

Ten Reasons to Not Coach the Player in Possession

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“To not do something for someone who can and should do it for themselves is an act of love.”

John Wooden

Among the many negative side effects from overbearing coaches is the arrested development of player creativity. Yet it is not just the stereotypical loudmouth who inhibits creativity by attempting to orchestrate play. Nearly all youth coaches (present company included) are guilty in some way of making decisions for our players that they can and should make for themselves. Coaches who dictate play by directing the player in possession ensure that players never get to think for themselves and therefore never develop the skill so unique and elemental to our sport; decision making.

The problem is exacerbated by soccer’s juxtaposition to other American sports. Volunteer coaches with backgrounds in basketball and American football are conditioned to coach in that style. They attempt to control the flow of play despite the absence of time-outs or their players’ ability to slow the game down to await instructions. Their inevitable frustration spills out and piles misery on a game that is supposed to be fun. Perhaps more troubling, however, are the *professional* youth coaches stalking the sideline and demonstratively “coaching” in the style of football or basketball in an attempt to impress the unenlightened parents who pay their salaries.

We do a tremendous disservice to our players if we don’t allow them to make the most critical decisions in the game...the decisions made when in possession. The fluid nature of our game ensures that attempts to choreograph sequences of play are usually futile and frustrating for player and coach. There are, however, useful things a coach can do in the run of play. I have therefore listed below ten reasons to avoid coaching the player in possession and offered some suggestions of things we can do instead.

1. **Young players can’t multi-task:**

Most young children are cognitively incapable of processing external instructions and acting on them while performing a complex physical task. Players in Piaget’s “*Pre-Operational*” and early “*Concrete Operational*”^{*} stages of cognitive development have very limited ability to tend to more than one task at a time and little or no capacity for complex tactical decision making. Typically, players under the age of ten have no chance of simultaneously performing complex motor skills, reacting to the demands of the game, processing your instructions and acting on them. You are wasting your breath.

2. **They won’t talk to each other if you do all the talking:**

It is axiomatic of team discipline that players should not talk when the coach is talking. Yet we often hear coaches narrate a game and wonder aloud (often at full volume) why the players are not communicating with each other. If you overwhelm the game with narration, your players have no chance of communicating with each other.

3. The moment is gone:

The game moves so quickly that the sequence you are trying to orchestrate evaporates before the players can process what you have said. So don't bother. And...you make matters worse if you try to "teach" while the game is happening. If there is a teaching point to be made, make it to the players on the bench. The players in the game have already moved on.

4. You rob them of a chance to make a decision. They don't discover solutions and are therefore less likely to remember them:

Every possession is an opportunity to experiment and learn...but not if the coach dictates play. When players achieve success in a sequence of play through their own cleverness, they are far more likely to remember why it worked. This opportunity for "Guided Discovery" is lost if you provide all the answers. Good decisions come from experience...experience comes from bad decisions. You have to hold your tongue in the run of play and then help them learn from their successes and failures by addressing those decisions during your half-time talk or at some future training session.

5. You miss a chance to analyze the game:

Leave the screaming to the fans. You need to watch and analyze the game. What formation is the opposition playing? Who are their dangerous players? How can you adjust to deal with their strengths and take advantage of their weaknesses? How can you maximize your strengths and hide your weaknesses? These decisions can't be made if you follow the ball and try to orchestrate play.

6. You miss the chance to coach those you can and should influence:

Players away from the ball can be influenced positively in the run of play. Is your team in a good shape? Are your blocks connected? Is your defense getting out on time? Are your flank players wide when you get possession? Are your forwards recovering to a position where they can win a cleared ball? Is your goalkeeper coming off her line when the ball is in the opponent's half? The players away from the ball can be urged to adjust their position to form a better team shape. This can be done quickly and efficiently without interrupting the flow of play or putting the player in possession under additional pressure.

7. You make the player in possession nervous:

The game is hard enough: screaming parents, teammates calling for the ball (often at the wrong times) opponents bearing down, a patch of clumpy grass thwarting every attempt at skill. The last thing a young player needs is another external distraction. Screaming at the player in possession just adds pressure and inhibits creativity. The most vociferous screaming is usually reserved for the most critical moment of the game; a "Moment of Tension" when everyone is on edge because something dangerous is about to happen and the player in possession must call on her best skills and play freely and creatively to be successful. This is when we usually destroy their creativity by sharing our anxiety at full volume. We will never develop creative players this way and...in case no one noticed...we are not developing enough creative players in this county.

8. They can't hear you:

Your instructions to a player 40 yards away are probably just white noise. You are no longer coaching...you are just screaming.

9. You may be wrong:

Coaches can't see everything. A player may know that "KAREN IS OPEN!" but Karen may be in an offside position. Or maybe Karen isn't open because there is a defender (whom you can't see) blocking the passing lane. Or maybe the player on the ball simply had a bad touch and has no chance of getting the ball to Karen. Now your credibility is shot.

10. They can't be brilliant if you are pulling the strings – they can only be robots:

We need to foster creativity not squelch it. Dictating play is a glory grab. Give them a chance to shine and develop their own style.

Some Exceptions:

Of course we must speak to the player in possession from time to time. Here are some ideas of things we can say in practice or in games to improve decision making and model good communication without making the decisions for the players.

"Turn / Hold / Man On / Turn and Go" – As an example to the team of how and when to communicate. This is information that helps the player in possession make a decision.

"Pick your head up, have a look" - Helps them make a decision but doesn't decide for them.

"Can we get to goal?" – As a reminder of our top priority.

A Final Word:

In my experience, the coach who spends 90 minutes yelling has probably not done his or her job during the week. If you run productive and efficient practices, you are less likely to feel anxiety during the games. A relaxed (but focused) coach fosters relaxed (but focused) players and these players make better decisions. Taking coaching courses is the best way to learn how to run such practices.

There is a mighty force urging us to give our players all the answers. But the sooner we realize that they must come to some answers on their own, the better we will be as coaches and the better they will be as players. I recommend that we resist the temptation to dictate play and find other ways to help the team and the players develop.

**Jean Piaget was noted developmental theorist who defined the various stages of cognitive, psychosocial and psychomotor development in children.*

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