

Coaching Comments and Their Messages

by Tom Turner, Director of Coaching, OYSAN

Much of what players hear from the sidelines reinforces the “fear-soccer” of the direct style and moves them farther away from the playing habits that will help them grow as intelligent soccer players. There are some simple and obvious reasons why our average player in OYSAN has never developed the competence to enjoy the game and play into adulthood. Evolving a culture will be a slow group effort, involving educated coaches and parents. What follows, is a sample of typical comments heard at soccer games, and the underlying messages that are being subtly relayed to the players about their significant adults’ respect for, and understanding of the game.

Comments: Get it out of here! / Great kick! / Get rid of it! / Boot it long! / Don’t pass it backwards, you might lose it! / Don’t ever pass the ball across the field!

Message: Don’t take any chances in trying to keep possession. You are going to be under pressure, so get the ball as far downfield as early as possible so that the ball is away from our goal. Don’t take the time to look for a teammate and don’t worry where the ball ends up. Just make sure you don’t lose possession and risk conceding a goal.

Style conflict: If we never ask young players to take risks and try to play constructive soccer at an age when results don’t matter, when will they ever develop the skills, insights and confidence to play in control, at speed, and under pressure?

Comments: Don’t play with it! / Too many touches! / Don’t hold onto the ball!

Message: You don’t have the skill to dribble the ball to create space or buy time for a pass, and we might lose a goal if you are dispossessed. Better to play safe and clear the ball forward out of our end.

Style conflict: Dribbling is the most important skill a young player can learn because they will never have another chance to become a creative player.

Comment: Never kick the ball like that! Always use the inside of your foot.

Message: There is only one correct way to kick the ball and that is not the right way. I have all the answers and you must follow my direction because I am the coach and I am in charge. If you don’t do as I say, you will sit on the bench.

Style conflict: Creative players solve problems in novel ways. They do the unexpected and use whatever insights they possess to arrive at solutions. A good pass, for example, is one that arrives at its target and can be used to the teams’ advantage, regardless of how it was delivered. When we tell players they “cannot” use technique in a unique way, we are chipping away at their ability to think for themselves and perpetuating a culture where players have limited skills and no creativity.

Comment: Always play the way you’re facing.

Message: I heard this maxim somewhere and I haven’t thought through what it means, but you were just caught in possession when trying to turn upfield and this seems like the time to make a coaching point.

Style conflict: This is a coaching contradiction. Players are often asked to receive the ball with their back to goal and turn against pressure. The most difficult opponents are unpredictable in their ability to receive passes and attack space behind and beside defenders. It is a difficult, yet necessary skill for forwards and midfield players. If we always ask players to pass the way they are facing, we make play too predictable and devalue the skills and insight necessary to recognize the opportunity to turn a defender or receive the ball into an open space. The most common reason why players lose possession is that they have no vision of the field behind them before trying to turn.

Comment: Always look to pass the ball “Short-Short-Long.”

Message: I saw a coach demonstrate this drill at a coaching clinic once, but I haven’t thought through what it actually means, other than you should play two short passes and then make a long p

Style conflict: Another coaching contradiction usually featured in warm-up drills. In the real world of soccer, passes should be played short or long based on the position of defenders and teammates and the skill level of the player in possession. In the real world of soccer, players are never required to play the ball long after a number of short passes, or vice versa. A more reasonable coaching comment would be to play short passes until there is a tactical advantage in playing a longer pass to a teammate in space.

Comments: That’s a card, Ref! / Offside! / Hey Ref, call it both ways! / Unintentional Ref; that’s not a foul! / That’s a handball! / Didn’t you see that, Ref? / Ref, you suck! / What game are you watching, Ref?

Message: “I know everything about the interpretation of the rules, and the referee, players and parents need to know it.” By attacking the credibility of the official, we send the message to the players and the parents that referee abuse is acceptable. When we serve as a negative example, or condone a vocal parent or player’s negative outbursts by not rebuking them, we are demonstrating disrespect for the game. We also send a strong message to the players that appealing decisions and questioning the authority of the official is an acceptable part of a soccer education.

Style conflict: Refereeing is a matter of opinion and many new referees are just learning to understand the nuances of officiating what can be a very fluid game. There are good and bad referees, good and bad players, and good and bad coaches. Everyone makes mistakes and everyone should be allowed to learn their craft without undue abuse. Coaching players to react to any call by taking a quick restart or by organizing the defense is a much more proactive and productive approach to dealing with refereeing decisions. Without a playing background, a refereeing license, and years of experience in soccer, questioning calls is usually the last action an inexperienced coach should undertake. Coaches, who truly work from a developmental bias, view positive and negative refereeing decisions as an integral part of the game, and which present valuable learning opportunities for their players. Life is not always fair!

In summary, the safety-first, fear-driven, direct, approach to youth soccer develops players who are uncomfortable and, probably, incapable of playing constructive soccer. Only through more focused, less pressured coaching, and more appropriate small-sided games, can we provide an environment where our young players have the opportunity to play soccer as adults in our national style.