



Exploring Enthusiastic Experiment

Lots of young children are energetic bundles of creativity and imagination and are quick to come up with ideas to solve problems and to do things in unique and varied ways. Quite often, however, the environment we set for our young players does not encourage or allow for these things to happen.

Coaches can sometimes be in a rush to get the players ready for the next phase of their development and in doing so miss out the development that is possible during the stage that the player is actually in. Generally, our young players are creative and are willing to try new things in the search for something new. As coaches we need to nurture this natural creative ability and use it to challenge and stretch the players.

It may not be easy to adopt this approach as it has to include 'releasing' the players to experiment and explore within the coaching activities. However, if the coach creates an environment that encourages this then the players may surprise us with their responses. In an ideal world you would want a player's first response to any given situation to be a creative one, even if it is not used at that time.

This is the threatening part – if we are really serious about creativity it will mean a re-positioning of the coach and a subtle shift from the more traditional idea of what the coach should be.

Craft (2005) said "Creative performance is more likely to happen with a teacher who empowers students".

A coach who values creativity by: welcoming new ideas, trying new things, being spontaneous and enthusiastic, creating an environment where no idea is deemed 'wrong' and facilitates learning by refraining from always 'telling' but by setting challenges and problems to solve is one who will empower the individuals within their group. By giving young players the permission to try things and a safe environment in which to grow as individuals will enhance their creativity. This is what empowerment is.

The things we say and the way we say them play a huge part in this process. Effective questioning can help young players make the links and connections between original

ideas and effectiveness in the game. Think about the affect the following questions may have:

"Jacob, I love that stepover that I just saw you try. When would be the best time to use it in the game?"

"How could you use it to beat a defender?"

"Part of the empowerment approach involves the coach presenting themselves as someone who appreciates what is involved if a risk is taken"

"unforeseen connections"

"What might your next move be if I put in another defender?" "Let's try it and see what you come up with"

Using personal connections to challenge individual players has long been a part of the coaching process but what I am advocating is that you begin to plan for more of them and be comfortable in not knowing exactly what the outcomes might be. It's like planning carefully for something but you are not sure what you might get, yet you are ready to go with whatever the response may be. The more practice you get using these methods the more highly skilled you become at working this way.

If this is a relatively new thing for you, please move in small, manageable stages. Plan for some problem solving activities, such as an attack v defence game, but encourage the group to think about and experiment with a range of possible solutions for creating and scoring goals.

Allow some time for discussion, be interested in what the players say, give each of their responses due respect, show enthusiasm when they try new things and be specific when giving praise for the ideas they come up with. By showing genuine interest and enthusiasm reinforces the fact that their contribution is unique and that new ideas are valuable. This approach will encourage

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them to continue to be creative in their approach to playing the game.

Part of the empowerment approach also involves the coach presenting themselves as someone who appreciates what is involved if a risk is taken, someone who will make independent choices, someone who is willing to wrestle with different ways to solve a problem and someone who gets things wrong and learns from these mistakes. If we model this behaviour then the players may follow our lead.

It is important to stress, however, that empowering players does not mean the players are free to do as they please without any intervention or help from the coach. Empowerment is a subtle art, one which still requires the expertise, know-how and long-term vision of the coach to help guide, navigate, cajole, question and support the players to ensure original ideas appropriately link and connect with the game of football.

"John can you make that backheel pass so good that you would be able to use it in the game?"

Empowering the players requires the coach or teacher to soften their own expectation of the way in which things should be done, whilst supportively setting adjustable parameters in order to ensure certain outcomes in a long-term plan are worked towards.