

Motivating the pre-pubescent football player

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This article aims to review a number of reasons why football programmes for pre-pubescent (7-11 year olds) players, should have a high motivational content. Additionally, information focusing specially on factors that motivate young players will be presented. The last section of this article will discuss how coaches can maintain and enhance motivation by providing timely and constructive feedback on the performance of their players.

Often referred to as the 'skill hungry years' and the period between the age of 7 - 11, is arguably the most important stage in forming the robust foundation for future footballing development and involvement. Therefore the need to ensure young players are motivated during this key stage is paramount.

The performance of an individual player is determined by a combination of both their ability and motivation. Hence creating an appropriate balance between the type of training environment and the designing of programmes, which provide the means for players to learn, and proactively encourages learning is crucial. Furthermore, by understanding what underlies performance and motivation of young players, practices can be flexed appropriately to satisfy their training needs.

MOTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION.

1) Enjoyment - As a sporting activity, football is not unique, in the primary motive for young player participation is to have fun. Therefore from the perspective of the child, activities should be enjoyable. By encouraging feedback from the players and giving them choices on the different practices it is possible to gauge what type they enjoy.

Another way of establishing what types of practices young players enjoy is to observe them when they are playing informal games. Notably, pre pubescent players often organize games with the majority of activity taking place in and around the goal area. Therefore by being creative and devising practices which incorporate the use of the goal and the surrounding area, you can effectively enhance the levels of motivation for the age group.

Finally young players enjoy displaying new skills to others i.e. peers, coach and parents, providing them with the opportunity to do this can also be motivational. However, to avoid this being counter productive it is important to ensure that before asking (not telling) a player to perform a given task he/she is competent and willing to demonstrate the skill.

2) Excitement - closely linked to the need for enjoyment young players seek to gain excitement from their football experience. Failure to meet this requirement can result in a loss of interest and concentration and may also lead to players misbehaving during

training sessions. Consequently, effort should be made to keep everyone actively involved; having young players standing in long queues should be discouraged.

From experience it is noticeable that during training sessions young players mostly look forward to playing small-sided games. Hence, conditioned games should be incorporated into training programmes as they have the added advantage of allowing for specific skills to be developed. For example passing, control and support play can be improved by instructing the players that each member of their team has to touch the ball before they can score. Limiting the duration of these games to 3 - 5 minutes will help to keep the scores close creating a sense of excitement and purpose, with every pass, move and shot being important (Lauder 2001).

Varied and stimulating practices should be implemented. The occasional transfer of the training session to a fresh environment should also be considered. By periodically introducing different training equipment such as, skill balls, dummy wall, speed ladder. You can effectively provoke curiosity and enhance excitement.

PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

The remainder of this article will focus on strategies for coaches to consider when providing feedback to their players. In the main young players are not good at judging their own ability so they rely on other people (i.e. parents, spectators team mates etc) to tell them they are performing. The feedback received via the coach is according to Lee (1993) highly regarded and the significance it has on motivation and creating a positive supporting environment should not be underestimated.

Particularly when coaching young players performance, feedback should either be used to reward a player or to help improve his or her ability (Martens, 1987), and not as it often witnessed to punish or put down a player.

In addition to the outcome, effort should be praised and positively reinforced by feedback. Coaches should always aim to observe players when they have performed well or tried hard and immediately give them specific positive feedback. For example following a good shot at goal a coach may say "excellent! I like the way you shot that with your laces". This type of feedback should alleviate any ambiguity the child may have as to why he/she is being praised, therefore increasing the likelihood being replicated.

To avoid the occurrence of the player feeling patronised and the perception of limited coaching knowledge, it is essential that the feedback you give is honest and sincere.

By continually praising a player who has not performed a skill correctly may result in that player making bad habits becoming permanent. Therefore mistakes should be openly identified and corrected. The sandwich approach to feedback provides an effective mechanism for correcting mistake in a positive, supportive manner. An example might be, "great turn well done (start with a positive remark), you just need to accelerate away from the defender next time (followed by corrective feedback), I like the way you looked at where the defender was before you turned" (end with a positive remark).

Therefore, if we are keen to keep young players participating and enjoying football it is crucial that coaches continue to provide timely, constructive feedback and motivational coaching programmes.