

Lecture them not

By Mike Voitalla for Soccer America's Youth Soccer Insider

If being told how to play enabled children to master soccer we'd have an excess of great players and superb teams. The game, it is so obvious, is the best teacher. That's not to say the coaches' choice of words doesn't have an influence. The question is how a coach can communicate with youngsters to help them improve, inspire them, and make their soccer experience an enjoyable one.

"Obviously it depends on the age group," says Sam Snow, U.S. Youth Soccer's Coaching Director. "My dialogue with U-6 players is going to be different than with U-19s. But right away, there's part of it. It should be a dialogue not a monologue.

"And that's one of the big issues for a lot of our coaches. They indeed want to lecture the players."

Says Manny Schellscheidt, "Lectures are for the birds."

"Every good coaching manual I see now starts with the three L's: 'No laps, no lines, no lectures,'" says Tony Lepore, a U.S. Soccer Development Academy director whose background in education includes a decade as an elementary and middle school guidance counselor.

Schellscheidt, head of U.S. Soccer's U-14 boys national development program, Lepore and Snow agree that one of the most misguided approaches coaches can take is hold postgame lectures.

"We definitely teach coaches: No postgame mortem!" says Snow. "No match analysis right after the game. After the game, if it's U-12s, for example, the sportsmanship piece comes first. Shaking hands with officials, opposing coaches and players, and my players. Then take care of any injuries and rehydration, and do a cool-down.

"And if I have any wrap-up stuff to say, I want to point out some positives. Then, 'Next practice is on Tuesday, 5 o'clock on Field 7. See you there!'

"If you need to do some match analysis, we've always taught coaches that it's best to do that 24 hours later, at a minimum, where you get yourself on an emotional even keel.

"Right after the game, you got the emotions. I've done it in the past -- we've all made this mistake -- standing there going up and down the players in regard their performance. That's just the coaches dealing with their emotions about the game rather than anything constructive in terms of helping the team improve."

Schellscheidt has coached at every level of the U.S. men's national team program, in addition to winning national titles at the youth, amateur and pro level.

"After the game, we do nothing," Schellscheidt says in regard to coaching the U-14s, "because they're way too charged up, way too emotionally wound up, be it positive or negative."

When the time comes to discuss the game, Schellscheidt says, "It's very much a back and forth -- asking the players what it was like and how it felt.

"How did we succeed? What were the problems? What could we do? What could we not do? It's all about engaging a soccer conversation. A lecture? Forget it.

"In these long-winded, drawn-out speeches -- after the second sentence, they've lost us already. I'm at the point where I don't give answers anymore. I only ask questions. Because it doesn't matter how much I know. It doesn't matter how much I can tell them. It matters whether they involve themselves in the thinking part."

Snow says the US Youth Soccer national youth license course advocates the "guided discovery" approach.

"We're taking it straight from education," says Snow. "That is to pose questions to players to get them to think for themselves and guide them toward the right answers.

"Get the players where they're thinking for themselves rather than just being told what to do."

Of key importance is age-appropriate communication. Avoiding coaching jargon that youngsters won't understand and focusing on aspects of the game they can comprehend.

"It's really important to speak their language," says Lepore.

Snow: "As they get older the questions get more challenging. At U-6 it could be, 'Can you dribble with your other foot?' For U-19s, U-18s, it might be, 'Why are we playing zone defense.'"

Regarding the postgame, Lepore says that players do appreciate some closure -- a few words from the coach -- but always in a positive tone and in a discussion rather than lecture form. He recommends pointing out things the team did well that are unrelated to the final score.

"They know what the score was and they're probably going to get that on the way home," Lepore says.

During practice, all three agree that a coach should introduce one concept at a time, and then let the players have a go before expanding on it.

Schellscheidt says the key to all coaching communication is to be concise.

"If you can't say it in 20 seconds, you probably don't know what you're talking about anyhow," Schellscheidt says. "The coach is really a substitute voice. We want the players to hear the silent voice, the game. The game is actually talking to you."