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SPECIAL REPORT

HOW TO EVALUATE A SOCCER COACH



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The characteristics and ability of the coach plays a major role in determining the quality of your child's soccer experience. Coaches who are organized create effective learning environments, coaches who are familiar with methods for teaching the game promote learning, and coaches who are supportive build confidence and self esteem. While this is hardly new information, if you are not yourself an experienced coach it may be difficult to determine until after the fact how well the coach did. What this report provides are ways to objectively assess the coach from the beginning. This will help you make a better decision when you have a choice of coaches and it will help you provide specific feedback to a coach when your expectations are not being met.

Background Checks

Regrettably we live in a world where prudent parents find themselves wondering if the person who is going to be spending time with their child is safe. This question is hardly unique and today most organized soccer programs require all adult participants whether paid or voluntary to undergo a criminal background check. Often this check is repeated on an annual basis. This is an important question to ask when you register your child with a soccer league or association.

Licensing

There are three major organizations in the United States which offer formal training for coaches. They are the USYSA (United States Youth Soccer Association) which is the youth division of the USSF (United States Soccer Federation), NSCAA (National Soccer Coaches Association of America) which is a professional organization for coaches and an affiliate of the USSF, and the AYSO (American Youth Soccer Organization) which is an affiliate of the USSF. All three organizations are part of USSF (United States Soccer Federation) which is the governing body for all soccer in the United States. USYSA is the youth division of USSF and both NSCAA and AYSO are affiliate organizations. Although the certification terminology for the programs differs, the goal of all three organizations is to provide



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recognized training for soccer coaches in order to improve the quality of the game and promote the sport.

As a parent you should be aware of the licensing or certification level of your child's coach. Like any other certification or diploma program, successful completion does not mean the coach is a competent coach or a good fit for your child, it means only that the coach has demonstrated a minimum level of mastery of the course curriculum. The league that your child will play in or the association to which the league belongs may have established certification requirements for coaches. If this is the case, then you will not need to ask the coach directly.

Appendix I outlines the different programs.

Organization

A coach should be prepared for both the season as a whole and for each practice session and game. Expect the coach to arrive for a practice in advance of the players and to have organized the training space and equipment. The practice session should proceed in segments that have a clear beginning and end. Typically a coach will explain the purpose and schedule of the practice to the players at the beginning of the session. Well run session start with warm up exercises or games and stretching, when age appropriate, so that the players are physically prepared.

The coach should have a defined plan for the development of the individual players and for the team which are clearly communicated. Goals can be evaluated using the acronym SMART which stands for Specific Measurable Achievable Relevant and Timely. Specific means that the goal is not a general motherhood and apple pie statement, but is both focused and clear. A goal to be the best is not specific. A goal to win 50-50 balls is. Measurable means that there is some objective way to determine if the goal has been met. In the previous example, winning three out of four 50-50 balls would be measurable. Achievable means that there is a realistic possibility that the goal can be achieved. Relevant means that the goal is a good fit to the players or teams objectives. Timely means that the goal matches current circumstances. Planning to win a league championship with a team of novice players when the team is struggling to score goals is not very achievable, relevant, or timely. Setting a short term goal to score twice in a game is more achievable, relevant, and timely.



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Training Sessions

Soccer, unlike Football and Baseball, does not rely primarily on set plays or situational responses. Each snap in a football game starts from a preset position and attempts to run a play that has defined roles for each player and has been rehearsed many times. Baseball is very situational. The field adjusts to a batter based upon whether he is right or left handed and based upon his previous history. Other adjustments are made to the location of field players, all of whom have a predetermined position and zone of responsibility, based upon the number of outs, position of any running players, etc.

Soccer is a very dynamic game. There are no time outs, innings, or changes in possession that allow a team time to adjust and regroup. Play is continuous and player changes limited to times when the ball is being returned to play. Training session for soccer players need to reflect the realities of the game. In fact, a central principle of coaching is to 'let the game teach'. What this means is that practice session should mirror real game conditions. If you see players lining up to go thru repetitive actions where the positions of other players and relationship to the goal or the ball are static, then you are not seeing dynamic training. What you should see are lots of small sided games. Watch for 3 v 3 and 4 v 4 play which increase the pace of play and more actively involve the players. Frequent use of large sided games, 7 v 7 and 11 v 11 is not appropriate. If you see players standing in lines or waiting more that a few moments for a turn, this is a caution sign that the coach is not running a highly effective practice.

The generally accepted model for soccer rests on the four pillars of the game. These are physical, psychological, technical, and tactical. Physical elements are about conditioning and strength. Psychological elements involve working in a team environment, managing adversity, developing good work habits, etc. Technical skills cover the basic ball handling abilities of the player such as dribbling, heading, passing, and shooting. Tactical elements include the use of space and time, positioning, adjusting to the situation in the game and so on.

Training sessions should be appropriate for the age of the players. Their need to work on each pillar of the game changes as they mature both in physical age and as players. It takes hundreds of touches on a ball to



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become proficient at the basic skills of controlling, dribbling, receiving, and passing a ball. Muscle learning is most readily acquired by players less than 12 years of age. Practices for younger players should focus on technical skills and involve lots of touches on the ball. By the time players are over sixteen, their skills should be well developed and practices will focus more on the tactical aspects of the game. Physical conditioning is not a good use of practice time with players under 12, but becomes very important after players have passed through puberty.

Direction

Listen for how the coach gives directions. What you hear should be clear and appropriate for the age of the players. For example, "Billy, try harder", is not specific. It is the type of instruction that tends to create either guilt, 'Guess I really am lazy', or resentment, 'I am trying hard, why doesn't the coach realize that? He never appreciates anything that I do'. Better sounds like, 'Billy, when you run after the ball, run as fast as you can' or 'When the ball is loose on the field, I want you to be the first player to touch it'.

One of the basic principles in soccer training is to let the game teach. What this means is that a coach will focus on creating exercises and games that mirror the full game and allow the learning to occur as a result of the situations that develop in the training session. A balance point the each coach must find is between allowing the session to continue while players correct on their own versus pausing the session to make a specific coaching points. The location of this balance point will vary by age and from team to team. Too many interruptions result in boredom and too few slow the learning processes. If you are watching a training session pay attention to how the players are respond when the coach pauses the practice to make a point. If they consistently appear bored or inattentive, then the interruptions are too frequent.



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Appendix I

USYSA (United States Youth Soccer Association)		
<i>Certification</i>	<i>Target Player</i>	<i>Course Length</i>
State Youth	U6/U8 or U8/U10	4-8 hrs
State E	11 a side game	15-20 hrs
State D	U12 – U14	30-40 hrs
National C	All	7 days
National B	All	7 days
National A	All	7 days
National Youth	U6 – U12	4 days

AYSO (American Youth Soccer Organization)		
<i>Certification</i>	<i>Target Player</i>	<i>Course Length</i>
U6	U6	2 hrs
U8	U8	2 hrs
U10	U10	3 hrs
U12	U12	5 hrs
Intermediate	All	15 hrs
Advanced	All	18 hrs
National	All	56 hrs

NSCAA (National Soccer Coaches Association of America)		
<i>Certification</i>	<i>Target Player</i>	<i>Course Length</i>
Parent Coach	5 - 8	2.5 hrs
State	5 - 10	5 hrs
Regional	11 - 18	13 hrs
Advanced Regional	11 - 18	21 hrs
National Youth	5 - 12	21 hrs
National Diploma	High School and above	50 hrs
Advanced National Diploma	Advanced Player	50 hrs
Premier	Advanced Player	50 hrs