

# **NSCAA Position Statement - Role of the Coach in Player Development**

## **Role of the Coach**

The fundamental role of all coaches in all sports is to provide a safe, and educational playing environment for the players. This is the basic tenet of all coaches in any sport and players put their trust in their coaches that they have the best interests of the players at heart regardless of their playing ability.

There is no doubt that coaches play a vitally significant role in the life of all athletes. The role of the coach in the life of a soccer player, however, is qualitatively different than the role of the coach in other American sports like football, basketball or lacrosse because of the tactical and technical demands on the soccer player. Tactics refer to decision making and soccer is the ultimate “player’s game” because the player makes all the decisions during the course of the game with very little input from the coach. These decisions are made easier or more difficult depending on the technical ability of the player (i.e. the ability of players to use their feet, and other body parts, to deal with the ball.) The role of the soccer coach in player development is complicated because the players cannot use their hands and so the coach has to address the difficulties associated with “eye – foot” coordination rather than the, much more simple, “eye – hand” demands of other sports. It is, generally, accepted that the skill is so refined and difficult to learn that skill acquisition must begin well before adolescence, whereas skill acquisition in other sports can be picked up in the teen age years.

Today’s soccer coach must help players, not only become competent and creative with the ball but also become independent thinkers. The game is a game of split second decisions from the players with no help from the coach whatsoever. To develop this level of technical capability and tactical independence within the players the coach must be an eclectic individual possessing a compendium of knowledge regarding soccer strategy, tactics, anatomy and physiology, fitness, teaching methodology, and administrative symmetry. Coaches must be able to

employ divergent thinking to solve the many problems they face in today's complex soccer milieu. Divergent thinking is the ability to apply experience and creativity in problem solving. Divergent thinking devolves from convergent thinking, which is the summation of:

One's playing experience

1. Coaching experience
2. Formal coaching education
3. General observation of the game through watching soccer and discussion. The coach with a vast and deep reservoir of convergent thinking will be able to draw on those experiences when faced with tactical soccer decisions, player personnel questions, or being administratively nimble.

### Soccer as an invasion sport

The role of the coach begins with an understanding of what kind of sport soccer is. Soccer is a "focused target invasion" sport. Invasion sports include basketball, American football, lacrosse, field hockey, ice hockey, and rugby football, to name the most popular. The tactical objective of an invasion sport is to invade the territory of the opponent and get behind the opponent's defenders. American football and rugby are "open target" invasion sports, the team only has to cross the goal line to score. Soccer is a "focused target" invasion sport (hockey, basketball, et al), as the ball has to be propelled into a goal, or focused target to score. The penultimate attacking principle is penetration. For the coach, the task is: how does the team achieve penetration? And conversely, in defense, how do we deny penetration?

For coaches to fulfill their role, they must understand how players learn in a game which demands technical execution in a dynamic tactical environment. Players learn through perception and processing. The player perceives external stimuli, processes that information internally, and makes an action decision based on that information. This is known as TSA : " Theory of Selective Attention". The TSA

posits that we attend to the most important cues in an environment, ward off extraneous and/or ancillary cues, and make the action decision based on experience and knowledge.

Soccer coaches must help players to acquire this experience and knowledge in practice. However, there is no one way of teaching the game and sophisticated coaches use various teaching methods to achieve their goals depending on what is required and appropriate.

### The Role of the Soccer Coach in Player Development

What do soccer players need from the coach? The coach's role is to set goals, determine a progression that will achieve those goals, and provide feedback to players about performance. Goal setting demands both long and short term goals and will be determined, to a large degree, on the outcomes for which the coach is striving. These outcomes will vary depending on the categorization of the coach.

The role of the coach will fall into three general categories or levels;

1. The coach-facilitator
2. The coach-manager
3. The coach-teacher.

1. The role of the coach-facilitator is to engender an environment of fun, social interaction, and enjoyment of game - like activities that include a soccer ball. These coaches deal, generally, with very young, novice, players. Coach - facilitators must be aware of the physical, mental, and emotional characteristics of these younger age groups, including relative age effects. There is little "teaching the game" for the coach-facilitator. The effective coach-facilitator provides a portal for players to the next level of play. One of the main outcomes this coach seeks to achieve is a spirit and mentality in youngsters that instills confidence in

individual creative soccer expression when dribbling, shooting, passing, etc. Players must be free of the fear of “making a mistake”, losing a game, or being admonished by the “coach”.

2. The coach-manager is concerned with achieving a result; be it winning, playing to a draw, even not conceding an away goal. Coach-managers, often professional coaches, are not in the business of “teaching” players how to play specific tactical roles. They will go on the transfer market and buy the player whose physical, tactical, and psychological playing characteristics fit the coach-manager’s vision of that role. The role of the coach-manager is the transfer market, player selection, tactics for the next game, and, most importantly, “managing” the personalities of twenty or more adults into a cohesive collective entity.

3. The coach-teacher is the level that most impacts the membership of NSCAA. The membership certainly includes coach-facilitators and coach-managers, but the bulk of NSCAA members coach players from ten to twenty years old. Included in this sub - group are club, high school, and college coaches. It is the coach-teacher who will most effectively implement the constitutional imperative and mission statement of NSCAA.

The role of the coach-teacher is initiated with the establishment of a coaching philosophy. This will vary with the age and experience of the players and the agency sponsoring the team: club, high school, college, or other. The philosophical emphasis will fall somewhere on the continuum between player development and achieving a result (win). The coach’s role with a club’s in - house team or an intramural team is for players to have fun playing soccer and results should be inconsequential. The Division I college coach in a major conference, however, is contracted and terminated based on results. Most coaching for the coach-teacher will fall between these extremes and combines the educative process of player development while concomitantly attempting to achieve a result. This combination is a difficult, complex task as the coach is always under the cynosure of a thousand eyes. Because of this the role of the coach is perceived differently by parents, club presidents, athletic directors, players, and even the coach.

A typical example of the coach perception problem is evidenced with parents at the club and high school levels. Parents view the result at the end of the game as the yardstick for determining effective coaching because the result is quantifiable, easily measured: we won (good) or we lost (bad). Parents should be concerned with the “process of playing”: did the team play well? Did their son or daughter

make some good passes, dribble effectively, try to play both sides of the ball? Did their child compete hard the entire game? Is their son or daughter becoming a better player over the course of the season? The problem for the coach is how to quantify improvement for the parent. How does the coach quantify improvement in technical application to tactical play or how does the coach measure the player's improvement in "reading the game"? Parents can't measure these concepts, but it is easy for them to measure the result. The consequence for coaches is that they are evaluated by what is easily measured and, unfortunately, the result also becomes the parent's yardstick for player development. If, at the end of the season, the team hoists the "trophy", the coach is judged to "be a good coach" and did a great job coaching the players.

For the coach- teacher at these ages, is it the role of the coach to win games, develop players, or some amalgam of the two? Here, the administrative acumen of the coach is critical. The coach, parents, players, club officials or athletic director must meet frequently and have an open dialog regarding philosophy, goals and objectives, the process to achieve those goals, and a realistic level of expectation for team success. It is important that coaches do not perceive their role as that of only winning games. When this perception occurs, the result will be training sessions that focus on collective organization, defensive structure, restarts, fitness, no risk soccer, and fear of making mistakes. This type of training ignores the needs of the individual player and player development is minimal or non-existent. It is the coach's responsibility to have open lines of communication with all agents that act upon the players. It is critical that all agents agree on the coach's role.

### The Progressive Method

In, almost, all educational endeavors which impart physical skills and decision making, the progressive method is closely adhered to. This involves the introduction of steadily more complicated movements or decision making environments. Soccer is a game of technical execution in a dynamic, and constantly changing tactical environment. (e.g. the ball is arriving at my feet at the same time a defender is closing me down.) In a mille second I must perceive and process the speed and angle of approach of the defender, the position of teammates and opponents, then make an action decision to pass, dribble, shoot, or hold the ball. Making correct decisions in today's high paced soccer demands that coaches provide training that precisely replicates what players are going to experience in

the real game. This process is accomplished using progressive methods of teaching, meaning that the coach gradually increases the complexity of the playing environment, necessitating that players begin playing the game and making decisions in uncomplicated environments and as they become more experienced, the coach complicates the environment.

Realizing the impact of training that will replicate what the players will experience in the game, it is a further role of the coaching community, that if it understands how players learn, i.e. (TSA); training and teaching must be based on that model. The role of coaches is to teach from simple to complex, from general to specific. Introductory players (5-8 yrs.) play 3v3 and 4v4. Eight to twelve year olds play 6v6 to 8v8. Emerging and mature players play 11v11. Each of these playing modules will have its own desired player outcomes- technically, tactically, and psychologically. The issue that the soccer coaches must deal with is whether skill is acquired by simple trail and error or whether guidance from an expert is important and, if so, how is this guidance imparted?

### Learning – Manifestation or Acquisition?

When philosophy is established and goals and objectives are set, the role of the coach is to decide what educative approach is appropriate for the players being coached. Coach-teachers, must address the appropriate educational dilemma, is learning a manifestation process or an acquisition process? This dichotomy will be at the heart of the coach-teacher's role in determining teaching methodology.

### Manifestation Process

Learning as a manifestation process means that the learner will learn through experience and repeated exposure to a selected and somewhat manipulated environment. Improvement and development is a “manifestation” of the learner's reactions to the stimuli and the resulting decision making process engendered by those stimuli. The prominent methodological approach to learning as a manifestation process is “guided discovery.” A focal tenet of guided discovery is for the teacher to pose questions-

“How can you do this?” –

“Can you do it this way?”

“How many ways can you do this?”

The learner “discovers” the solutions through experimentation and reinforcement occurs with successful trials. “How can you kick the ball farther?” – “How can you dribble faster?” – “How can you get behind the defender?” - are typical situations for players to explore. This is the ultimate expression of the concept that “The Game is the Teacher”. Undoubtedly playing the game itself will help players develop as they are exposed to hundreds and thousands of learning environments where the player must make split second choices within the flow of the game. Much of the time, this is the preferred mode of learning. Soccer is a game of non stop action and practice should replicate the demands the game puts on a player’s concentration and focus. The issue of “flow” is very much a factor in the use of the “Manifestation Process” in that the practice never stops and, consequently, mistakes are ignored as the value of player engagement in the practice is highly valued.

### Acquisition Process

Learning as an acquisition process means that the learner “acquires” knowledge from the teacher. While guided discovery is very much player oriented, learning as an acquisition process is coach centered. The coach-teacher will prepare a learning environment, set goals, describe options, and will frequently say “do it this way”. The coach-teacher will stop the activity to make corrections, review options, and demonstrate solutions. This is the more common approach seen in use today by the coach-teacher. The coach-teacher designs the training session based on the concept of “distributive practice”. The session is distributed among three or possibly four elements that the coach-teacher considers the most important to the team’s function at that time, e.g, first defender pressure, playing from back third to middle third in attack, and finishing. The session will usually conclude with a game- from 7v7 to 11v11. Coach-teachers will “imprint” their vision of how the team will play in attack and defense. In preparation for a training session the coach-teacher will decide what specific coaching methodologies to employ that will best help players solve soccer playing problems. Improving technical play demands functional training methodology; improving attacking play from middle third to final third demands phase of play methodology. A critical role for the coach is to improve individual, group, and team function. This requires that the coach pose this question after every game, training session, or exercise within a session- “Is my coaching having an effect on the players? As a result of what we

do in training does the team play better, do groups play better, do individual players play better?” As mentioned previously, the more that training precisely replicates what the players will experience in the real game, the more transfer will occur from training to the game. The ultimate test of the coach’s effectiveness is if what is done in training is evidenced in the next game.

### The NSCAA trained Coach

We believe that a sophisticated coach will blend the use of “flow” and game rhythm to teach players with careful and measured use of what the NSCAA calls “teachable moments”. We believe that, at times, players need immediate and specific guidance from the coach and that the experienced coach will know when to allow “flow” to take its course and when an action must be corrected or reinforced immediately. The NSCAA believes that there are many situations that are simply too complicated for the player to solve without outside guidance and to continue to allow players to be frustrated by incorrect decision making is bad coaching

The sophisticated coach, then, uses a blend of both of these coaching styles. Both styles require progressive teaching methodology. Progression requires the selection of appropriate teaching methodologies and pedagogical styles. Feedback must, frequently, be immediate, specific, and positive. On the other hand the coach, often times, must decide to ignore mistakes and allow the fluid nature of the game to be the teacher. It is the philosophy of the NSCAA that there is no one way of improving players but that coaches must be equipped to deal with players in a variety of ways and the “Craft of Coaching” is to determine which way is appropriate at that time. This is, in and of itself, an important coaching skill and one well understood by the highly sophisticated coach. Players should not be stopped every time they make a mistake...on the other hand there are situations which demand interjection and teaching – how to play out of the back versus three attackers rather than two, the importance of bent runs, the need to keep space open to sprint into at the last moment etc.

### Final Summary

A final role of the coach is to understand responsibilities. The first responsibility

of the coach is the welfare of the players. Coaches do not coach soccer, they coach people. Soccer is the vehicle through which coaches coach people. The coach has a physical responsibility to the players; that the field and weather conditions are safe for playing; that player's equipment, especially studded shoes, are safe and fit correctly. The coach has a psychological responsibility; that all players, from the star to the sub, are treated with equal respect and education; that injured players are respected and cared for; that players are never punished for mistakes or losing. The coach has a soccer responsibility that all players receive equal and the best coaching that the coach can give; that winning and losing are treated for the impostors they are.

The coach also has a responsibility to the game. The game must be held to the highest standards and in the greatest esteem. The coach and players must respect the laws and spirit of the game. Tactical fouling, diving to deceive the referee for a penalty kick, referee abuse- are examples of playing behaviors detrimental to the ethics and spirit of the game. The coach and players must hold their ethical behavior to the highest standards- win, lose, or draw.

In summary, the role of the coach is an ongoing, educative process that demands the coach understands the nature and essence of the game, to know how players learn and so develops a philosophy and methodology for teaching, and most importantly, responsibilities to players and the game.