

# Coaching and Developing Young Players

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Coaching at youth level is an extremely rewarding experience, but it comes with the challenge of dealing with young athletes who are coming to terms with changes in their life. It can be a difficult and demanding period for the players as they juggle a number of areas. These crucial player development years require delicate management skills to look at improving the 'all round athlete'. I believe that when developing young players, we need to look at 'effective coaching' rather than basing our success on 'results coaching'. This means that we need to have a mentality of coaching young players for the future rather than just coaching for the present.

A successful youth coach needs to have the following characteristics:

- Organised
- Prepared
- Positive, enthusiastic and encouraging
- Empathy for the player (remember how tough the game really is)

## **Develop their kicking skills:**

The most important skill development area to focus on with young players is their kicking. The ages of 6-15 are the most important years for developing an effective kicking technique. It has been found that it takes about 10,000 hours of practise to become 'elite' at a skill execution, so it is very important that youth coaches expose players to lots of skill practise. This can be in a variety of forms, but most importantly, we need to teach players to consistently kick and be able to adjust to different scenarios within a football match.



Decision making is vital and I would encourage coaches to place players in situations which require them to react quickly and effectively so that improvement translates into match conditions (game sense training). The majority of young players today will practise very little kicking outside a scheduled training session, so it is very important to construct training with this core skill in mind.

Coaches need to look at the ratio of footballs to players to ensure that participation is at its maximum. Cricket players bring their bat to each training session, yet a number of young footballers don't even own a football. Encourage players to invest in a football and get them to bring it along to training so that maximum participation can be obtained. When all players are active there will be a greater learning effect and there will also be less chance for disruptive behaviour within the group.

## **Game Sense and Decision Making:**

Game sense training, incorporating kicking and all of the skills required for AFL football, is very important for developing the young player. When we are towards the end of our playing careers our bodies can often let us down in terms of keeping up with the pace of the game and standard, however at this later stage of our development we often have the skills to be able to read the play and play 'smart football', through drawing on our past experiences.

Game sense training will allow coaches to bring athletes along more quickly in the areas of anticipation and match play of AFL football. This type of training does not have to involve physical contesting (thus reducing the chance injury or risking further injury), but players will soon learn through their own experience (Implicit Learning) where they should run and what they need to do both defensively and in attack.

## **Player Evaluation – Skill Set to Play**

A youth coach needs to be able to quickly evaluate a young player's set of skills and address any technical flaws in their game. It is also vital for young players to be given the opportunity to continue to work on their strengths, because those are the traits that made them a good player in the first place - encourage your players to become elite in these areas. Use AFL players as role models for young athletes in terms of strengths and areas to improve. It will help them to have an example to associate with, and also serve as a guide for future reference.

## **Communication and Feedback:**

An important characteristic of a good coach is the ability to communicate well to ensure that players understand what is required of them. Young athletes respond best to positive messages and body language, and it is important to give them feedback that gives them confidence to go forward with their football.



This generation of player wants constructive feedback on how they can improve so it is important that the coach is honest with the information provided to the player. At meetings ask the players questions. This will have the benefit of encouraging discussion within the group and you will also gain an

understanding of what a player already knows (i.e. related to their own performance or what they would do if they were in the same situation in a match). Over time, this questioning technique will also ensure that players remain attentive during meetings, as they know that they may be asked a question at any time. It is also important to consider the way that you present your feedback to players as they all have different learning styles. To ensure that your message is getting through, it is a good idea to use follow up questions with the players.

A great activity after a match is to get players to rate their own game. From my experience, players are mostly accurate in their observations and it gives you a great starting point to work with in evaluating their game. It is very important that they take ownership of the performance and how they can go on to improve from here.

Feedback can be given in a number of different ways. I have found that the use of video is a great resource for discussing scenarios, so if possible try to utilise this tool in your coaching. Ensure that you give your players confidence to go forward and if behavioural change is required, that you have a remedy for the behaviour.

## **Success – what does it look like for each player?**

I believe that it is important for young players to have a feeling of success when looking back on the season program. They need to feel that they have improved and benefited from the work that they have put in and that they have taken steps towards becoming a better player. It can be difficult to find success in a game with 1 ball and 36 players on the field, so we need to look closely at each individual player and what influence they have brought to the team.

A positive coach is one who makes each player feel important and successful. As a coach, I get great excitement out of seeing young players develop and improve. Careful management and planning will help result in an effective season for both player and coach.