

A Coach's Next Step on the Journey Towards Self-Awareness:

An Observation of Coaching Behavior

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### Abstract

Sport coaches are incredibly influential on young people in today's society though, unfortunately, coaching education is not widespread leaving many coaches unable to self-evaluate their behavior and unaware of its potential impacts. Given such influence, this study observed a volunteer coach's interaction with his U8, coed, developmental soccer team located in Northern California to identify coaching behaviors that positively or negatively impacted his players. A qualitative analysis of the practice location was undertaken and behaviors identified from a practice session recording were quantitatively categorized using the Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS) to allow analysis of trends in the coach's behavior. Results noted the negative overall tone at practice due to responses to mistakes behaviors being approximately twice as common as more positive reinforcement or general encouragement behaviors. However, the negative tone notwithstanding, the team appeared to remain in high spirits during and immediately after the practice session. Possible reasons for this paradox are explored and implications for the coach are noted, including identifying ways to set a more positive overall tone during practice sessions and the potentially effective use of punitive behaviors in limited circumstances.

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Examples of coach misbehavior are, unfortunately, all too common in today's society. From those who treat young children as though they are the next Bill Belichick (see the television show "Friday Night Tykes"), to brawls and referee attacks, to failures of moral leadership (see Bobby Petrino, Rick Pitino, and many more), the indiscretions of coaches make headlines because of the role that society has given them. Coaches are often a person's most influential role model and "function as surrogate parents" (Boxill, 2013). With such an important role to play in the development of young people, one would think that coaches are educated on their responsibilities and in ways to appropriately interact with their athletes. But most aren't. Overwhelmingly, the first coaches that a child will come in contact with are unpaid volunteers in local programs and, while those volunteers are vital to the continuance of such programs, they are also rarely required to attain any sort of coaching education. This leaves many coaches unable to self-evaluate their behavior and unaware of its potential impacts and it leaves children in the hands of fate – some will likely have excellent experiences with good coaches while some will likely have terrible experiences with those next Bill Belichick (or Pep Guardiola/Pat Riley/take your pick) types.

Therefore, if formal coaching education is not required, hopefully coaches care enough to personally learn how their behaviors affect their young athletes and how they can provide a better experience for them. The subject of coaching behavior is not new; many studies have attempted to quantify how the behavior of coaches affect athletes in hopes of coming up with the ideal way to interact with them. But, of course, athletes and coaches are all people – everybody is different and responds to stimuli differently. One model used to study coaching behavior is

the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS) developed by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980). This method categorizes 40 different behaviors in five factors: Training and Instruction, Democratic Behavior, Autocratic Behavior, Social Support, and Positive Feedback. A strength of this model is that it is well rounded; besides simple task execution (Training and Instruction), it takes decision-making style into account (Democratic and Autocratic Behavior) as well as measuring the important coach/athlete relationship that takes place off the field (Social Support). These areas are important – in terms of leadership style, as athletes get older, they may want a higher degree of autonomy in deciding how they are trained; and socially, they may also look to their coach for mentorship in avenues other than sport. A weakness of this model is that it is based on athlete feedback; this makes it unusable below a certain age – such feedback from young children is difficult due to advanced language in the questions that the children might not understand, hindering their ability to properly rate the coach.

Another model used to study coaching behavior is the Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS) developed by Smoll and Smith (2002). The CBAS looks at the occurrences of 12 behaviors that fall into two classes, Reactive and Spontaneous. A positive of this model is that the behaviors being observed are predefined, therefore anybody knowing the behavior's definitions can analyze a coach with a fair degree of accuracy. This method is also not reliant on athlete feedback – this suits the task of observing the behavior of those coaching young children, such as in this study. A negative of this model is that it does not evaluate athlete-coach interactions outside of practices/games. As previously noted, coaches are very influential outside the immediate arena of sports as well; their actions off the field can be just as important as their actions on the field.

Given the impact that coaches can have on youth's decisions on whether or not to continue participating in a sport, the purpose of this study was to identify how an observed coach interacts with his team and attempt to identify ways in which coaches can modify their behavior in order to more positively influence the young athletes on their teams.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The coach of the team is Caucasian, in his mid-30's, with four children (one of whom is on the observed team) and works as an officer in the United States Air Force. He has coached youth, developmental soccer teams in the U6-U12 age groups during ten different seasons over the last six years. He is a volunteer who began coaching in 2012 when his oldest child expressed an interest in playing youth soccer. He had no prior coaching experience although he was quite familiar with soccer, having played during his youth and continued with participation in pickup games and recreational leagues in adulthood. While he has expressed interest in furthering his coaching education, and he holds a U.S.A. Soccer coaching F License, his many commitments keep him busy to the point where he is not able to devote much time to such practice.

The team consists of nine boys and one girl in the U8 age group (comprising six and seven year olds) and is part of a traditional "pay for play" youth league that services many communities in and around the small towns of Yuba City and Marysville, in Northern California. This league has two tiers, a local, developmental tier and a traveling, competitive tier – this team is part of the developmental tier. The league covers an area that is home to a wide range of socio-economic areas, from poverty stricken areas to upper class neighborhoods. This team is from the Olivehurst/Linda area which is generally a lower to lower-middle class area with the

exception of the Edgewater neighborhood, which is middle class and mainly populated by military members and contractors who work at nearby Beale Air Force Base.

However, the Air Force base is an afterthought to most in this area as the vast majority of the base population that does not reside on-base lives to the south, in the more suburban communities of Lincoln, Rocklin, and Roseville. Like many parts of California's Central Valley, agriculture is the main industry here and families of migrant workers are very common. The Olivehurst/ Linda area is almost evenly populated by Hispanics and Caucasians with the Caucasian population mostly living in the Edgewater neighborhood and the Hispanic population mostly living elsewhere. The 10-person team reflects the community makeup – five players are Caucasian (all of whom live in the Edgewater neighborhood) and five are Hispanic (all of whom live in other Olivehurst/Linda neighborhoods)

## **Procedures**

Observation of the coach's behavioral interaction with his team was done during a singular, standard practice session at the team's usual practice location. The one-hour practice was recorded from a position that allowed the viewer to hear the coach's speech and to see his physical movements, as well as, seeing and hearing the team on the field during these interactions. This allowed a full spectrum view of the feedback chain between the coach and players throughout the practice session. While the presence of the recorder was noted by a couple of players, the recorder did not interact with the coach or players at any time during the session. Upon the completion of the practice session, the video was examined using the Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS) to categorize the coach's behavior.

The CBAS distinguishes among 12 categories of behavior that are split between two classes, Reactive and Spontaneous. Reactive behaviors are those that are in response to

athlete/team actions (Smoll and Smith, 2002). For example, one of the coach's players did a step-over to misdirect a defender and was verbally praised for using a move the team had been practicing. Or, one of the coach's players struck a pass with the wrong part of the foot causing the pass to go astray and was instructed on how to properly strike the ball for a pass.

Spontaneous behaviors are those that originate from the coach – behaviors without identifiable prior events prompting them (Smoll and Smith, 2002). Examples include when the coach gathered the team together to explain a drill or to describe the proper way to strike the ball for a shot on goal prior to scrimmaging. Each identified behavior from the video that correlated to one of the 12 CBAS categories was tabulated while any other behaviors were not; the results of this video analysis can be found in Table 1.

## **Results**

### **Qualitative Observations**

Upon first glance, POW/MIA Park appears to be the quintessential neighborhood park. It is situated next to a newer elementary school, in the newest development, in the only nice neighborhood of the Linda area of Marysville, California. It is clean and free of litter. Two large stretches of well-manicured, green grass are ringed by a smooth, virtually crack-free concrete pathway and large shade trees, perfect for providing a break from the still-hot Northern California sun. Many locals are out walking along the pathway or sitting under the trees while their children play at the nearby playground. But like many things in the Central Valley, even the glossiest exteriors often hide a degenerated, run-down interior.

There are two well-kept, if basic, concrete basketball courts in the southwest corner of the park, adjacent to the area where the coach sets up his practices. Like many days, the courts are in full swing with loud, swearing teens and young adults playing pickup games to the backdrop

of blaring gangster rap music. Obviously, this is sometimes a distraction to the players, especially those who have not had much, if any, exposure to profane language. At least on this day there is no marijuana aroma lingering in the air, a fairly common occurrence here as in most California public parks, even before the legalization push. A small, one-toilet restroom is also nearby, in the northwest corner of the park. While there is a clean, floral mural on the outside, it is the typical public park restroom – rarely clean enough to want to use for the males and *never* used by the player's mothers and sisters who are watching practice. More than once, a player has been pulled from practice early in order to ensure that a relative can make it to the nearest, decent restroom. Other areas of the park are not any more useful for soccer practice, in comparison. The north central portion of the park has two baseball backstops, while the south central portion hosts a small playground. The east field is open but, while it might offer some respite from the music's volume, it falls prey to the same turf issues as the west field.

Nowhere is the Valley's false veneer more glaringly obvious than with the grassy fields themselves. While green and plush at first viewing, a short walk down the small hill, where most of the relatives watch practice from, to the flats quickly becomes a slog in places. The field is so green, an outright oddity in this drought-stricken state (in contrast, the elementary school's field is completely brown, dry, and dead), because it is vastly overwatered. While there are days where it dries out enough to almost feel like a normal patch of grass, many days it is so soggy that any area that is played on for more than ten minutes soon turns into a sloppy puddle of mud. Today is a middling day, many areas around the edges of the coach's makeshift field are saturated and squishy but the majority of the interior is dry enough to play on.



## Quantitative Observations

Table 1: Coaching Behaviors

Behaviors	Number of Instances (211)
<b>Class I – Reactive Behaviors</b>	130
Responses to Desirable Performances	35
<i>Reinforcement</i>	32
<i>Non-reinforcement</i>	3
Responses to Mistakes	76
<i>Mistake-contingent Encouragement</i>	19
<i>Mistake-contingent Technical Instruction</i>	42
<i>Punishment</i>	2
<i>Punitive Technical Instruction</i>	11
<i>Ignoring Mistakes</i>	2
Response to Misbehavior	19
<i>Keeping Control</i>	19
<b>Class II – Spontaneous Behaviors</b>	81
Game Related	78
<i>General Technical Instruction</i>	10
<i>General Encouragement</i>	41
<i>Organization</i>	27
Game Irrelevant	3
<i>General Communication</i>	3

Quantitative observations are broken down by CBAS behavior and listed in Table 1.

Reinforcement behaviors were steadily apparent throughout practice as verbal praise was used consistently when players showed desired skills. However, responses to mistakes seemed more prevalent, which is evidenced by the table as they were approximately twice as likely to occur.

The majority of responses to mistake-contingent behaviors seemed to snap the focus of the players back to the task at hand for at least the immediate moments after each interaction;

however, there were some that had little to no effect. When the effect was lacking, the technical instruction was often repeated, and if still not effective, would usually devolve into the instances of punitive technical instruction or punishment. These occurrences seemed to finally rein the

players back in with no ill-effects except for one instance of punishment where a player was noticeably down on himself for a couple minutes after the interaction. Anecdotally, according to the coach, the number of instances of punishment and punitive technical instruction seemed average as did the number of responses to misbehavior; the coach stated that he did not feel like the practice was noticeably better or worse than other practices in these respects. Non-reinforcement and ignoring mistakes were minimal and these behaviors did not seem to have any effect on the players involved in those instances.

Like reinforcement behaviors, general encouragement behaviors seemed widespread throughout the practice and were the most common spontaneous behavior. Organization behaviors were the next most common with the time spent on these behaviors seeming high for a practice which consisted of only one drill/game and a scrimmage. These behaviors overwhelmingly consisted of reiterating the rules of the drill/game and getting players in their proper positions during stoppages in the scrimmage. General technical instruction was low; these instances were reiterating previously presented skills that would be needed for the drill/game and, prior to the scrimmage, reiterating skills that the coach noticed were lacking in the previous weekend's game. General communication was minimal and took place entirely outside of organized activities with two of the instances immediately before the initial drill/game and once to end practice.

### **Discussion**

Given the impact that coaches can have on youth's decisions on whether or not to continue participating in a sport, it is important for coaches to realize how they behave and to look for ways to modify their behavior so that they can positively influence young athletes. In this case, the results are an odd mix. When viewed as a whole, despite the consistent use of

reinforcement and encouragement behaviors, the coach's overall tone during the practice seemed to lean towards the negative side. There are two potential reasons for this. First, the disparity may be more noticeable because reinforcement and general encouragement comments were made more in passing – play often continued while these coaching behaviors were modeled. In contrast, behavior that was categorized as responses to mistakes was more likely to cause a stoppage of the drill/game/scrimmage in order to provide corrections to the players. Therefore, despite the total number of instances of responses to mistakes and reinforcement combined with general encouragement being very similar, individual instances of responses to mistakes took up more practice time when compared to reinforcement/general encouragement.

The second potential reason for the session's negative tone is the age group of the children. While instances of punitive technical instruction may have been noted regularly throughout practice, these behaviors were exclusively elicited as third or fourth tries at interacting with a player. As anybody with small children knows, they are often rambunctious and do not always respond to friendlier first requests to act in a specific way. There were times when a child would continually ignore the coach's keeping control and/or general and mistake-contingent technical instruction behaviors causing a change in the coach's tone which would result in punitive technical instruction and/or punishment behaviors.

The coach's choice of where to hold practice also seems like a possible contributing factor to the negative tone of the session as well. The loud environment, subpar facilities, and shoddy turf all posed their share of distractions throughout the session. However, further analysis of the local area shows that there are not many other options – POW/MIA Park is the only sizable public park in the Linda area. Local schools, for reasons ranging from vandalism to legal liabilities, rarely allow use of their facilities after school hours unless an activity is school-

sponsored. The next nearest area to practice is the soccer league's complex, 15 minutes away in Marysville proper. However, the traffic that must be navigated to arrive by the 5pm practice start time and the jockeying for practice times with other, more established, teams makes this an untenable option. It may not be the best environment for children to practice in, but it is an open, green field, which is nicer than what is usually available to many of the players outside of their time playing soccer.

But despite all of these factors, the players did not seem adversely affected. With the exception of the immediate aftermath of the aforementioned instance of punishment, review of the video shows that the children appeared happy throughout the practice, often laughing and smiling. They continually communicated with each other and with the coach in a relaxed, respectful manner and never bickered with each other or grumbled about the practice. At the end, everybody cheerfully took part in the breakdown, shouting the team's name with enthusiasm and chattering with excitement about the upcoming game. The positive atmosphere of the practice never seemed to wane.

This could be due to the coach's focus on work-ethic throughout practice. The preponderance of the reinforcement and encouragement behaviors focused on effort. Many of the technical instruction behaviors at this practice, including many of the punitive technical instruction behaviors, centered on effort – outworking the other team to a position, not giving up on plays, etc. One of the instances of punishment behavior, the instance that seemed to affect the child for a few minutes afterwards, was due to the player's lack of effort. The overall motivational climate seemed to trend towards effort versus winning. The player's willingness to take criticism as a motivator to try harder may explain part of why the overall negative tone did not seem to negatively affect the players on the team.

**Limitations**

This study is not without its limitations. The most obvious limitation is that the coach was only observed at one practice. The reasons this is a limitation are abundant; the coach's and player's moods on this particular day may not be emblematic of their normal dispositions, both parties may act differently in a game setting versus a practice setting, etc. For example, at this specific practice, organizational behaviors seemed high for a practice which only contained one drill/game and a scrimmage. In this case, the coach introduced a new drill/game at this practice, so it logically follows that it would require multiple instances of explanation to ensure the players were mindful of the new rules. Also, on this particular day, three players were late to practice. This necessitated the coach explaining the game to each of the late players individually as they arrived. This further skewed the number of organizational behaviors away from what a normal practice might contain. An accurate behavioral profile of the coach, as well as an accurate representation of the impact he has on his players, cannot be drawn from only one observation.

Another limitation of this study was that the data was neither categorized based on the number of behaviors directed at players of each gender nor was it analyzed for the magnitude of each behavior's effect on players of each gender. The type of behavior a coach decides to employ is always situationally based and may be affected based on the gender of the player the behavior is directed toward. Likewise, the effect of specific behaviors may be more pronounced on one gender than another. In this case, the sole girl on the team is also the coach's daughter; this introduces an additional bias into the equation, no matter how hard the coach may try to treat everybody equally. A coach's behavior may or may not be different to his/her child versus other children, may or may not be different because his/her child is a girl versus a boy, may or may not

be different because there is only one girl on the team versus many girls. The impact of each type of behavior may also be different for a single gender team versus a coed team and may be different between an all-boys team versus an all-girls team. These biases and differences should be taken into account when other coach's evaluate these results.

### **Implications**

The implication that struck the coach first was the need to ensure that the overall tone of practice sessions does not trend negative on a regular basis. Every team and every coach will likely have bad days but, as the observed coach stated, this was not a "bad" practice. That a seemingly normal practice had a negative overall tone likely means that the tone of this practice is more common than the coach would wish it to be. Finding ways to positively affect the tone should be undertaken. Instances of non-reinforcement were extremely small and Smoll and Smith (2002) note that too much general encouragement is just as damaging to children's attitudes as too little so the answer likely lies in the realm of responses to mistakes. For one, eliminating as many punitive behaviors as possible is a good start. From there, better ways to incorporate mistake-contingent behaviors should be examined.

A second implication is that, while Smoll and Smith (2002) noted the detrimental effects of punitive behaviors on young athletes, this study seems to show that there are times when these behaviors may be effectively used and should not be shied away from altogether. The behaviors observed using the CBAS method appear to work along a continuum and are different tools to be used in different situations; the more important aspect seems to be how the punitive behaviors are framed. While the coach would like to utilize these behaviors as little as possible due to the potential negative effects, when framed in terms of effort as part of an effort-focused

motivational climate, they appear to work more often and with fewer ill effects. Identifying appropriate instances to effectively use such behavior is a potential topic for future investigation.

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