

Team Management Ideas

Maintaining Team Discipline

by Jeff Pill, U.S. Soccer National Staff Coach

Team discipline is crucial to the overall success of any team endeavor. Not only do disciplined teams perform well on the field, but, if teams are able to maintain good discipline both on and off the field, the overall soccer experience is far more positive for all involved; parents, players, coaches and administrators.

In fact, maintaining team discipline is one of the biggest fears or challenges for beginning coaches. Often, coaches are lost or ineffective because they are unable to maintain order and discipline with their team.

Towards the end, I have included several brief suggestions on what I have found to be successful in maintaining good team discipline. Hopefully, you have developed your own "list" of what works for you. If not, let this serve as inspiration to come up with your own system.

1. Plan Ahead

The single most important thing that can help is the coach's organization. Here, if it is obvious to the players that practices are conducted in an orderly manner, with clear goals and objectives, they are more likely to treat both the coach and the training time seriously. If practices flow easily from one activity to the other with minimal "down time", the players are able to stay focused on the task at hand. By making training meaningful and educational, the players will be motivated to pay attention and keep focused.

2. Choose Your Activities Carefully

There is nothing worse than putting players through "boring" drills that are inappropriate to their playing ability either by being too difficult or too easy. Activities should be fun, challenging and replicate the demands of the game itself. In this way, the players sense that their time is not being wasted. Having activities be competitive motivates them to play their best. Keep the players moving and engaged. Make sure that there are plenty of balls at hand so that a good activity is not interrupted by taking unnecessary time out to chase the ball. Even young players will engage themselves in a great game. Remember, your parents will appreciate the fact that their young player comes home and sleeps through the night because they have tired themselves out in healthy, engaging fun activities.

3. Have A Clear Picture In Mind of What Appropriate Behavior Looks Like

If you know what the players will look like when they are playing the game, you will be able to recognize when they are not playing the game correctly, or not behaving appropriately. This will enable you to step in immediately when inappropriate behavior is seen. As soon as you notice it, you must deal with it. Having a clear picture in your mind will allow you to be decisive. Then, you should also have a clear picture in your mind of how you are going to deal with the situation. Having players do push ups or run laps as punishment is inappropriate, especially for younger players. Removing them from an activity is more effective. Their primary desire is to be involved in their peer group. Therefore, removing them from the activity is an effective way to deal with problems that occur. As one coach said, "Don't be afraid to use the bench!"

4. Involve The Parents

Especially with the younger players, having the parents support and reinforcing your discipline policies are crucial. Your expectations for player behavior should be clearly stated during the preseason parent meeting. Enlist their support. It has been my experience that they will be glad to do so.

5. Remember, You Are The Role Model

It is always good to remember that our actions are speaking so loudly that the players can not hear what we are saying. If we ask for respect, but show that we don't respect others (e.g. the referee) then we are asking for problems. If we expect players to be kind to each other, but we are not kind to ourselves, then expect the worst. Model appropriate behavior and get it in return.

6. Recognize The Difference Between Open Acts of Defiance and Childhood Irresponsibility

"Kids will be kids" is a great phrase that both excuses a lot of inappropriate behavior, on one hand, and reminds us all that kids make mistakes on the other. When players openly defy, and act inappropriately, then swift, appropriate action is called for. However, when players momentarily forget themselves, and do not show any malicious intent, then a gentle reminder is perhaps more appropriate. Just remember, youngsters are often quite skillful at disguising the two types of behavior. We all have to be sharp in recognizing the difference so that we can act appropriately.

7. Finally, Be Sure To Put Yourself In Their Shoes

If we can remember what it is like to be at a fun practice that is both enjoyable as well as educational, we will be better off. Always ask yourself, "What would I like to do if I were at practice and needed to work on my passing?" This will enable you to avoid a lot of possible challenges.