Management and Discipline for Soccer Coaches

(Reprinted from footy4kids.com)

There are a number of problems which may occur over the course of a season due to the behavior of parents or players. These include attendance problems; disruptions/misconduct during practice or games; "overly-helpful" parents; and parents who are chronic gripers. Difficulties in handling these four problems are why most coaches to decide to give up coaching, so it is very important to learn how to deal with them.

Dealing with discipline problems

The first trick in learning to handle players is to establish your authority early. If players do not get the idea that you are the "boss", and that you will insist that they follow your rules, it will be very difficult to control them. Here are some time-honored ways to get this message across early.

Tips on Asserting Your Authority

Using "the Voice" and "the Look"

It's important for players to be able to recognize by your tone of voice and your manner when you intend a no-nonsense directive, or are drawing a boundary which they try to cross at their peril. Yelling does not work. Use a firm voice and a firm look, and DEMAND attention. Make it clear that this is non-negotiable - and your chances that they will listen increase substantially. Watch for their reaction, however. It is easy to scare little ones with a tone of voice which might induce teenagers to slowly think about complying - so adjust to your audience.

The Art of Refocusing Attention

Sometimes a quick, firm word in passing is enough to get things back on track without stopping an ongoing activity. If this doesn't work, don't try to yell or frantically run around to get the attention of the players. STOP the group, DEMAND that they all stop talking and look at you, and WAIT until everyone does so before even trying to start with the substance of your remarks. Using "the Voice", say something like: "Eyes on me. Now."

If someone starts clowning or chatting in the background after you start trying to talk substance, STOP! Firmly re-demand silence before continuing. Keep doing this until they shut up, even if you spend 20 minutes on a 30 second announcement. Eventually, the other players will start to tell this player to be quiet, because they will get bored standing around. When the disruptive one starts to get negative attention from his peers, the behavior tends to cease quickly.

Choose Your Battles Wisely

Remember that all young kids misbehave at times. If the child is not normally disruptive or if the disruption is not serious - and is quickly abandoned with a quiet word from you, there is no reason to make a big deal over it.

If you are too stern, and use the proverbial cannon to deal with a small gnat of an offence, this causes two problems. First, the compliant players will start to fear you - and will become so upset by any correction from you that they will tend to freeze up and become afraid to make mistakes for fear of displeasing you (so they won't learn very well). Secondly, the more spirited or defiant players will figure out that you have already used up all of your ammunition on a trivial offence - so they won't see any reason why they shouldn't commit HUGE offences if the punishment is going to be the same anyway. As a result, it is not uncommon to find utter chaos when the coach is not using good judgment on when/how/why/where to punish offences.

How to discipline effectively

When misbehavior seriously disrupts the activities of the other players (either because it is persistent minor stuff or because of one egregious act), the coach needs to use "the Voice" and "the Look" to stop the behavior instantly.

It is a good idea to talk in terms of Rules - because players tend to remember Rules better. So, tell them that "Hitting a team-mate is against our Rules".

Then, get the offender to tell you WHY this is against the rules. Forcing the offender to verbalize why other players might not like to be hit serves two purposes. It shows the other players that this kid knew better AND it causes the offender to suffer some humiliation in front of everyone by admitting that he knew better.

Once the player admits that he knew better, make him apologize. Sure, the apology is likely to be grudging - and delivered under his breath in the general direction of his belly button. But, by forcing him to apologize (and making him go sit out until he does apologize, if he initially refuses) helps to breed good sportsmanship down the line - and helps him to recognize that other players have rights too.

Sometimes, of course, a player may not understand why something is against the Rules. For instance, the little brother of a HS-level player may have seen lots of slide tackles in games, and truly may not understand why you got upset when he took out the ankles of a team-mate with a reckless tackle. In those cases, it is important to explain why you are upset, and to explain what you want in the future.

What if one team-mate started it and the other finished it? Easy. Make them both apologize, then make the retaliator explain to you how he plans to handle things next time (e.g., come to you; use his words instead of his fists; etc.). However, the instigator should not get off scot-free. Consider giving him an extra "punishment" for starting things. Often, especially with arch-rivals, making the instigator say 5 good things about his adversary is quite effective in healing the wounds all around.

Some Tips on Using "Punishments"

Be careful in using physical activity as punishment. Especially with younger players, learning to associate running or exercise with punishment can cause them to resent

that activity when you need them to do this work. Nonetheless, there are times when a quick set of jumping jacks or push-ups may help to refocus the player. As long as these are not onerous (no more than 5-10), the players usually accept the penalty with good humor and no lasting effects. However, if the player is looking for attention and wanting to clown around (or wanting to challenge the coach in some fashion), he will use the penance as an opportunity to have fun at the expense of the coach. As a result, if the coach already knows that he is dealing with a defiant player, the best bet may be to tell the player to go sit out until he can behave.

ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE sanctions is forcing the misbehaving player to sit out during an activity. Giving a time-out can often be very effective. Most players want to be with everyone else - even if they are being disruptive.

Usually, the coach will give the player the option of returning when the player decides to behave. However, if the player is refusing to participate in an activity which he doesn't like, then the better course is to sit the player out for the remainder of the practice. Otherwise, the coach will send the message to the team that, if you don't want to do an exercise, just go sit down - and you won't suffer any penalty. Once the players discover that you don't get to pick and choose what you do, and you don't get to scrimmage if you don't work, the incentives will be reduced to seek a time-out simply to avoid doing work.

Okay, so where should the player be sent to sit out? The ideal spot for a player to sit out is where you (or some responsible adult) can keep them in view, but where they are far enough removed they cannot easily create further distraction for the rest of the group. Where and how far will depend on the player, the setting, and the available supervision. (Don't let a buddy join them for company; if two players must be sent out, send them to opposite ends of the field).

Sometimes carrots work better!

It's important to not forget to use carrots as well as sticks. Just as in making corrections, good behavior should be praised and rewarded to reinforce behaviors you want at practices and games. One of the most effective ways to shape up a whole team that's half-hearted and distracted about whatever subject is the focus of the day's activities is to make most players' favorite part of the practice, THE SCRIMMAGE, contingent on the extent they get with the program. "The sooner we learn to do this, the longer we can scrimmage".

"Full Moon" Days

Sometimes, your players' energy and mood simply isn't a good match for the well-intended practice plan you designed. They're hopelessly restless, with unbounded energy. If the normally cooperative players are exceptionally wild, and none of the adjustments which you make seem to work, consider simply abandoning the plan for the day - and playing nothing but games (the winners of the last game get to pick the next one). As long as the games are soccer-related, the practice session is probably doing more good than you realize. The kids are getting lots of touches on the ball; team morale is soaring because coach is a good guy (and we got a free day); and coach is able to relax and enjoy watching the players act like a bunch of puppies. Consider it a vacation to recharge the batteries, and just have fun.