

Managing Mistakes to the player's advantage

John Allpress - The Football Association, England | Tuesday, July 17, 2007

Introduction

This article is based on my experience in developing coaches for professional football clubs in England. The lessons from this may have much to offer coaches in other countries. This article focuses specifically on learning from mistakes in football.

Learning in football

Learning new things can be like riding a roller coaster for the learner – some days things seem easy, other days almost impossible – things can vary depending on what you're doing, how you're feeling, whether you're growing and lots of other things too.

Learning new things can be the best experience or the most scary thing you've ever done because if you're truly learning you don't really know what to do – so learners can be fragile or strong and this can easily change. There are so many factors involved that are also constantly changing, developing and evolving – but there is one constant – the learner. The ultimate responsibility for learning sits squarely with the player and not the coach.

Coaches are not there primarily to show or tell players what **they** know; they are there to create environments for learning that are varied and challenge the players, but also give them enjoyment, and a degree of security and support. Coaches should also give players choice and ownership allowing them to practice and experiment with the new techniques, skills or tactical ideas they present in their training activities.

Practicing, Experimenting and Competing

We learn football through three different modes –

- practising,
- experimenting
- competing

these modes require different mind sets.

While there is no substitute for **practicing** to get better at things, **experimenting** and **competing** also have a major role in the process. As coaches' our understanding of where these different modes of play sit within learning is vital if the players are to be supported effectively. Research has shown that it takes around 10000 hours of practice and experimenting to get really good at something complicated like football skills or playing the violin. Interestingly the very best players spend a larger percentage of their 10,000 hours working away from their coaches on their own or with their friends in informal activity.

In football when **practicing** passing, receiving, shooting or dribbling the aim should be precision, efficiency and reliability and such repetition leads to smooth, effortless, automated expertise.

But simply practicing can also make players rigid and predictable. So after practicing for a bit, players need to try something different. They need to mess around with the

techniques, skills and tactics and see what happens. A simple example may be to try out new techniques and skills with the weaker foot or see what happens when you cross the ball into the penalty area earlier or later than the coach has suggested. Players need to experiment with the new skills and concepts they have practiced. Practice gives players the foundation for experimenting.

Experimenting develops flexibility and the ability to be unpredictable; the perception to see the tiny differences in an opponent's body position or a team mate's movement that cannot be seen by the coach from the side – lines. Experimenting helps develop creativity, innovation and inventiveness – hallmarks of the best and most effective footballers.

But experimentation can lead to things sometimes going wrong and mistakes being made. When young players compete in matches they are not the finished article. They should always strive to win but never be afraid to push the barriers and experiment even during matches. In order for this to happen the coaches need to be mentally strong and to understand their temporary place in the evolution of the developing player – in other words the coaches should endeavor to put the learning needs of the players first and model learning and all the behavior that goes with it. Send out a message that you don't like experimenting and the players will stop doing it and their learning will probably be hindered as a result.

Guy Claxton [Professor of Learning sciences at Bristol University] says 'Learning is what we do when we don't know what to do,' and if we don't know what to do sometimes we'll get it wrong and mistakes will happen – the big question is how can players and coaches use this to their advantage?

Firstly players need to know whether they are expected to practice or experiment. Practicing is aimed at precision, efficiency and reliability. Experimenting at pushing the limits of our practice so that we can see what may happen if we try it this way or that. If coach and players get their wires crossed and one thinks it practice and the other experimenting chaos and breakdown in communication will occur.

Secondly coaches need to clarify the learning objectives for the players - i.e. what is this activity or drill all about?

Understanding how players learn is central to the whole process – some learning is almost instantaneous but some takes time to mature and become fluid and natural. Players that take more time to learn are not bad learners; they may simply need more time – fast learning is not necessarily the best learning.

After setting up a new learning activity the coaches first task should be to conduct a needs analysis – **who really needs my help?** Or am I just being self indulgent and showing the players what I know?

Listening to the players is a vital skill and one that coaches need to develop; also asking the right questions in the right way and at the right time. Instructions should be clear and precise and directed at those players who need them. Players who do not need help should be given the time and opportunity to practice or experiment without interruption.

How do mistakes help learning?

We might not like our players making mistakes but they do happen even when the players are experienced and know a lot about what they are doing. The fact that we talk about learning through trial and error suggests that the error part is not going to be eradicated, unless at the expense of practice, experimentation and learning.

There is also our recognition that in order to win games of football there is often the need to take risks and try out the new things from the training field. This may mean attempting more difficult techniques, applying new skills or experimenting with new strategies or tactics i.e. **taking the training into the game.**

If as coaches we encourage our players to take the actions that are required to learn new things we have to recognise that there will be errors. The question is how do we as coaches respond to our players making such errors?

High-lighting mistakes

Learning new things is a high risk business for the players. It means daring not to know and it may mean facing up to the fact that you may not yet be as competent as others within your group or team.

Therefore the player must see the relevance of the new technique, skill or tactic otherwise they may perceive the risk of daring not to know as too great and not bother to try - just staying within the boundaries of what they can already do instead. So motive to learn is high on the agenda.

During this transitional state players could be fragile and only highlighting their mistakes may not be the best way to encourage them to practice and experiment with new things.

Players need to be given the license by the coach to experiment and try out the new and exciting things thus pushing out the boundaries of what they currently know or can do – moving on into the unknown. Highlighting mistakes may send out the message that not being able to do something is a personal flaw so players may not want to risk being seen as incompetent or inadequate within their group and again not try.

If coaches create the right learning challenge for their players sometimes the most constructive response to mistakes could well be a sort of ‘skill-full neglect’. In other words leave the players alone as much as possible to work out as much for them-selves as they can.

The coach needs to recognise and acknowledge how players may be feeling when faced with new or difficult tasks e.g. ‘We’re now going to work with our weaker foot. **I understand that things may go wrong and sometimes passes may not be as good as you would like** but that’s OK. Just try to steadily improve that weaker side.’

Become your own ‘coach inside your head’.

It is possible to reflect on mistakes later when the emotion of the moment and the match has drained away. Some players will find developing this questioning process useful:

- Where did the mistake occur?
- When did it occur?
- What did you do?
- How did you feel about what happened at the time?
- Why was it a mistake?
- What did you learn?
- How will you improve?

Coaches can help players develop this process.

Possible problems with mistakes

The biggest limitation of mistakes is that fear of making them may well hinder our development and evolution as learners and players. That is why it is important to reassess the role of mistakes in player development, recognise that they are merely staging posts on the learning pathway and can never be completely avoided. They can be costly in competitive matches but if we are talking about player development which is a long term process. The short term reversal versus the long term gain should be a price worth paying