

College Scholarships: The Parent's Guide to Coaching Assessment and The Player Development Process

Tom Turner
Ohio Youth Soccer Association North
January 2011

While every youth club coach will claim to be a practitioner of player development, it is often difficult for non-soccer parents to objectively determine fact from hyperbole.

On the surface, the inexperienced soccer parent often equates results with success and success with player development, and comes to regard the club that wins the most games and the most championships as the most alluring.

There is, however, more to the story: while it is relatively easy to be a successful youth coach, it is very difficult to be a successful developer of talent.

The purpose of this article is to offer a simple, observable framework for separating the good coach from the good talker. Simply, how well a team is organized to play in a constructive manner, and how well the individuals understand their roles in attack and defense says everything about the coach's underlying motivations and their understanding of the long-term player development process.



Buyers Beware

As a fledgling sport, youth soccer was marketed as an inexpensive alternative to the mainstream choices. Today, youth soccer is a growth industry and the most involved families can expend many thousands of dollars on an annual basis.

At the more elite levels, playing soccer because it is fun and healthy has given way to a more callous motivation: college opportunities. For many, youth soccer has become little more than an extended college search. So, for parents, the important question is determining which youth soccer club provides the best return on their investment?

Long-term development requires the vision of a finished product – the adult player.

At the professional level in all countries, youth team coaches train their charges in the style of their top tier teams and prepare players to meet the technical, tactical, psychological and physical challenges of the elite level. Players who don't learn to solve soccer problems are eventually replaced by those who can. Winning games at the youth level is secondary to producing professional players.

In the United States, the US Soccer Development Academy's 78 clubs include all the MLS youth teams and require each member to play and train in a manner that improves each young man's potential to compete in MLS and beyond. While only a handful will succeed, the style of play in Academy games is important and clubs are removed if they fail to honor their obligations. Striving to win games is important, but so too is the quality of the performance.

Outside the Development Academy, there are thousands of clubs operating in the 50 states and the player development vision and the associated styles of play are less well defined.

Playing to Win vs Playing for Development

For most of the high visibility clubs, preparing players to earn a college scholarship is the stated or de facto substitute for professional ambitions. On the surface, this is a perfectly reasonable alternative to professional soccer. However, with college scholarships fueling the frenzy, particularly for girls, youth soccer clubs have become fixated on the outcome of matches; have become driven by the recruiting potential of titles; and are being sustained by the marketing value of their top players who matriculate to the Promised Land.

With no professional model to adhere to, or take inspiration from, the overwhelming tendency is for youth coaches to revert to playing the tactical percentages in order to minimize the risk of mistakes and win games. In this surreal world, the inherent

If I could wave a magic wand at youth soccer, winning would not be the primary factor that determines acceptance into elite tournaments.

I firmly believe this "evolution" is crippling player development and ultimately affecting a player's ability to adapt to the college game.

The players must be taught to play the game; winning should be the byproduct.



**Karen Ferguson-Dayes
Head Women's Coach
University of Louisville**

historical value of competing in sport has been usurped; the athletic is favored over the artistic and the early developer trumps the late bloomer. Just win, baby!

This shift in focus for youth soccer has served to muddy the long-term development waters by tilting the recruiting balance in favor of clubs which demonstrate the ability to win. Regardless of the style with which victories are achieved, or the technical, tactical, physical or psychological development that takes place over as much as a decade, clubs that win are regarded as successful. They are assumed to be practicing player development and assumed to be more likely to deliver the desired college outcome to hopeful families.

Lost in the calculus is the appreciation that young players don't develop into competent players by just winning games; rather, they maximize their potential by striving to win in a manner that helps them progress towards a long-term vision. Mistakes are a vital and necessary part of the learning process.

For players of all ages, competing with and against like-skilled opponents is preferred because the risk of losing makes winning all the more meaningful. Sadly, while competition, per se, is a necessary element of development, the value of competition has been hijacked by those who must win at all costs.

Developing for College?

Arriving at a level of competence requires years of deliberate practice on the part of the player; and a patient tolerance for risk taking on the part of the coach as players are helped to gain experience in recognizing and solving the standard tactical situations that appear in every game.

The saturation of soccer on television now provides daily and unambiguous images of the technical and tactical elements of the professional game. To be a top level player requires excellent technique and the ability to play the game in a constructive manner.

We play one-and two-touch soccer, we pass and move, and we defend very aggressively.

Possession is prized.

We recruit players who have touch, who can think, and who are committed to playing in a style that will prepare them for the next level.

We want to win, but we want to make a statement that winning and playing well are both possibilities.



Caleb Porter
Head Men's Coach
University of Akron

Assuming that competing in college is an attainable vision to market to motivated and talented players and their families, it follows that the image of a top-level college player should be the adopted standard for long-term player development. Why only strive to produce Division III players, whatever that means?

The 2010 College Cup winners were Akron's men and Notre Dame's women. Both programs have established a reputation for playing constructive soccer and the trend in college soccer has been towards a more worldly approach to the game. College teams that kick and run soccer are few and far between and none wins on a national level.

To be successful in college now requires players who are technically sound and who can play the game in a constructive manner; perhaps not Messi and Marta, but close facsimiles.

In essence, if the goal of club soccer is to develop players for college soccer, the best youth coaches are working towards the same player vision as the professional youth coach. The goal is to maximize each player's potential. In the end, some will play at the top level, others at lower levels, and still others will determine the commitment is too intense and move on.

Technique and Self-Training

Above all else, player development starts and ends with technique, technique, technique.

For example, the player who can control the ball on the ground and out of the air is better than one who can't. The player who can control the ball using a wide range of body surfaces is better than the one who can't. The player who can control the ball and quickly solve tactical problems is better than one who can't. And so on.

Player development is first and foremost demonstrated by the efficiency and range of techniques...

There is a lot of "blah" out there. Too many players who are not comfortable with the ball. The ball controls them as opposed to the player controlling the ball. The ball should not be a mystery.

We want to be excited by watching a team play with individuals that value quality soccer, players who play free with a dusting of flair even at the expense of winning.

There is a time for "win at all costs" mentality and there is a time for development.

Can players solve the question "What is the game asking of me?"



**Lori Walker
Head Women's Coach
Ohio State University**

First, how quickly and effectively can the ball be controlled, dribbled, kicked, tackled and headed? Second, what range of kicking or dribbling or heading or ball control or tackling skills does the player have available to solve tactical problems?

It is no secret that the better players have better technique. The surprise is that many parents expect coaches to work developmental miracles with players who won't help themselves.

The reality of skill learning is that if a player doesn't practice extensively in a purposeful way, in their own time, over a number of years, there is no possibility of achieving broad technical literacy.

The player who is willing to work towards self-improvement outside of the regular soccer practice will improve incrementally. The players who work hardest outside of the regular soccer practice will improve the most. Time in = skill out.

Coaching for Understanding

Coaching a soccer team to play in a sophisticated manner, at speed, and under pressure, is dependent on two factors: the technical level of the players and the expertise of the coach.

As the level of competition rises, the speed of play becomes increasingly faster and the average number of touches per player per possession drops. Ultimately, the technical limitations of each player will determine their summit.

Short of reaching that summit, to survive and flourish at the "next level" players must improve their technical speed, improve their tactical speed, improve their positional understanding, improve their soccer fitness, and develop the mental toughness to play under the pressure of reduced time and space.



As noted above, improving technique takes time and is highly dependent on players engaging in self-training. In contrast, improving soccer fitness, tactical insight, and positional understanding can be achieved much more quickly through regular exposure to standard game situations in practice. Ironically, a good teacher can maximize a team's existing technical potential by training players to better-understand the game.

When realistic match situations are routinely replicated in training and the coach is capable of imprinting a common vision, players quickly evolve a better appreciation of their roles in attack and defense. Simply as a function of familiarity, the lessons of practice improve the player’s recognition of standard soccer situations and improve their speed of play.

Part I: Assessing Team Play

The following table lists the key elements of team play. The philosophy of each coach (development vs outcome) can be objectively assessed by determining the extent to which his or her players attempt to apply each element during meaningful competition.

Elements of Team Play

| Element | Observed Frequency | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Spacing and Role Definitions | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Lateral Ball Circulation | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| The Goalkeeper as an Attacker | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Changes in Rhythm | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Backs and Midfielders in Attack | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Vision and Combination Play | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Clearing vs Building | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Defensive Strategies | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Basic Offside Tactics | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Game Management | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Substitution Management | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Overall Developmental Score | / 110 | | | | | | | | | | |

Whenever an element is demonstrated as a regular feature of play, the coach’s scores should move closer to 10 points for that category. When the team only demonstrates an element when they are winning, the coach’s score will move closer to the 5 point marker. Finally, if an element is rarely displayed, the coach’s score would approximate 0 points. The higher the coach’s score out of a possible 110 points, the more clearly the team reveals a player-centered approach to player development.

It is important to note that consistently “successful” application of an element is not critical to the scoring system, although improvement in performance should be expected over time. In the developmental process, how a team tries to play on a regular basis is more important than the success rate, particularly as younger and more inexperienced players will make more mistakes and perhaps lose more goals as a consequence.

However, mistakes are a necessary and important trigger for learning and repeated exposure to tactical concepts is the only means of gaining practical experience.

Finally, all parents must understand that every team will likely face a far superior opponent at some point during a season and attempting to play constructive soccer in the face of a blow-out is not necessarily the most sensible strategy. Coaching competence relating to long-term player development must be assessed over time.

Explanations...

Each element of the assessment model is explained below.

Spacing and Role Definitions

The main purpose of assigning players to positions is to create space between the front, middle and back, and left, right and center when the team is in possession of the ball.

The more crowded a team appears, the more the preparation of the coach should be questioned.

By dispersing the players over the width and depth of the field, the good coach creates the conditions where soccer becomes little more than a series of small-sided games. These match-ups, typically between 1v1 and 4v4, should be clearly visible from the sidelines (10 points). Players are said to have good tactical awareness when they are able to recognize and solve these small-sided situations to advantage.

The numbering of the system (4-4-2 / 4-3-3 / 4-2-3-1 / etc.) is less important than the information the players receive on their individual roles and how the coach expects them to play in attack and defense. Particularly when attacking, the movement of players in response to the game (ball, teammates, opponents, location) is more important than the generic label of a position.

When a team appears congested; when the players appear to be too close to each other, particularly in central midfield; and when the spacing between the back, front and sides

I always look to see if a team can regularly string three or four passes together.

The better coached teams do this routinely and it allows the players to develop a feeling of being part of a team.

Not every team can be Barcelona but they can look to keep the ball.



Bobby Clark
Head Men's Coach
University of Notre Dame

of the team is similar in both attack and defense, the coach should be awarded 0 points for this category.

Lateral Ball Circulation

One of the clearest indicators of coaching for development over outcome is a team's willingness to circulate the ball across width of the field.

When the back line routinely stays close to the midfield line and the full-backs are never wider than the width of the penalty box, there is very limited space created for building up (0 points). As a consequence, defending is made much more predictable and scoring chances are typically created from direct play or defensive mistakes.

Perhaps the most telling tactical situation occurs with a throw-in close to midfield. If the back line drops off 10-20 yards from the ball and the far side fullback is positioned outside the width

of the penalty area, the attacking team creates the space to play through 180 degrees and, if necessary, the width of the field (10 points).



In soccer, a basic tenet of team defending is to form a tight block by moving players towards the ball from the back and front and side(s) of the field. This movement reduces the dribbling or passing lanes between defenders and protects the direct route between the ball and the goal.

Soccer is a game of tactical opposites and good team defending also serves to open attacking space 1) behind the block, if the opponent is defending in their attacking half; 2) in front of the block, if the opponent is defending in their own half; and 3) around the edges of the block, if the opponent is defending the ball on a touchline.

If a team is poorly organized to defend, and is too spread out from side to side or from front to back, attacking options can also be found through the middle of the block. In a game of soccer chicken, the width and depth of the block can often be teased apart by good positioning or movement of attacking players into spaces away from the ball.

Since defenders can't tightly mark their immediate opponent and also help protect the integrity of the block when the opposition is spread out, the goal of soccer tactics during the build-up is to circulate the ball quickly and look to attack forward whenever space becomes available (10 points).

To take advantage of these spaces, good teams quickly circulate the ball to players in deep or wide positions and, in non-pressing situations, the most common options are to pass the ball across the field through the goalkeeper, through the back line, or through the midfield. This tactic is easily achieved by dropping the back line deeper into their own half and spreading out the players across the width of the field (10 points).

When the back line drops off, the forward line of the defending team can either 1) push on, which opens space to build-up through the midfield line, or directly to the forward line; or 2) stay more connected to their midfield, and allow the ball to be freely circulated across the back line.



Possessing the ball in the back line is one of the safest aspects of build-up play and the ideals of coaches who encourage the ball to be dropped backwards only to be routinely cleared forward (0 points) should be questioned.

The Goalkeeper as an Attacker

At the top levels, goalkeepers touch the ball up to seven times more frequently with their feet than with their hands.

They function as a deep support player when teammates are under pressure and facing the wrong way (10 points); and they are invariably the most open player on the field to help circulate the ball in the defensive half (10 points).



There is nothing more indicative of a coach playing to win than seeing defenders kick the ball out of bounds for throw-ins when they are facing their own goal (0 points).

Goalkeepers bear the same supporting obligations as the outfield players and must remain connected to their teammates. Goalkeeper development therefore requires evolving the confidence and skills to actively contribute as a field player. The technical and tactical demands can range from simply clearing back passes when there is no opportunity to play away from pressure; to receiving balls in and around the box from teammates and building the game into the back line or into midfield; to playing outside the box as the deepest defender, responsible for dealing with long through balls.

For a coach to limit the goalkeeper's role to mere shot stopping (0 points) is to deny the player's most important functions in the modern game.

Changes of Rhythm

Bad soccer is frenetic, direct, and strewn with unnecessary turn-overs (0 points); good soccer, in contrast, is a game of changing rhythms.

A key indicator of team preparation is the degree to which players individually and collectively maintain possession and dictates changes in the speed of play.

Fundamental to good team play is the decision-making of individual players. When there is space to pass or dribble the ball forward, the speed of play should increase as the team seeks to gain territory or create scoring chances. In contrast, when an attack is repelled or stalled, or the opponents are well positioned to defend, the game slows down and the ball should be circulated away from pressure until a new forward option appears (10 points).

Because soccer is a low scoring, endurance sport, building player's awareness of when and how to change the rhythm of play is a tactical and physical necessity.

Backs and Midfielders in Attack

Modern systems always arrange for more defenders than forwards. Subsequently, it is necessary for players from the midfield and back lines to come forward and participate in the attack (10 points). And, in order to create scoring chances against well-organized

I'm always amazed at how many players aren't technically or tactically prepared to play...even at our level.

Coaches seem to be coaching to win, perhaps as a by-product of seeking to earn a living.

Player development seems to be a word that is used often by club teams, but practiced rarely.



Randy Waldrum
Head Women's Coach
University of Notre Dame

teams, players must be capable of interchanging positions laterally, vertically and even diagonally.

At the higher levels, the striker(s) will often drop off their markers in order to play-in teammates arriving from deep supporting positions.

When a team consistently plays in rigid lines, or when the job of the midfielders and fullbacks appears to be limited to simply kicking balls for the forwards to run onto, there is a significant gap in the developmental process and the coach should be awarded 0 points in this category.

Vision and Combination Play

Aimlessly kicking the ball forward is the dourest form of attacking strategy and the least likely to graduate players into a college uniform (0 points).

To keep possession and break down well-organized defenses, good teams must link players together using passing, dribbling and off-the-ball movements (10 points).



Collectively, any action that takes place between two or more players falls under the heading of combination play.

At the most basic level, a pass from one player to another is a form of combination play, while, at its' most spectacular, excellent combination play is demonstrated when three or four players link together with limited touches to create a scoring chance.

Combination play is used to keep possession and to create openings to advance the ball forward (penetration) and the ball does not always have to travel forward to indicate good tactical awareness (10 points).

The tactical foundation of combination play is vision and good players always look around them before the ball arrives to determine the position and movement of teammates and opponents. Like riding a bike, young soccer players must learn to look before they maneuver; waiting to look until after the ball arrives is too late and too slow for rapid interplay.

Soccer is a much more choreographed sport than most outsiders appreciate and the top teams appear to combine instinctively because they have practiced together and learned

to read the preferences and tendencies of their teammates. A key role of the youth coach is therefore to help players understand who plays with whom in various areas of the field and how those players can solve small-group problems together.

Clearing vs Building

The purpose of defending is to recover the ball in order to score goals and win the game. Developmental coaches encourage their players to find teammates following a positive turn-over (10 points) , while outcome coaches simply encourage clearances (0 points).

In the spirit of challenging players to improve their ideas about the game, clearing is the last resort, not the first. This mindset not only permeates interceptions played with the feet, but also interceptions played with the head; a surface which is essentially another passing tool.

Possession is a prize commodity and good teams always look to counter-attack when first recovering the ball. When a counter-attack is not possible, the next objective is to possess and circulate the ball. To do either, requires players who think about defending as much, much more than simply foiling attacks.

Finally, to reprise a previous theme, players who are facing their own goal always have the option of passing the ball to their goalkeeper (10 points). Kicking the ball out of bounds with time and space to be more constructive (0 points) simply ignores the purpose of defending.



Defensive Strategies

Just as when attacking, seeking to dictate or change the rhythm of play is an important strategy in team defending (10 points).

When a defending team presses forward to recover the ball in the attacking half, the tactical response from the opposition is often a more direct style of play. Because there is less space to build up, passes from the back line are more likely to seek space behind the defensive block.

Pressing forward also forces opposing goalkeepers to abandon a strategy of deliberate build-up. When no teammates are open for short passes, the goalkeeper is more likely to clear the ball from punts and goal kicks, which can favor an inferior team in search of a scrappier game or a team with tall players who are strong in the air.

Pressing can be an effective strategy when, for example, the opponent likes to play with a patient controlled rhythm, or when the opponent is leading, or when the strength of the defending team is its back line, or when an opponent is shorthanded, or if the weather is conducive to a high energy style.

Pressing is the most physically demanding form of defending and also the most risky.

Alternatively, when a team starts to defend 30-40 yards from goal, or at the top of the center circle (40-50 yards from goal), or at the half-way line (55-60 yards from goal), the opponent can be lulled into playing a less direct style for which they may be ill-suited. Often, good teams will start defending deeper because they are leading, or because they want to create space for a counter-attacking strategy, or because it takes less energy, or because the opponent likes to kick-and-run, or because the weather favors a slower game.

The score of the game and the time remaining should always have some impact on game strategy - on both sides of the ball. Good coaches appreciate that altering the starting point for defending provides another way of impacting a match and evolving more soccer-savvy players (10 points).

It follows that to be an effective defensive team requires preparation. Players must be helped to recognize the tactical cues of the game in order to shift the block forward or backward or sideways as a unit (10 points).

While setting a team out to defend from an established starting point is often a routine part of game preparation, there are many, many instances where the unfolding game dictates a variety of responses. When the players can seamlessly transition between

At both the national team and college level, our players are significantly deficient in their technical abilities.

Unfortunately, the youth game has become too focused on winning and coaches are not spending the time necessary to develop the skillful young players.

I would love to see the youth game focus more on individual player development rather than winning at all costs.



**Karen Richter-Hoppa
Head Women's Coach
Auburn University**

pressing and defending from deeper starting positions (10 points), the impact of training is evident.

Finally, regardless of where team defending starts on the field, the skill and insight of each individual player is the key to successful ball recovery. When the players don't understand their ever-changing roles, bad things happen.

Soccer is a game of mistakes and perhaps the worst mistake is the failure to defend following a turn-over. When training sessions are primarily drill-based, fitness-based or technique-based and fail to help players experience realistic soccer situations in realistic soccer spaces on an ongoing basis, the lack of transfer from training will be clearly evidenced by the disorganization of the team under competitive pressures (0 points).

Basic Offside Tactics

There is a significant developmental difference between teaching young players to use standard offside tactics and being completely benign - or suicidally aggressive - in defending the space between the back line and the goalkeeper.

Playing “flat” across the back line is often mistakenly interpreted as playing with no cover and inexperienced coaches will often resort to using a sweeper-stopper arrangement in the belief that it is a safer strategy (0 points). While this can be somewhat effective positioning against kick and run teams, the sweeper does little more than provide an additional 10-15 yards to the depth of the block against teams that play with a more patient build-up.



Employing offside tactics does not mean taking unnecessary risks, and playing flat across the back is also not the same as playing with a high back line. While there are moments to squeeze forward and “trap” opponents offside, routinely holding the back line 30 or 40 yards from goal, particularly when there is no pressure on the ball, is naïve (0 points).

When an attacker makes an early run into offside space, there is no need for a defender to follow (10 points); yet, poorly coached players are encouraged to do so (0 points). When the decision to follow or release an attacker into offside space is left to the last defender, offside tactics become very simple to understand.

When goals are conceded, the most likely cause is a lack of pressure on the ball. Particularly when defending in the last 30-40 yards of the field, good teams quickly close down opponents in possession to limit their time and space and vision. This serves to minimize the number of shots, forward dribbles and through passes that have to be defended. To accomplish this tactic, good teams step forward together as the ball moves away from their goal and any attacking players in offside space are taken out of the game (10 points).

Game Management

The objective in soccer is to score more goals than the other team in the time allotted. Every scoreline impacts the match situation in some way and, as games unfold, experienced coaches will adjust their team's play in an effort to achieve favorable outcomes (10 points). These adjustments can be tactical or structural.

For example, the coach can ask the players to circulate the ball more quickly, or more slowly; or to play more direct, or with more patience; or to defend further forward, or further back; or to defend with more aggression, or more restraint. Tactical adjustments can also be made to improve the flow of play through playmakers in attacking positions.

Adjustments can also be made to the structural organization of the team, by adding or subtracted players from the back, middle or front lines in order to change or control the rhythm of play. The experienced coach may also change the spacing within and between the lines in order to maximize opportunities or minimize risks.

At the youth level, a strong player may be asked to play further forward if the game is in arrears; or the coach may decide to add attackers and play with fewer defenders. Either approach can leave a team more exposed to counter-attacks and a further loss of goals.



When chasing a deficit, the brave coach takes risks, while the insecure coach often settles for the hollow victory of a narrow defeat (0 points).

The coach can make adjustments to the game during open play or at half-time. And, while the eventual outcome of the game may always be positive, the telling factor is that there is some logic to the changes (10 points). Simply substituting players for the sake of making changes is not good game management (0 points).

Substitution Management

At the more competitive levels of pay-to-play youth soccer, limited re-entry is the standard substitution model and coaches must learn to start and rotate players in equitable ways over the course of a season. However, competitive sport is not always fair, and a key element of development is that players must come to grips with the self-motivation required to aspire.

While playing in local league matches and multi-game tournaments necessitates that every player contributes, it is not unreasonable for a coach to play with a starting eleven - and only substitute as necessary - for a very limited number of important competitions. These competitions should be designated as focal points at the start of the season with reminders given prior to the events.

Over the balance of the season, every player should have the opportunity to start and play complete games, and every player should, otherwise, be afforded significant blocks of playing time in each game (10 points). Once a pattern has been established,

Part II: Coaching Personality Assessment

Aside from independent technical training, the quality of the coaching is the most important factor in long-term player development. Two factors should be scrutinized: training and personality.

As described in detail above, the value of the training sessions can be directly evidenced from the evolving nature of the team over time. Either the players and the team consistently learns to display good habits because they are well trained, or they don't.

The second factor is the developmental personality of the coach and their tolerance for the individual frailties of young players. The following table presents seven facets of behavior that can be used to assess coaches in the training environment and, more importantly, under the stress of competition. It's easy to be magnanimous, gracious, consistent, and supportive when things are going well! Attitudes revealed when the wheels are coming off is more telling.

Elements of Coaching Personality

| Element | | Observed Frequency | |
|---|--------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Volume of Information | Selective | 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 | Constant |
| Global vs Local Coaching | Mostly Global | 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 | Mostly Local |
| Response to Mistakes | Mostly Positive | 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 | Mostly Negative |
| Coach or Cheerleader | Mostly Informative | 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 | Mostly Praising |
| Body Language | Well Controlled | 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 | Highly Emotional |
| Referee Respect | Understanding | 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 | Abusive |
| Overall Coaching Personality Score | | / 60 | |

Explanations...

Each element of the coaching personality assessment model is explained below. It is important to note that there is no perfect coaching style and no perfect coach. Good teachers are often passionate people who earn their player's respect because they make them better and treat them with dignity. For the best teachers, "perfection" is the unattainable ideal that drives long-term development.

Being demanding is therefore a prerequisite to becoming a top quality coach and showing emotion is a necessary companion on that journey. However, the degree to which each coach is first and foremost a teacher is critical to this discussion and those who demonstrate abusive behavior towards children or young adults have no place in youth sport. Good teachers are not physically or verbally abusive.

Volume of Information

One of the most common reasons cited by young people for dropping out of sport is that adults don't understand their motivations for participating. Besides skill development and friendships, young people want to feel some ownership and control over their leisure time activities. Given the contrast in quality and drive between street soccer players and those from the organized sports world, the horrendous drop-out rates in soccer only serves to accentuate these concerns.

In my opinion, one of the biggest challenges facing many of the players coming into the U17 National Team Residency Program lack is a lack of confidence to effectively communicate with one another on the field.



Erik Imler
US Soccer U-17
Residency Staff Coach

When coaches prepare their players in practice and use games to measure the value of their tuition, the respective roles for practices and games are well balanced (10 points). However, when coaches provide constant direction during games and deprive the players of the ability to control their own decision-making, an unhealthy balance is created and development suffers (0 points). It is perfectly acceptable to help players navigate through a game; it is unacceptable to play the game for them.

Making mistakes is an important part of learning, as is learning by doing, and practice is the time for coaches to address individual and collective failings. The most vocal game coaches may be guilty of two serious errors. First, they may be unaware of their negative impact on long-term motivation; and, second, they are broadcasting to the world that their players are not prepared well enough to be trusted.

Global vs Local Coaching

Professional and college coaches exhibit a broadly consistent style of bench behavior. For the most part, they are seated, they take notes, and they observe; and, on occasion, they will offer specific, strategic, “global” information to help change the game (10 points).

The top coaches leave the technical and tactical decisions to the players and focus on the global picture, while the less experienced are often heard providing instant solutions to each technical and tactical breakdown (0 points). Ironically, these “local” coaches are often unaware of the global image unfolding before their eyes. They see players, but not a team.



Evolving a global mindset to coaching is important because technique cannot be affected outside of training and each tactical decision, once made, is over. Yes, at the youth levels, it can be helpful to give players advice on how to solve a challenging or repetitive problem, but just not as part of a 90-minute monologue.

Response to Mistakes

Players of all ages and abilities will make mistakes that result in turn-overs, conceded goals or lost games. Soccer is a game of mistakes and constantly changing soccer problems, so each player’s immediate transition to the next phase of the game is critical. For example, turning the ball over, or mistiming a tackle, are signals to defend; while failing to convert a counter-attack is a signal to revert to building-up. Making a mistake is acceptable; compounding a mistake by not reacting to the next phase of play, less so.

From experience, the good coach will appreciate which tactical breakdowns were beyond their players' skill levels; which mistakes were caused by psychological factors, such as extreme pressure or a lack of mental preparation; and which errors were caused by technical limitations.

The coach's reaction to mistakes and to the player's response to these mistakes reveals much about their personality. Players don't need to be told that they have erred, nor do they need to be scolded, threatened, derided with sarcasm, or criticized for their limitations. Players who fail to recognize they have erred, need more experience through training.

The supportive coach is inherently positive, but knows when a button requires compression (10 points) and when to push. Coaches who routinely scold, who are sarcastic, who threaten, who criticize, and who instruct by highlighting failings might also win, but at what psychological cost (0 points)?

Coach or Cheerleader

UCLA coach John Wooden is revered because he won; but he won because he taught and taught and taught. For every time a player was praised for their effort, Wooden would offer eight times as many comments on how the player could do better. More than half of Wooden's coaching comments were informational. And brief! No long lectures. No disruptions to the flow of practice. Information. Information. Information. Habits. Habits. Habits.



Players know when they have done well. What they need to improve on a daily basis is information on how they can do well more often. This is the coach's primary function in practice (10 points). Practice is where the good coach imparts their vision. Practice is where players learn good habits.

Youth coaches can be scrutinized through the content of their coaching points. The coach who spends most of a game or practice praising effort is probably not looking for technical or tactical or physical or psychological flaws that can be addressed through training (0 points). The cheerleader responds to effort and is excited when something good happens; the talented coach makes note of everything, in everyone.

Body Language

Sport reveals character and nothing reveals character more than reactions to adversity, frustration or disappointment. Crossing arms, throwing clip boards, gesticulating wildly, and shaking a lowered head are all signs of negative body language (0 points), which players read, react to, and often replicate.

Coaches are often amongst the most important influences on young people's lives and the non-verbal communication players receive from the sidelines either supports or negates the verbal messages they receive otherwise.



Stress is necessary for improvements in performance and managing stress is one of the key factors which differentiate levels of athlete. In close and important matches, when leadership is vital, the coach must be the steadying influence or discipline, focus and performance will quickly evaporate.

The coach who stresses tolerance and emotional control (10 points), yet becomes highly emotional under pressure (0 points) is likely to have players who react similarly. Negative coaching messages can also trigger reactions from the adults on the sideline; when adrenaline flows, tensions rise, and the potential for injury, referee abuse, and sideline conflict are all increased.

Referee Respect

Each year, youth soccer loses around 50% of its new recruits. The overwhelming source of this attrition is sideline abuse (0 points). In today's intolerant world, it is never acceptable for a referee to be wrong and it is never possible for a referee to be right. It is a certainty that one side or the other will feel aggrieved by every decision. When indignation boils over, trouble brews.

Referees were added to association football (soccer) when polite conversations between the "gentleman" captains became less agreeable. As the game evolved, the need for neutral adjudication became necessary and referees have been an integral part of soccer since the mid-1800's.

Coaches are the most important influence on sideline behavior on both sides of the field. When a coach feels obliged to voice an opinion, so too do the parents, and often the players, as well (0 points). Even more problematic are youth coaches who feel that constantly baiting the referee is part of their bailiwick (0 points). Ironically, the coach who takes time to inform the referees of their wrongdoing has just lost the opportunity to observe their team's response to the restart.



“In the opinion of the referee,” are the six most important words in the FIFA Laws of the Game. While no-one ever agrees with every call made over 90 minutes, respecting the game includes respecting the opinion of the referee. The coach who sets the standard, models that standard, and enforces that standard throughout the team and sidelines is the ideal to which every coach should aspire (10 points).

In Closing...

The purpose of this article was to provide soccer-parents with a practical method of assessing coaching performance. On the surface, this can be a straightforward process of assigning two numbers: one, based on the elements of good team play; the second based on the personal qualities of the coach.

Of course, there is more to the equation than the sum of two numbers.

Dutch master coach Rinus Michels noted in *Teambuilding* that developing a cohesive team begins at the youth level with a vision of how the desired qualities of the top players can be systematically trained over time. This grooming process starts from the earliest contact with young players and is invariably a long and involved journey for those who strive to reach the top.

In the United States, a country devoid of a natural street soccer culture, the onus for long-term development falls on two sets of shoulders. First, clubs must practice up to four times a week; or, at a minimum, offer additional training opportunities for motivated players. And second, players must appreciate that to achieve mastery with the ball requires many hours of independent practice.

Coaches are not miracle workers, but the talented ones find ways to maximize potential! Parents...Seek them out!