. First, establishing team rules should be kept to a minimum of 2 to 4 rules such as "being on time" and "respecting others." Coaches need to develop "team rules" that cultivate a spirit of responsibility among players.

Second, it is the responsibility of the coaches to ensure their players follow the rules of the game. If a situation is ambiguous, coaches need to promote fair play and fairness rather than doing something that gives an advantage to his/her players – for example, not intervening when a player cheats destroys the spirit of the game.

Finally, teaching players to respect the decisions made by the referee is essential to protecting the positive character of the game. Along the same line, being courteous towards the opposing players and their coach, under any circumstances, demonstrates a high level of maturity and spirit. Coaches should be a role model by showing respect to the referee and their opponents.

The main way to protect the integrity of youth sport and promote the positive spirit associated with competing, is to have coaches set an appropriate code of conduct through team rules; assume responsibility for the rules of the game to be respected; and, uphold the referee and the opponents as partners and enablers of a positive sport experience.

Developing Community Commitment:

The opportunities that sport offers are no different from those offered in real life. Participation in sport can offer experiences that exemplify citizenship qualities such as team work, friendship, trust, loyalty, commitment, and respect – all of which promote community commitment. The values developed in sport should be the same as those developed in other learning environments such as school and family. Researchers believe

⁵ Ibid

that thriving youth who develop competence, confidence, connection, and character will put themselves in a position to make a contribution to their community. Contribution and commitment to community can result from sport participation when the values of sport match the expected behaviours of an exemplary citizen.

More specifically, research⁶ shows that certain opportunities created in youth sport promote the development of community values: These include adults providing opportunities in sport to:

- experience supportive relationships and have good emotional and moral support
- feel a sense of belonging
- be exposed to positive values and social norms

Involvement in sport programs which promote these opportunities has been found to impact young people in a positive way – specifically as it relates to their community commitment (i.e., stronger interpersonal skills, development of quality adult and peer relationships) – and decrease problem behaviours. It is important for coaches to use different sport situations, such as winning and losing, as teachable moments to emphasize positive social values and behaviours.

Youth sport is a micro community that offers opportunities to interact with others, learn social skills, and broaden citizenship qualities. Through the integration and reinforcement of positive community values in sport, coaches are in an ideal position to facilitate the development of characteristics and skills that represent ideal citizenship behaviours.

Creating Passion for the Game:

Passion in sport has been defined as a strong dedication to an activity that one likes, finds important, and in which one invests time and effort⁷. In the context of the 4Cs, passion for the game of soccer results from players feeling competent, confident, and connected with others. Research has emphasized the need for coaches to develop passionate and autonomous athletes by empowering them and to increase their enjoyment of the game through a focus on personal achievement rather than on comparing themselves with others.

⁶ Fraser-Thomas, J., Côté, J., & Deakin, J. (2005). Youth sport programs: An avenue to foster positive youth development. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 10(1), 19-40.

⁷ Vallerand, R. J., Rousseau, F. L., Gouzet, F. M. E., Dumais, A., Grenier, S., & Blanchard, C. M. (2006). Passion in sport: A look at determinants and affective experiences. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 28, 454-478.

Learning activities in practices and games that develop competence and confidence, as well as connection with others, are paramount to developing self-determined individuals who will enjoy sports⁸. To ensure players enjoy themselves, coaches need to involve them in activities that allow them to make their own decisions. For example, coaches should design learning activities in practices that are enjoyable and typically represent the games that are played by youth.

Research has shown that when young people have a certain amount of autonomy in sports, positive characteristics such as teamwork, initiative, and positive identity are more likely to blossom. As such, coaches who support autonomy in soccer programs involve their players in making choices, are less controlling of athletes' behaviours, and focus on the needs of each player involved in the program. Coaches can keep their young athletes motivated by promoting autonomy through the TARGET Model, which stands for *Tasks* that are challenging, diverse, and fun; *Authority* that allows children leadership roles and flexibility; *Recognition* that is personal; *Grouping* that promotes peer interaction and communication; *Evaluation* that is based on the inherent nature of the experience (i.e. fun); and a *Time* structure that is flexible and compliant with individual players' needs.

Fully engaging young players in their own development and focusing on personal skill development are among the most important aspects of coaching young people. If youth soccer coaches can fulfill each player's needs for competence, confidence, and connection, they will nurture their passion for the game.

Conclusion

By focusing on the "how" of coaching rather than the "what," this paper has hopefully provided guidelines for youth soccer coaches that can be easily implemented to enhance players' pride, spirit, community commitment, and passion for the game. Because of the enjoyable, challenging, and competitive nature of youth sport, coaches have the ability to nurture developmental assets through sport that will have long lasting impacts on youth and society. If youth soccer coaches are able to build supportive relationships with their players that are based on sound moral principles, they will create an environment that empowers youth beyond the soccer field.

⁸ Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.