

## **Chapter Two**

### ***Sideline Instruction***

*"We all have a built-in, natural learning capability that is actually disrupted by instruction".<sup>30</sup>*

*Sir John Whitmore - Sports Psychologist and Performance Coach*

Although providing clear instruction and guidance at appropriate moments can facilitate young players' learning, many coaches and parents make the mistake of relentlessly bombarding youngsters with information and directions during games. These coaches and parents habitually bellow instructions and completely overload players (**many of whom are novices struggling to execute fundamental skills and techniques**) with excessive information without considering the ramifications of this behavior on the youth's overall development and immediate experiences.

Many coaches and parents fail to understand that when they take this approach they end up creating a chaotic commotion that serves no help to anyone and simply suppresses the players' liberty to make their own decisions. For example, some of the most popular phrases and instructions that can be heard from the sideline robotically yelled are:

- ***"Pass it!"***
- ***"Shoot!"***
- ***"Clear it!"***
- ***"Be Aggressive!"***
- ***"Go, Go, Go!"***
- ***"Not in the middle!"***

Furthermore, not only do many coaches and parents constantly relay such instructions, but due to their overzealous nature many attempt to pass on multiple points at once. When they take this approach, coaches and parents



unwittingly end up overloading young players with 3 or 4 different coaching points often leaving them completely **confused** and with no real focus on any particular objective.

Here is a simple example of how coaches overload a player with numerous instructions at once:

***Alex, you've got to pass the ball as soon as they're wide open and then overlap, but if we lose the ball get back quick on defense and mark your player!***

But regardless of whether coaches or parents are overloading players with multiple instructions or directing them with single word commands, **why do so many feel as though it is their responsibility to constantly tell players what to do and create a scenario where young players are machines who are there to merely execute their instructions?**

First of all, many coaches and parents do not even think about why they are doing it. They witness others constantly offering instruction in youth soccer, at various youth sport events, or at college and professional levels, so they simply repeat it without question and it becomes a habit.

Many coaches and parents have benevolent motives, and believe they are helping their players by constantly imparting advice and instructions from the sidelines. There are also those who unwittingly assume it is their role to constantly tell players what to do and how to do it, convinced that if they do not perform this duty then they are not effective as coaches or displaying good parental support.

Many coaches also allow their egos to influence their sideline behavior and become preoccupied with exhibiting an air of control, authority, and expertise, feeling they must behave in a way that befits what they consider the archetypical coach by pointing to, directing, and constantly shouting instructions to their players. More concerned about their coaching ego than about their players' best interests, these coaches strive to be seen as commanding figures



and constantly consider how parents and administrators may be evaluating them.

In their study investigating practice and skill acquisition in soccer, researchers Professor Mark Williams and Dr. Nicola Hodges reaffirm this point: "Unfortunately, some coaches feel the need to justify their existence and consider that this is best achieved through a vociferous, authoritarian style [of coaching]".<sup>31</sup>

But it is important to note that many parents and administrators often **demand and expect** that their coach be highly vocal and commanding from the sidelines. This they believe constitutes good coaching practice. So, as long as the coach is pointing at, directing, and telling players what to do at every turn, a high percentage of parents and administrators feel satisfied. This is another reason why many coaches (especially those who are paid money for their coaching services) play the role of the 'sideline general'!

Many parents constantly direct their child from the sidelines **because they are desperate for their child to play well** due to the personal fulfillment they receive. Conversely, if their child's performance level is not reaching their desired standard, this frequently results in them feeling depressed, dismayed, and frustrated. So, more concerned with their own feelings of self-worth as a result of their child looking good on the field parents relentlessly shout instructions as they believe it increases the chances of this outcome. According to sports psychologists, this overreliance on the child's performance influencing the parents' gratification and dejection is what is referred to as the '**reverse dependency trap**', which can be very destructive for their child's early experiences and future in the sport.<sup>32</sup>

**However, the primary driver as to why so many coaches and parents constantly tell young players what to do on the soccer field is because of the win-at-all-cost mentality. Many believe that their commands and directions increase their team's chances of winning.**

Evidence suggesting that this is the case is how the ceaseless instruction and direction is frequently at its peak when the score line is close. But this diminishes considerably when the possibility of winning is seemingly out of

reach. During our research, we encountered numerous occasions where coaches and parents were vociferous and instructive, but when their team went 3 or 4 goals down they barely said a word, having 'thrown in the towel' and given up pursuing the desired result. So again, what happened to the notion that *"The most important thing is that the children are having fun - it's not that important if they win or lose."*? If these coaches and parents truly adhered to this philosophy, their emotions and interest in the game would not deviate in such a dramatic fashion.

We only have to take a look at the popular shout of **"Not in the middle"** to affirm this. Coaches and parents commonly scream this command when their players play the ball in the middle of the field close to their own goal, reacting this way due to the fear that one of their players will make a mistake and present an easy scoring opportunity to the opposition, even though playing in these areas is an excellent way for young players to learn and develop their understanding of the game.

Finally, further evidence to suggest that instruction from the sideline is primarily for winning purposes is how many coaches constantly command their players to pass the ball to their most effective or skillful member of the team. Often, this player is more likely to score goals or cause trouble for the opposition. But the fact that other players are often bypassed due to this tactic and have to squander opportunities important to their own developmental needs is frequently overlooked by many.

It is important that coaches, parents, and administrators understand the detrimental impact consistent sideline intervention has on players' long-term development and immediate experiences. Horst Wein, an elite youth soccer coach who has worked with some of the major professional academies in Europe, states *"Coaches are used to giving away their knowledge through many instructions without being aware that **coaching this way will limit their players' development**"*.<sup>33</sup>

With its unpredictable, frenetic, and uncertain nature, soccer presents various situations for players to make split second decisions and work out problems by implementing inventive techniques, skills, or ideas. So coaches and

parents persistently barking instructions from the sidelines **simply stifle the players' ability to learn** and to develop their creativity because the opportunity to take ownership of the decision making process is taken away during such critical moments.

Young players not given the chance to make their own decisions or the opportunity to allow their individual flair and imagination to flourish often lack imagination and become rigid and predictable in the long-term. In their study investigating the perspectives of elite coaches on effective talent development, Dr. Martindale and his colleagues offer the following viewpoint of a leading coach, *"Players who are directed all the time lack self-awareness and become robotic"*.<sup>34</sup>



*Constant instruction and direction from the sideline is a common theme in U.S. youth soccer that negatively impacts young players' experiences and development.*

The following scenario demonstrates how persistent intervention suppresses the chance for players to develop their inventiveness, problem solving, and decision making capabilities:

*Jimmy is dribbling the ball up the field and getting close to goal when an opposing player approaches to tackle him. Jimmy's teammate Billy is wide open on the left side of the field. The coach starts to scream to Jimmy, "Pass to Billy!!! Quick, pass to Billy!!!" Jimmy, hearing the coach, immediately passes the ball out wide to Billy, who strikes the ball past the goalkeeper to score.*

In this particular circumstance, many coaches and parents will likely assume this to be effective coaching as the directions that Jimmy receives makes it easier for him to make a successful pass and helped his team score. However, telling Jimmy what to do and when to do it, the coach deprives Jimmy of a learning opportunity by making the decision for him and denying him the chance to assess the situation and find a creative solution to the problem for himself.

Additionally, in this scenario the coach also misses an excellent learning opportunity to evaluate Jimmy's progress. By telling Jimmy what to do and when to do it, the coach loses the chance to see what he would have done had he received no instruction from the sideline. But now the coach will never know. Therefore, a good question at this juncture is **how can we evaluate what players have learned and what players are capable of doing, if we constantly tell them what to do and deny them the opportunity to show us what they know?**

A further point using the last example is that we have to consider that Jimmy may have been eager to try to beat the opposing player by experimenting with a new skill, rather than taking the option of passing the ball. The challenge of dribbling past an opponent is a situation many players are faced with and have to execute if they want to advance towards the opponent's goal. **This imaginative trait and ability distinguishes the most successful soccer players.** So undoubtedly this should be encouraged and developed during a young player's early and influential years. John Peacock, the England U17's Boys National Coach, supports this view and advocates an approach that allows players to take ownership of decisions as much as possible:

Too readily we tell our players to pass and obviously through good combination play we can get to the other side of the defense. However, what happens when players are isolated 1 v 1 in attacking areas and they don't possess the necessary qualities to go past anyone? We may have to start playing negatively, i.e. backwards or square, or even worse, lose possession through inefficient skill when facing an opponent.<sup>35</sup>

Again, directing players to pass and telling them when to shoot or clear the ball not only deprives them of the freedom that will help them become more creative and intelligent soccer players, but also inadvertently **restrains players' immediate enjoyment levels.** Ultimately, all coaches and parents must understand that overbearing instruction often results in young players becoming uninspired by the sport.

In their book More than Goals, Mike Woitalla and former captain of the U.S. national soccer team and current U.S. Youth Soccer Technical Director, Claudio Reyna, use an excellent analogy to articulate how this sideline instruction negatively impacts young players' experiences and appetite for the sport:

For some reason, adults – some who can't even kick a ball – think it's perfectly ok to scream at children while they're playing soccer. How normal would it seem if a mother gave a six year old some crayons and a coloring book and started screaming, "Use the red crayon! Stay in the lines! Don't use yellow!?" **Do you think that child would develop a passion for drawing?**<sup>36</sup>

From our early days as young soccer players right through to the professional level, we conclude that there is nothing more irritating when playing than having someone constantly directing you and telling you what to do. Additionally, while coaching youth soccer, we have observed firsthand many young players becoming despondent, de-motivated, and frustrated due to the





conventional approach toward sideline intervention being taken by their coaches and parents.

This state of affairs undoubtedly increases the chances of young players disengaging from the sport. In their investigation of the factors contributing to the drop out in youth sports, researchers Dr. Fraser-Thomas and colleagues substantiate this by claiming, *"An autocratic style of coaching has been associated with negative outcomes such as negative attitudes towards coaches, decreased motivation and dropout"*.<sup>37</sup>

Investigating sideline behavior within youth soccer, researchers Dr. La Voi and Assistant Professor Jens Omli attempted to determine the effects that adult intervention has on young players' development. In their study, **they establish that comments and sideline behaviors are often characterized by frustration and anger** which magnifies further the detrimental impact sideline instruction has on the experiences and well-being of youth soccer players.<sup>38</sup>

This is something we have observed consistently in youth soccer. Often this scenario arises because coaches and parents become frustrated that things are not going well for their team. As many fail to consider factors such as the ability of the opposition, their own players' capabilities, or that young players may be lacking in confidence (*possibly because they are being critiqued with every play*), these adults automatically assume that players are simply not listening to their instructions. Therefore, they begin to get angry and their sideline direction becomes even louder and begins to take on an aggressive form.

So not only are coaches and parents bombarding young players with overwhelming amounts of instruction which is detrimental to the players' learning and enjoyment, but the negative consequences are intensified further due to many **young players feeling intimidated** from such sideline rage. By hijacking youth soccer games in this inappropriate fashion, how do we expect young players to enjoy their experiences and develop effectively?

Based on the evidence presented so far in this chapter, it is truly remarkable that so many self-proclaimed leading clubs in the U.S. (who charge significant fees for their services) claiming that player development is their main focus not only employ coaches who constantly direct young players from the sidelines,



but also allow parents to relentlessly overload players with instructions and commands. Time and time again, we have observed how parents at these clubs gather on the sidelines as though it is both their responsibility and right to tell young players what to do. Why are these clubs claiming to have the primary objective of player development allowing this to happen, considering the **detrimental effect this has on the players' development and immediate experiences?**

In many cases, it is because administrators and coaches are fearful of upsetting parents by informing them they **cannot** tell players (including their own children) what to do on the field. Of course, many clubs claim to have this kind of rule in place, but if you go and watch one of their games the parents' actions clearly demonstrate that it is simply not being enforced. But this is another façade of acceptance. These clubs would not dare tell parents that if they fail to abide by this rule they must leave their organization. Therefore, more concerned with the danger of parents becoming dissatisfied and taking their child to another club than the **true development** of their players, these administrators and coaches choose to say **nothing**.

For many self-proclaimed 'premier' clubs, this path is the one to take, as it often reduces the risk of players leaving and maintains higher numbers in the organization, which in turn increases revenue: **Another classic case of business before development**. Additionally, losing a 'star player' due to enforcing rules and upsetting parents has the potential of reducing their chances of short-term success and trophy accumulation, which ultimately damages the winning reputation they so desperately pursue.

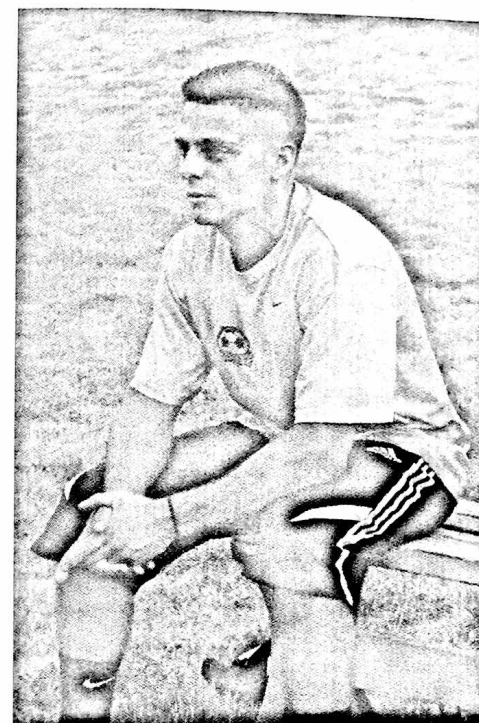
### ***Increasing imagination, creativity, and learning opportunities***

Throughout the years we have always appreciated how the players' decision making skills, imagination, and creativity on the field are pivotal factors in their becoming effective soccer players. Again, the world's greatest players have reached that status because they are exceptional in these key areas.

It is no surprise that studies indicate decision making skills, imagination, and the players' overall awareness on the field are the strongest indicators that young players will progress in the game to the professional status. In their study investigating the key factors for talent development in soccer, researchers Dr. Rianne Kannekens and colleagues point out how young players who demonstrate superior decision-making skills are the players that reach higher levels of the game when they become adults. They also stress how it is extremely difficult for players to be successful in the future if they do not develop this crucial aspect of the game during the formative years of involvement in the sport.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, it is essential that coaches and parents allow young players the freedom to make their own decisions on the playing field and refrain from instructing them through each phase of play. In *The Talent Code*, Daniel Coyle substantiates this perspective using the thoughts of leading sports coach Robert Lansdorp, "If it's a choice between me telling them to do it, or them figuring it out, I'll take the second option every time. You've got to make the kid an independent thinker, a problem-solver. The point is they have got to figure things out for themselves."<sup>40</sup>

In our program, we have constantly encouraged all coaches and parents to embrace this perception in order to facilitate players in their overall development and enhance their enjoyment, motivation, and confidence levels. Our message is to allow players to get on with things under the coaches' **guidance and support** rather than under the coaches' and parents' overbearing **command**. Essentially, our objective is to change the mindset from one that views the coach as a 'sideline general' to one that views the coach as a facilitator of learning.



*Well informed coaches recognize that they don't need to be constantly directing and shouting from the sidelines. Sitting and observing in a relaxed manner is a far more effective approach.*

But for many parents new and unfamiliar to this approach, it often causes curiosity, leading them to ask why the coaches are so quiet, and why they are not more vocal and controlling on the sidelines. However, after they have been informed that this approach is a deliberate strategy to facilitate their child's overall development, it relieves their initial concerns and often causes healthy inquisitiveness.

This supportive approach is advocated by a number of top-level youth coaches who acknowledge that young players should be viewed as active problem solvers and provided with the responsibility for their own actions on the field. Investigating the game-day behaviors of leading youth soccer coaches at professional academies in England, researchers Dr. C. Cushion and M. Smith state:



Silence was considered necessary by the coaches to observe and analyze, and was used as a method to encourage the players to learn for themselves. Without intervention from the coach, it was believed that the players could encourage their own sensory feedback. Consequently, **silence was used as a tool for learning. The coaches expressed concern that too much intervention would deny the players not only the opportunities to learn but also the opportunity to demonstrate what has already been learnt.**<sup>41</sup>

In addition, three elite coaches in this study offered the following thoughts on intervention from the sidelines:

**Coach A:** "I want them to be unencumbered by the pressure of my voice. So I want to let them go through the processes of making decisions and choices during the course of the game unfettered by me telling them what to do and when to do it".

**Coach B:** "Your automatic instinct is to help the kids and you think helping the kids is actually giving instruction. When it might be more helpful if you don't, if you let the kids make their own mistakes. That would be a better way for learning".

**Coach C:** "I want the players to learn for themselves. **I don't want prescribed motions of play.** The kids have got to learn, find out through their own learning experiences".

This perspective is reinforced by former international soccer player Trevor Brooking the Technical Director for the English Football Association responsible for the progress of England's youth players and national game. Discussing his views on the development of young players, he used a shining example afforded by the coaches working at the academy of Manchester United FC: *"The Manchester United philosophy is to let them discover it themselves. The old vision of the coach shouting do this or do that has gone. What they have realized at United is the best coaching for youngsters is about standing back"*.<sup>42</sup>



**\*Note: This was something we observed first hand during our visits to Manchester United's training facilities when we watched the academy train and play.**

Looking at some of the most successful players in the history of the game, we see many spent countless hours playing in environments **with no adult intervention** and organized structure. Playing soccer on the streets, in local parks, or in any free space, allowed them freedom and enhanced their learning possibilities through experimenting, taking risks, making their own decisions, and pure enjoyment. Arguably the greatest player of the modern era, Argentinean and Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi relates his current philosophy of playing to the unconstrained manner that allowed him to develop his fantastic talents as a young boy, "I play like a child. I think about myself on a small field, or in the street, I see myself with the ball in the same way as I am now. I have not changed at all. You must remember soccer is a game to have fun and you play for that".<sup>43</sup>

Dutch legend Johan Cruyff, an exponent of the Total Football philosophy exhibited by the famous Holland international teams of the 1970's, also affords insightful views on how young players should be permitted the freedom to play **without** constant adult intervention maintaining that:

Children should do nothing but play and play. **Children should play with total freedom and enjoyment without any pressure or any shouting from the coach that can turn every game into a case of life or death.** My generation learned to play soccer on the street. Our skill levels greatly improved because **we** were always involved in the game. The street was our soccer school.<sup>44</sup>

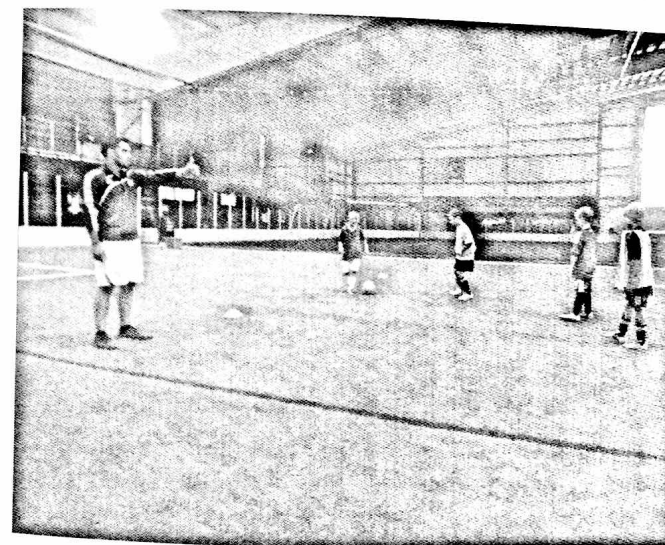
These perspectives are further reaffirmed in research by Dr. Salmela and Dr. Moreas who investigated the history of 22 Brazilian youth soccer players aged 16-18 selected for professional soccer clubs. In their study, they established that until they were selected by clubs in their later teens, these players had **received little or no structured coaching**.<sup>45</sup> Once again the driving principle we can take

from this evidence is that playing in a free and positive environment that allows players to make their own decisions and be accountable for them is essential for their development.

We must make an imperative point at this stage. When working with young players, we do not advocate that coaches should be silent and uninvolved throughout the entirety of the game. It is important to understand that there are key moments when coaches can facilitate the players' self-learning by using **subtle cues and timely advice**. We will now touch on a few examples of how offering short phrases, questions, and constructive feedback can assist the young players' learning and understanding.

- **'What do you see?'** – This question encourages a player in possession of the ball to get their head up and assess their options.
- **'Scan'** – This helps to develop the players' awareness of what is around them on the field when they are not in possession of and/or are about to receive the ball.
- **'Relax'** – This cue, delivered in a calm tone, develops the players' composure on the field and encourages them to think about their choices. It is particularly useful for novice players who may be nervous or lacking in technical proficiency.
- **'What can you try?'** – This question motivates players to attempt new skills and be creative. It also helps to reaffirm the message that the game is a learning platform.
- **'How can you help?'** – This encourages players to support the player on the ball, help teammates defend, and create further attacking options in the final third.

Additionally, choosing appropriate moments to offer positive support and guidance can have a very powerful effect. For example, briefly speaking individually to a player in a relaxed manner at half-time or after they have had a drink will often have much more impact than trying to explain your thoughts while they are engaged in play. Additionally, if a player attempts a skill or does something well on the field, announcing in front of everyone that their effort was excellent is a great way to boost their confidence while affirming to other players and parents that you are striving to create a positive learning environment. Furthermore, in their book Communication Basics, authors Judy Jennings and Linda Malcak demonstrate that "The single most powerful form of communication is non-verbal. More than 80% of communication occurs without words, hence the expression 'actions speak louder than words'".<sup>46</sup> Therefore, using some positive body language such as a smile or thumbs up to compliment players can be very effective.



*Actions can speak louder than words and can have a positive impact when delivered at the appropriate moment.*

Finally, since the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate philosophically how the approach, in terms of instruction from the sideline, needs to be altered from



the conventional one which bombards players with instruction to one that offers players an appropriate amount of freedom, we are merely touching the surface on what methods you can implement from a positive coaching standpoint. An important point when utilizing these methods to guide players is that you only **use them occasionally**. Additionally, it is essential that coaches do not overuse the same methods when offering positive reinforcement, such as robotically yelling “**good job**” or “**way to go**” consistently throughout the game. When coaches make these mistakes it is often counterproductive and diminishes the power and effect of your message as players become aware that this praise is being offered way too generously and it is not from the heart.

We must reiterate, our experiences and the evidence we have looked at suggests that young players must be provided with **sustained periods of freedom, silence, and uninterrupted play** throughout the early stages of their development in order to enhance their creativity, ability to make astute decisions, and solve problems. Providing young players with this autonomy will always increase their enjoyment, confidence, and chances of developing a passion for the game and exploring their potential.

## Chapter Three

### *Dealing with Mistakes*

*“If we have to deprive a player of the right to make mistakes, then we’d best hang up everything and go home”.<sup>47</sup>*

*Giovanni Trapattoni - The most successful coach in professional Italian soccer*

It should be expected that players (**many of whom are novices struggling to execute fundamental skills and techniques**) in their formative years will often make mistakes. How coaches and parents deal with this during the early stages of the players’ development is an essential issue in youth soccer. For many years we have witnessed coaches and parents react in an unacceptable manner when young players make a mistake on the field. These actions range from inappropriate to disgraceful, harmful, and even abusive behavior.

But the way mistakes are dealt with negatively could be attributed to various reasons. For example, some coaches and parents believe that regularly shouting at or criticizing young players when they make a mistake is an effective method of coaching which motivates players to perform at a higher level. Once again, many coaches allow their ego to get in the way and feel as though their players’ mistakes reflect negatively on their coaching ability. Likewise, parents frequently get caught in the ‘**reverse dependency trap**’ and allow their child’s mistakes to influence their emotional state of mind. However, there can be no doubt that the major reason why many coaches and parents deal with mistakes inappropriately is because of the **win-at-all-cost mentality**.

But regardless of the reasons why mistakes are dealt with inappropriately, we must appreciate how it negatively impacts young players’ immediate experiences and development in the sport. To help our understanding, we will look at some notable scenarios indicative of our observations throughout the U.S.