Coaching and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the crucial matter of how coaches may obtain the best quality of learning from their players. The chapter is organized around three critical questions, and is devoted to providing sound, comprehensive, and practical answers to each of them: (1) What is the *ultimate objective* of the learning process in athletics—the "target" toward which all of our teaching efforts should be directed? (2) What are the *necessary conditions* that coaches must create on their teams if they wish to promote optimum learning? (3) What *learning principles and policies* should coaches employ if they are to help players to acquire the best possible mastery of the skills and concepts of their sport?

> "They call it coaching, but it is really teaching."
> —Vince Lombardi

Coaching is quintessentially about *getting players to learn*. It is about helping them to acquire the greatest possible mastery of the skills and concepts necessary for success in their sport. This being the case, it is absolutely necessary for the athletic coach, like any other teacher, to know a great deal about how to achieve the highest

quality of learning in his or her "students." The achievement of such learning excellence will be the subject of this chapter.

In order to address these matters of teaching and learning in athletics adequately, it seems best to raise and to answer three distinct questions:

1. What is the *ultimate objective* of the learning process in athletics; what is the "target" toward which all of our teaching efforts should be directed?
2. What are the *necessary conditions* that coaches must create on their teams if they wish to promote optimum learning?
3. What *learning principles and policies* should coaches employ if they are to help players to acquire the best possible mastery of the skills and concepts of their sport?

This chapter will be organized around these three questions, and will be devoted to providing sound, comprehensive, and practical answers to each of them.

Objectives of the Learning Process

"Begin with the end in mind."
—Steven Covey

What are we, as athletic coaches, trying to accomplish when we implement drills, chalk talks, scrimmages, and other learning procedures? What is the target or goal of all of our efforts to get players to learn? As in so many human endeavors, it is best, as Covey suggests, to "begin with the end in mind" (1989, p. 95) If we know exactly where we are trying to go, this provides an invaluable focus for all of our efforts to get there.

In athletics, the ideal goal of the teaching process is the development of players who have acquired the best possible mastery of the skills, choice principles, and self–regulatory abilities called for by their sport. Let me elaborate briefly on each of these.

Skills.
The first goal of the teaching process is that players acquire the ability to execute the fundamental skills of their sport (dribbling, passing, shooting, hitting, etc.). The ultimate objective here is that they become able to execute these skills in game situations with great technical correctness and quickness, without having to think about it (Wooden, 1972). They instinctively do the right thing, do it extremely quickly, and do it with great technical proficiency.

Choice Principles.
The second goal of the teaching process is that players gain a very strong mastery of the choice principles (Ossorio, 1983; Putman, 1990) essential to their

sport and to team life in general. Choice principles, as the name implies, are general decision rules or behavioral policies. They contain sound guidelines regarding what actions it is usually best to take in various situations. They tell players, in essence: "As a general rule, do X, but if in unusual circumstances you can see strong reasons to do otherwise, do so." Thus, they state general guidelines about what it is usually best to do, while permitting flexibility and creativity in unusual circumstances.

Most choice principles provide guidelines regarding what to do in game situations in one's sport. Some familiar examples of these from various sports include the following: "On defense, stay between your man and the goal." "Work hard to create good shots, and take only good ones." "Work hard to get open when you don't have the ball (or puck)." As a forward (shortstop, setter, goalie, etc.), your role is to do X, Y, and Z, but not A, B, and C" (positional role responsibilities, which include roles on set plays).

The other major group of choice principles has to do with one's conduct as a member of a team. These tend to be quite similar from one sport to another, and to permit fewer exceptions. Perhaps the most important of these is a principle that might be considered the cardinal rule of team life: "Always act so as to make the greatest contribution to the mission of your team" (cf. Putman, 1990). Other examples would include: "Always treat your teammates with respect," and "Acknowledge the positive contributions of your fellow players."

Self-regulation.

The third goal of the teaching process is that players learn to self-regulate—i.e., to govern their own behavior independently of the coach. The objective here is first of all that they learn to observe what they are doing and to evaluate it competently. If they judge their actions satisfactory, they must learn to note what is working and to make further use of it in appropriate situations. If they judge their actions unsatisfactory, they must learn to (a) diagnose the problem in behavioral terms (e.g., "I'm letting my person get behind me when I'm on defense"); (b) prescribe behavioral adjustments (e.g., "I've got to stay back a little more, focus more on her and less on the ball, and prevent her from making runs behind me"); (c) implement the prescription; and finally, (d) observe the consequences of the adjustment made and proceed accordingly (Ossorio, 1976, 1981; Bergner, 1995).

Summary.

Overall, then, the ideal goal of the learning process is the development of a player (a) with great technical skills; who (b) makes good decisions based on sound choice principles both in game situations and in team life in general; and (c) who is capable, without constant direction from the coach, of monitoring his or her own behavior, staying with what is working, and making appropriate adjustments in what is not working. Such a player can be released by the coach to do his or her job in an autonomous fashion. Such a player, if he or she also possesses leadership

qualities, can become a positive team leader (in the sense implied by the traditional expression, "a coach on the field").

With this as our picture of the ideal outcome of the learning process, let us turn our attention to how best to achieve it.

Promote Conditions Necessary For Optimum Learning

Learning, whether it be in the classroom, in the business organization, or on the athletic field, always occurs in a context. This context, far from being irrelevant, can be the determining factor in whether learning occurs to a high degree, a low degree, or not at all. For example, there is a great deal of talk in contemporary America about the appalling conditions in many of our classrooms. Teachers report that their students are unmotivated to learn, that they engage in behavior that introduces chaos and even danger into the classroom, and that they force teachers out of their educational roles into oppositional, police-like ones a great deal of the time. Under such conditions, these educators relate, they can possess the best teaching skills in the world and it does not matter. They cannot teach, and learning cannot occur to any appreciable degree in their classrooms.

Thus, one of the vital matters that the athletic coach must attend to is promoting the contexts or conditions necessary for optimum learning to occur. In this section, four such conditions will be examined: (a) players' motivation, (b) players' sense of personal eligibility to acquire athletic excellence, (c) the relationship between player and coach, and (d) the presence of seriously disruptive behavior in the athletic learning situation.

Motivate Players to Learn

Learning in the fullest sense of the word means more than mere exposure to content (students sit through many lectures and pick up little of what is said) or mere acquisition (many students acquire content but retain it only long enough to pass next week's test). Rather, as Bandura (1986) has noted, it implies *acceptance* of the newly acquired behavior or idea. In the present context, this means that players truly assimilate and personally adopt the skill or choice principle into their personal repertoires. They truly "make it their own" in the sense that they are ready, able, and personally inclined to *use* what they have learned in their own behavior.

People tend to learn, in this fullest sense of "accept," what is relevant to the achievement of their purposes in their worlds. They tend to discard, or to have a hard time maintaining, what they find irrelevant to the achievement of such purposes. When all is said and done, the expression, "being motivated to learn X," comes down essentially to this: that one can see clearly how learning X can be helpful in the accomplishment of one's own personally valued goals.

The practical upshot of this point for the athletic coach is that he or she must make every effort to ensure that players are very clear about how the meeting of each specific learning target can help them to achieve their own desired objectives. An in-depth discussion of this point, and of numerous ways to align the accomplishment of team objectives with players' existing motivations, is contained in the previous chapter. For the present, two brief examples of such motivational activities by the coach will be mentioned.

First, at a general level, the most important thing a coach can do is to articulate and continually renew a team mission in which, if players do their best to learn and acquire excellence, they can satisfy a great number of motivations that virtually all of them share. As noted in previous chapters, such preexisting motives will almost always include the desires (a) to win games and championships; (b) to achieve personal excellence; (c) to display this personal excellence before admiring others; (d) to work in positive collaboration with others in pursuit of a highly valued common purpose; and (e) to be personally valued, included, and cared for by one's coaches and teammates.

A second, more narrowly focused example of a motivational activity is that coaches may, as Lombardi did so fastidiously, continually clarify how every little thing to be learned benefits the player and the team (O'Brien, 1987). Thus, when introducing a new skill or exhorting players to improve an existing one, the coach might say something like, "If you become able to execute this move very skillfully and very quickly, you'll be able to break down most defenders and create scoring opportunities."

Establish Player's Eligibility to Acquire Excellence

John Gardner (1990), in his widely acclaimed book on leadership, relates an incident that occurred one day when he was sitting with Martin Luther King during a talk at a conference on education. The speaker, who was relating her approach to teaching inner-city children, stated that we must "First get them to read." On hearing this, Dr. King leaned over to Gardner and whispered in his ear, "No, first get them to believe in themselves" (p. 195).

Coaches, like inner-city teachers, have to deal with many individuals who have declared themselves *ineligible* for athletic success. These players, perhaps with the "help" of messages from previous coaches, teammates, or even their own parents, have made self-appraisals that disqualify them in their own minds from ever becoming good players or making meaningful contributions to the team (cf. Ossorio, 1976, 1978; Bergner, 1987, 1995 on "private self-degradation"; Bandura, 1992, on low "self-efficacy"). In their view, they are too uncoordinated, or nonathletic, or slow, or possessed of other attributes that doom them to athletic mediocrity at best.

Such a sense of personal ineligibility is the enemy of all serious efforts to learn. If players firmly believe that they do not have what it takes to achieve quality

athletic skills, it is only logical that they would see little reason to exert long and strenuous efforts to acquire them (Bandura, 1992). Therefore, in cases where players have insufficient faith in their own abilities or potentials, coaches must find ways to enhance the beliefs of such players that they can acquire excellence, or in some cases that they already are a good deal better than they realize. The following are some general strategies for accomplishing this end.

Work to Establish Own Credibility.

If the coach is to be successful in getting players to drop their old, self-disqualifying beliefs, and to adopt new and more positive ones, it is important for him or her to be as credible as possible (cf. Bergner & Staggs, 1987). Thus, the first general direction for efforts is that the coach pay a lot of attention to establishing his or her credibility in the eyes of players. Such credibility derives from two primary sources. First, it derives from players perceiving that the coach possesses considerable expertise about the sport itself. Players must believe that the coach knows the game, knows how to teach it well, and, most importantly, knows a good or potentially good player when he or she sees one. Second, credibility derives from players seeing the coach as honest. They must believe that the coach will render honest judgments, for better or for worse, of what he or she observes. A coach who, perhaps in a misguided effort always to be positive, says that everything is wonderful will quickly lose credibility.

If the coach is new, or is unknown to players, a good place to begin to establish credibility is in the initial address to the team. For example, the author, in his last such address to a new team, designed the talk, among other things, to convey an aura of competence to players. The talk was carefully written and rehearsed, contained allusions to a number of soccer principles, and included some analysis of videotaped highlights from a game featuring the U.S. National Women's Team. Further, in the course of focusing on other matters, the author mentioned at various points that he was a university professor, that he was a professor of psychology with a professional interest in what made organizations thrive, that he had been a coach for many years, that his previous team had had an unbeaten string of 16 games, that he had coached higher level players in the past, and other facts designed to foster credibility. A conscious effort was made to report all of these things in a matter-of-fact way that was not boastful, since boastfulness tends to undercut credibility and to have other negative side effects. Finally, in the days and weeks following this team meeting, all chalk talks, demonstrations, drills, and exercises were highly planned so that practices would be, and would be *seen* to be, highly efficient and goal oriented. All of these measures, aside from their obvious objectives, had as their unspoken agenda the goal of getting players to believe in their coach and in his competence.

Use Credibility to Create Useful Doubts in Players.

Having established his or her credibility, the coach may use this credibility in all sorts of ways to undermine players' negative self-appraisals, and to get them to consider far more positive ones (cf. Ossorio, 1976; Bergner, 1987; Bergner & Staggs, 1987). One of these ways is to create doubt in players that they are the best judges of their own potential. For example, in the team address alluded to above, the author attempted to plant such a doubt by relating the following message to players: "It's my experience over many years of coaching that most players do not know how good they can be if they really push themselves." He then goes on to tell some true stories about players who vastly underestimated themselves and later, by hard work, accomplished things that surprised both themselves and others. The point of saying this to all players, but especially to those with little belief in themselves, was to plant a useful doubt in their minds about whether they were the best judges of their own potential. "Most players," this message suggests, "underestimate how good they can be if they really try, so don't be so sure of any limitations you may have placed on your own possibilities."

Use Credibility to Recognize Competence.

One of the most powerful countermessages to "I can't do it," is "You've already done it" (Farber, 1981). One of the messages that unconfident players find it hardest to dismiss occurs when a highly credible coach repeatedly recognizes their already completed and undeniable successes. "Very smart shot, Sara Beth, you placed it right where the goalie wasn't." "Great route, Doug, you completely lost that defender." "Super defensive job, Anna, she couldn't get free to create a good shot or pass." All of these messages, delivered by a knowledgeable coach who players know does not lie, not only acknowledge success, but carry a further implication: such accomplishments, especially if they occur repeatedly, imply skill and competence, and are not the sorts of things that a "lousy athlete" would be likely to achieve by luck or accident. Therefore, the coach should actively search for such undeniable successes and accomplishments, even if they are small ones, and take pains to recognize them very clearly and explicitly.

Use "Move Two's."

A "move two" is a psychotherapy tactic created by Peter Ossorio (1976). In the present context, it represents a further way to recognize competence. Again, its primary virtue is that it can be especially difficult for players to dismiss. What the coach does here is to issue a message that doesn't explicitly state that the player has achieved some competence; rather, it presupposes that this must be the case. Consider this sequence of statements: "Joel, I believe that you have surpassed Pete in your defensive skills" (call this "move 1"); therefore, you are getting the starting nod over him in Saturday's game" (this is "move 2"). Here, Joel, if he does not believe in himself, has in move 1 something obvious and explicit that he can reject ("Gee, I don't think I'm better than Pete."). In the "move two" strategy, however,

what the coach does is to leave the premise (move 1) unstated, thus rendering it more difficult to combat. Instead, he or she issues only the move 2 message: "Joel, you're starting this week." The positive implication is clear, but it is not so easily dismissed because it is never made explicit.

Other examples of move 2's include the following: "Liz, come out here and show everybody the move you were just doing; everybody, please pay careful attention to what Liz is doing here, and then you try it" (unstated implication: Liz is quite good at this move). "Tony, I'm moving you up to varsity" (unstated implication: "You're too good to stay at the junior varsity level"). "Andrea, we've got a very important job for you this week; we'd like you to shadow their star all game long, deny her the ball, and pressure her to give it up when she does get it" (implicit message: "You are an excellent defender").

Use Credibility to Combat Players' Difficulties in Accepting Positive Appraisals.

At times, self-doubting players will find it difficult or impossible to accept the new and more positive appraisals they are hearing from their coaches. In their own minds, they will discount such appraisals with thoughts like "I was lucky," "it was an accident," "coach is just trying to make me feel good," or "it's amazing how even a klutz like me can get it right once in a while, but it can't last" (see Ossorio, 1976, on how "status takes precedence over fact"). Often, the coach will not be aware of these private discounting activities. However, if the player does make them public, coaches are well-advised not to let such statements pass unchallenged. For example, during a soccer practice, one player who thought little of her own ability made a perfectly formed, hard, and accurate shot on goal. When the coach said, "Nice kick, Sarah," she retorted that it was an "accident." The coach, in a friendly, gently teasing way, responded "Okay, nice accident." Then, after several additional quality shots from Sarah, he kidded her further by saying, "Gee, you're sure having a lot of good accidents today." Thus, while never directly contradicting Sarah, the coach worked to gently undermine her dismissal of her own competence by making teasing comments that he did not regard her success as accidental.

Never Degrade a Player.

Coaches, especially if they have acquired credibility with their players, should be careful never to use labels or other characterizations that could serve to diminish players' beliefs in their own abilities, potentials, or personal worth. Such labels and characterizations frequently imply ingrained, permanent deficiencies. The danger when we use them is quite simply that players will believe us—will believe that they possess these unchangeable, disqualifying characteristics (Ossorio, 1976, 1978; Bergner, 1987, 1995). Thus, the coach not only fails to enhance players' belief in themselves; he or she undermines such belief and, in the bargain, damages the team's ability to achieve its mission. Some common clusters of such labels and characterizations center around themes of work ethic ("lazy," "loafer," "always taking the easy way out," etc.); team vs. self orientation ("selfish," "ball hog,"

"glory hog," etc.); decision making ability ("stupid," "head case," "screw–up," etc.); and athletic potential ("uncoordinated," "klutz," "nonathletic," etc.).

The issue here is not truth. The issue is how to address deficiencies honestly and effectively, yet in such a way that the confidence of players is not destroyed. Coaches do not have to say "glory hog" to a player who is behaving selfishly. They can say, "Johnny, you absolutely must look more for the open man and stop taking bad shots, or you're coming out of the game." Coaches don't have to call Susie a "lazy loafer." They can say, "Susie, I don't see you working very hard right now to get this skill right, I need to see a greater effort," and then bring a negative consequence to bear for continued noncompliance. Coaches don't have to call Terry an "idiot." They can say, "That was a mistake, Terry; do you know what decision you need to make if that situation comes up again?," and then discuss the matter. Criticisms that destroy player's belief in themselves, that contain no useful information about how they can modify their problematic behavior, and that hurt the team by turning players against the coach, are destructive both to players and to the team's ability to accomplish its mission.

Relationship Between Coach and Athlete

Teaching is a human transaction entailing two complementary roles, those of teacher and student. In this transaction, one person, the teacher, creates a situation (e.g., gives a lecture, provides a demonstration, or prescribes an exercise) that he or she hopes will result in learning on the part of a second person, the student. For this transaction to be successful, the student must *cooperate* with the teacher's agenda, and do what it takes on his or her part to acquire the content of the lesson (do the exercise with diligence, practice the skill, etc.).

Viewed from this transactional perspective, the question becomes: "What sorts of relationships between teacher and pupil will lend themselves to the student being receptive to the teacher's agendas, and cooperative in carrying out his or her role in the learning process? The teacher can only "make a bid" or "extend an invitation" to learn. He or she cannot force the student to learn. What sorts of relationships will give students reason to cooperate, and thereby maximize the likelihood that this invitation will be accepted? On the other hand, what sorts of relationships will give pupils reason to reject the invitation—to thwart, oppose, disregard, or otherwise refuse to cooperate with the teacher?

A teacher is a leader whose particular mission is to enable followers to learn. Thus, it will not be surprising that those relationships that are conducive to effective leadership, and the actions that establish these relationships, will also be conducive to effective teaching. Since these are discussed at length in the chapter on leadership, they will be reviewed here only briefly and insofar as they relate to learning.

Act in the Best Interest of Athletes.

Athletes will tend to cooperate with a coach who places their best interests as human beings first. This is a coach who cares about them, and who in his or her actions gives priority to doing what is best for them as human beings (e.g., not playing them if they are injured, if they are neglecting their classwork, or if they need important behavioral limits placed on them). With such coaches, most athletes will tend to cooperate in the effort to learn. They will do so because they will want to return the good treatment given them, to please the coach, and not to do anything that would let the coach down or destroy the good relationship that exists between them (Warren, 1983). On the other hand, if the coach cares little for them, exploits them, and shows no concern for their best interests as persons, players have less reason to cooperate in efforts to learn, and more reason to be oppositional to the coach's teaching agendas.

Encourage, Listen To, and Genuinely Consider Player Input.

A coaching attitude of "I welcome your input, I will listen carefully to it, and I will always give it due consideration," is conducive to cooperation. When players see that the coach is genuinely interested in knowing their ideas, complaints, and difficulties; is truly attempting to understand them; and is willing to act on their input when convinced of its value, they are generally more receptive to the coach's agendas, including those having to do with learning.

Maintain Control: Set Limits and Enforce Them.

Research by Diana Baumrind (1983) and others in developmental psychology has shown that, where parents are concerned, it is a combination of warmth and firm control that yields the best outcomes, including learning outcomes. The same holds for coaching. Players respond best not only to the sort of caring and responsiveness described above, but to a situation where this is combined with the setting and subsequent enforcement of clear standards and limits. If the coach is a "good guy" but a pushover, it doesn't work. The message to players in such circumstances is that they don't really have to work hard to acquire skills and choice principles because, if they don't, there won't be any negative consequences from the coach (Paterno, 1988).

Keep Players Informed.

Coaches need to keep their players as informed as possible about key decisions and other developments affecting the wellbeing of the team. Secretiveness about such matters often elicits mistrust, suspicion, and the attribution of all sorts of unsavory motivations to the coach. None of these, it goes without saying, is particularly conducive to players being receptive to the coach's agendas, including those bearing on the matter of working hard to learn.

Acknowledge Efforts and Achievements.

Coaches must explicitly acknowledge players' efforts and achievements with recognition, praise, appreciation, new assignments, and in any other meaningful way that they can devise. From a relational (vs. informational or confidence-building) standpoint, such acknowledgments serve to establish a relationship with players where they know that their efforts are both recognized and appreciated by the coach (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). In general, all of us are more inclined to cooperate with others who recognize and appreciate our efforts.

Avoid Unnecessary Provocation.

Provocation elicits hostility (Ossorio, 1976), a motivation that, directed towards a coach, is not conducive to being receptive to him or her. Therefore, actions by the coach such as verbal or physical abusiveness, favoritism, exploitation, deceit, manipulation, or failure to honor commitments should be avoided on this, as well as on moral, grounds.

Avoid Unnecessary Coercion.

Coercion elicits resistance (Ossorio, 1976). Directed toward a coach who is attempting to teach, this is the very antithesis of cooperation in efforts to learn. Therefore, unnecessary resort to the use of threats, the degrading barking of orders, or any other form of pressure that will be perceived as excessive and/or illegitimate should be avoided.

Promote Family–Like Relationships between Team Members.

Speaking about families, Ossorio (personal communication, 1993) has characterized them in the following way: "A family is paradigmatically an institution marked by mutual support, affection, respect, cooperation, and trust, where differences are respected. No one is privileged, and no one is barred from rights" (cf. Roberts, 1991). While an athletic team is not literally a family, Ossorio's description is an excellent recipe for the sorts of relationships that would ideally exist between the members of a team. Where such relationships exist, they provide countless reasons for players to strive to learn and acquire excellence. For example, players on such a team will wish to do their best for their teammates, will be very loathe to let them down, will not want to damage their existing good relationships with them, and will work harder in the knowledge that their efforts will be noticed and celebrated by their fellow players. In contrast, the opposite sorts of team relationships (lack of mutual support, dislike, disrespect, noncooperation, mistrust, cliquishness, etc.) do not provide reasons for team members to strive in such fashion, and may provide reasons contrary to such acquisition of excellence through learning.

Therefore, coaches are well-advised to do such things as the following: (a) Take the lead by personally treating all team members in these ways (i.e., respectful, supportive, no one is privileged, etc.). (b) Set strict rules about how players must treat each other (see next section). Finally, (c) continually encourage players to

treat each other well through verbal messages, team–building activities, and open acknowledgments of their efforts when they do so.

Minimize Distractions from the Learning Situation

The athletic teaching situation must be as free as possible from elements that compete with the athletic lesson for the players' attention. Such elements are also destructive since they divert the coach's efforts toward controlling the distracting conditions, and away from teaching the lesson. Typical distractions include players horsing around when they are supposed to be on task, engaging in side conversations when coaches are instructing, refusing to cooperate with directions, harassing one another, or getting into physical confrontations.

Coaches must take strong action to eliminate or minimize all such barriers to learning (Paterno, 1988; Warren, 1983). The primary antidote here is something that has already been mentioned in connection with the coach–player relationship. Here we shall discuss it in greater detail insofar as it relates to preventing and eliminating factors that damage team learning. It comprises the following steps: (a) Establish from the outset a small but sufficient set of extremely clear rules and penalties prohibiting these and other activities that hurt the team. (b) Clarify for all players exactly how the proscribed activities damage the team. (c) Put the rules in writing and hand them out to every player (and, for younger players, every players' parents). (d) Stress that there are no exceptions to these rules and penalties. Finally, (e) enforce these rules throughout the season with the greatest possible consistency and evenhandedness. Coaches are well–advised never to let infractions slide in the hope that the problem will just go away by itself. Such an action is basically a message to all that they may be able to get away with these disruptive activities. This can easily lead to practice sessions becoming chaotic, uncontrolled, and of limited or no learning value. It is an absolute must that a coach, like a classroom teacher, maintain sufficient order so that lessons can be taught.

Teaching Policies

This section presents a set of eleven teaching policies. To a greater degree than the materials that have been presented previously in these chapters, the content of this section may be familiar to many readers. This is so, I believe, for two primary reasons. First, these policies are extremely commonsensical and will seem intuitively obvious to many readers. Second, they have been "preached and practiced" by many highly successful and visible coaches both past (e.g., John Wooden and Vince Lombardi) and present (e.g., Bobby Knight). To some degree, these policies may be seen as "reminders" whose value lies in the fact that, while "everybody knows them," it is equally true that everybody frequently forgets to

observe them or even violates them. While there are exceptions to every principle, and careful judgment about one's particular situation remains always a necessity, the following teaching guidelines should serve the athletic coach well the great majority of the time.

1. Teach Fewer Things Better

A cornerstone of the methods of John Wooden (1972), Vince Lombardi (O'Brien, 1987), Bobby Knight (Mellen, 1988), Woody Hayes (Walton, 1992), and many other great coaches has been a policy of not trying to teach players more than they can learn well. Rather than teaching many things only adequately (or even poorly), the central thrust of this policy is to teach fewer things, but to teach them as close to perfection as possible. Let us review three different applications of this general guideline.

The first application has to do with the overall design of the entire team training program. It comprises the following parts. (a) Decide on a relatively small set of fundamental skills, choice principles, and plays that are necessary and sufficient for success in the sport in question. (b) Inform the players of exactly what these are, so that they are very, very clear regarding precisely what they must learn. (c) Finally, focus the entire training program on teaching these fundamentals as close to perfection as possible. Thus, rather than teaching fancy but rarely utilized skills, the coach who follows this policy would teach players to execute the basic skills of a sport more quickly and perfectly than anyone else, and to a point where they can do so in game situations without thinking (Wooden, 1972). Rather than teaching numerous complicated plays, this coach would teach players to execute fewer, simpler, and thus more learnable ones more perfectly than the opposition.

A second application of the policy of teaching fewer things better is to teach one thing at a time. The general idea here is to create conditions where players can focus their attention on one thing to be learned, and not to overload their capacity to process information by trying to teach them too many things at once. For example, when a new skill is being introduced, players should not be inundated with all of its complexities at once ("Okay, everybody, now in playing defense, you have to get back fast, know where your person is at all times, stay between her and the goal, avoid ball-watching, be ready to help out if a teammate gets beaten, take this stance if your person has the ball...etc."). By way of further example, when instructing players about strategy during a time out in a game, only one very clearly stated point should be made at a time, and very few points made overall. When the coach tries to make ten points, all jammed into a very short, tension-packed, period of time, players usually leave the huddle thinking "What did he (or she) say? What were those ten things that I'm supposed to do all at once?"

A third and final application of the policy to teach fewer things better is to refrain from trying to cram too many things into one practice session. After observing the unfortunate state of overall team skills at an opening practice, or after

a poor showing in a game, the coach may become alarmed and begin to think, "Gee, we just have to do a much better job at X...and at Y...and at Z...etc." He or she may then attempt to improve all of these areas in one single practice session, and wind up touching only superficially on all of them, resulting in negligible improvement. Learning is far better served by selecting fewer learning targets for each practice session, and making sure that sufficient time is spent on each of them to achieve meaningful progress.

2. *Take Learners Where They Are, Not Where You Wish They Were*

We human beings have an amazing capacity at times to violate self-evident principles. One of the ones that the author has most frequently seen violated in athletic practice sessions is this: "Never require a person to do what he or she cannot do." For example, the author once observed a soccer coach who led off his first practice session by running a drill calling for players to get in groups of three and pass the ball back and forth to each other in the air, not letting it hit the ground. When his players proved completely incapable of keeping the ball in the air for more than two touches, the coach made no adjustments to accommodate to their skill level. The result was that, during the entire drill, the ball was on the ground being retrieved approximately 90% of the time. Players were not learning anything retrieving missed balls, showed negligible improvement, and were clearly frustrated by the drill. Why? Because they were asked in the first place to do things they could not do, and no adjustments were made when they proved incapable of carrying out the drill.

Teaching policy #2 suggests that the coach observe carefully where players in fact *are* in their skill development and, based on this assessment, refrain from giving them training exercises that call upon them to possess skills or skill levels that they do not in fact possess. They will only fail, learn little, and possibly become disheartened and lose confidence. Instead, the policy suggests, the coach would do well to build on what players are currently able to do. He or she should give tasks that they can succeed at, gradually add ones that call for manageable stretches in their abilities, and build up their skill levels in this fashion.

This general principle of taking players where they are, and building on this, has numerous practical applications. For example, (a) when introducing new skills of a complex nature, the policy suggests that these be broken down into simpler, and thus more currently manageable, components. These simple components should each be taught separately; and then players would put the individual pieces together to form the complex skill. (b) When teaching new skills, the policy also suggests that the coach should utilize a progression where the skill is learned first in very low-pressure situations (no opposition, ample time, etc.) where it is easiest for players to take their time and get their technique correct. Once it is well-learned under these conditions, the player is called upon to practice the skill under increasingly greater pressure, culminating in high-pressure, game condition

situations. (c) Finally, when teaching choice principles and other ideas, the present policy suggests that we draw upon examples of things that players already understand well. For example, with a young former football player who was new to soccer, the offensive responsibilities of a center midfielder were explained this way: "This position is a lot like a quarterback in football. You don't try to score much yourself; your basic offensive job is more to set others up to score with your passing."

Taking learners where they are also implies that drills or other lessons should not be too easy. Players will not learn from tasks that call upon them to operate well below their capabilities. (This should not be taken to imply that the fundamental skills of a sport do not need to be practiced over and over again, even by the most expert of players. Ted Williams, one of the greatest hitters in baseball history, continued throughout his career to work strenuously on his hitting, always refining his technique and searching for ways to make it even better.)

3. Be as Simple, Precise, and Clear as Possible.

Wellington Mara, the owner of the New York Giants football team, once made the following comment about Vince Lombardi's teaching methods. Seeing how simple, repetitious, and utterly exact Lombardi's messages to players were, Mara commented that "It was as if he were teaching the bottom 10% of the class" (O'Brien, 1987, p. 119). With verbal messages to the team, such simplicity, precision, and clarity are essential for optimum learning to occur. To create this, it is important for coaches to use language that they are sure players understand. Further, if athletes do not understand a lesson when it is given one way, it is critical that the coach present the lesson another way. Finally, clarity and understanding are often well served by the coach using stories, metaphors, and analogies to make his or her points (e.g., the technique for trapping a soccer ball coming out of the air may be compared to that of catching an egg thrown to one—one must withdraw the receiving surface to soften the impact).

This need for extreme clarity and precision also extends to nonverbal messages. A great deal of information in athletics cannot be communicated very well verbally. It is virtually impossible to describe all the elements of a technically correct "fireman" in wrestling, forward pass in football, or backhand in tennis in such a way that these descriptions alone would be sufficient for learning. Players simply have to see certain things to understand them. Thus, it is incumbent on the coach to provide the clearest, most helpful visual demonstrations possible. In this connection, two helpful guidelines are the following. First, separate the verbal part of the demonstration from the visual part, so that the auditory and visual channels are not "jamming" each other. For example, if the coach is teaching essential footwork, she might start by saying, "Now watch how I turn my foot," *stop talking*, and only then turn her foot in the desired way. Second, it is frequently helpful to provide illustrations in slow motion. If, for example, the coach is demonstrating a

complex skill, demonstrating it at full speed will often result in the players seeing a rather uninformative blur. If executed in slow motion, however, they will be able to see each of the components of the skill and how they go together in its overall execution. The coach may even isolate each of these components for the players' attention ("Now look at the position of my feet...now look at how my body is turned...now look at how my racket is back...etc.").

4. Insist that Players Strive to Execute Skills Perfectly.

One of the most useful maxims in coaching (my daughter informs me that her ballet instructor also employed it heavily) is that "Practice doesn't make perfect; *perfect* practice makes perfect." If players execute a technique the wrong way a thousand times, they have only made themselves better at doing that technique incorrectly. In the bargain, they have also established muscular habits that will render changing the technique more difficult. Therefore, it is essential that coaches ceaselessly urge players to strive for perfect execution, that they catch and correct faults before these become bad habits, and that they promote a value for perfect practice on the part of players.

5. Provide Immediate Feedback

The motivational and confidence–building benefits of providing positive feedback for successful performances have been discussed previously in this book. Such feedback, it may now be noted, is also very important from a learning standpoint (Skinner, 1974; Bandura, 1986). Accurate, credible messages that one is making progress, or that one has just executed a skill or a play assignment with excellence, provide important confirmatory *information* that one is getting something right. When viewed from a learning perspective, further, one can see that the provision of false positive feedback in order to please or reassure players is a poor idea. Such feedback, if believed, provides players with misleading information about the correctness of what they are doing.

From a learning perspective, it is also very important to provide immediate corrective feedback when players make mistakes in their technique or decision making. Again, such feedback provides critical information to players that they are going wrong and how they are going wrong, and can thus prevent them from making their mistakes habitual.

The fundamental rule for corrective criticism is this: *Criticism must always be for the benefit of improving behavior* (cf. Ossorio, 1976, 1981). When feedback is degrading ("Smith, you'll never amount to anything") or otherwise lacking in usable information ("C'mon, quit screwing up and get your act together, we need a hit"), it serves no constructive learning function for the player. In contrast, when criticism contains diagnoses of what is wrong, and prescriptions for how to improve it, that are couched in language that informs players about how to modify

their performance, it is beneficial criticism from a learning standpoint. For example, the classical admonition, "You're not watching the ball, you've got to keep your eye on the ball" is a simple, everyday example of criticism that can serve to improve behavior. It contains a diagnosis ("not watching the ball") and a prescription ("keep your eye on the ball") that the player can *use* to improve his or her performance.

6. When Possible, Teach in Small Groups

Circumstances and coaching personnel permitting, the quality of learning can be enhanced by teaching players in small groups of from two to six players. Working with such groups enables coaches to observe each player better, to provide corrective feedback more adequately, and to maintain levels of behavioral control that are more conducive to optimum learning.

7. Design Practices to Achieve Maximum Learning Time

In the "best of all possible learning worlds," players would be enhancing their mastery of skills and choice principles 100% of the time during every practice. While such a state of affairs is an unachievable ideal, certain common coaching practices do result unnecessarily in large wastages of valuable learning time. For example, it is not uncommon for coaches to employ drills where players stand in long lines awaiting their turn to practice a skill, thus creating a situation where they are learning only a small percentage of the time. Other common time wastages occur when valuable stretches of practice time are spent on breaks, setting up equipment for drills, giving lengthy instructions, and/or selecting sides for scrimmage. Finally, when players are required to participate in large scale scrimmages or other game–type drills (e.g., 9 v. 9 baseball, 11 v. 11 soccer), significant periods of time may pass where they are out of the action and learning comparatively little.

An excellent general learning principle is therefore to design practices so as to achieve maximum learning time for every single player. To this end, practices should be planned completely beforehand (all drills selected, their order determined, scrimmage sides established, etc.) so that no valuable learning time need be spent during practice on these matters. Whenever possible, all equipment (cones, flags, nets, etc.) should be set up before practice so that no time is wasted on set–up and players can move swiftly and efficiently from one learning activity to another. Where skill development is the goal, drills should be selected in which every player is practicing the target skill as much time as possible (e.g., in baseball, if fielding ground balls is the target skill, pairing up and throwing each other hard grounders will be infinitely superior to an intrasquad game where some players may handle no grounders the entire time). Where playing the game itself is the focus, and thus having players use the full range of skills and choice principles

under game-condition pressure, small scale games will usually be preferable to full scale ones (e.g., in soccer, 3 v. 3 games will result in all players dribbling, passing, shooting, or defending virtually 100% of the time).

8. Employ Drills that are Competitive Games

Compared to drills that involve repetition only, ones that are also competitive games sustain motivation and effort more easily for the vast majority of players. In soccer, for example, most players find pairing up and passing balls back and forth a somewhat boring activity. In contrast, when they are told that there is a contest, and the winners are the twosome who can make the highest number of consecutive passes to each other standing in small target areas, they usually find this a much more involving activity. When employing such contests, it is a good idea to publicly acknowledge the winners at the end, and to do something celebratory such as having them briefly raise their hands in victory while the rest of the team claps. Concentration, effort, time on task, and thus *learning*, are all improved by such drills.

9. Prefer Drills that are Enjoyable.

The rationale for this principle is essentially identical to that of the previous one. Drills that are enjoyable sustain motivation, effort, concentration, and time on task more easily than drills that are tedious. Again, they facilitate a better quality of learning, and do so without the coach continually having to "ride herd" on players.

10. Prefer Drills that Reward Perfect Execution.

Drills that have built-in rewards for perfect execution, and built-in penalties for poor execution, are excellent vehicles for achieving high quality learning. In such drills, getting the technique just right usually works, and getting it wrong usually does not. Players get their own natural feedback—the curve ball breaks or doesn't break, the jump shot goes in or doesn't go in, the escape from the down position occurs or doesn't occur—and learn from it. The reinforcement, or lack thereof, is instantaneous. Further, such drills reduce the burden on the observational and corrective powers of the coach. He or she has less of a need to see everything, and provide corrective feedback for it.

11. Employ Economical Drills (Under Certain Conditions).

Economical drills are ones that accomplish multiple coaching objectives at the same time. For example, a good economical drill might enhance skills, teach choice principles, and promote high levels of conditioning all at once. Such drills should not be employed in the early stages of teaching a specific skill or concept; at this stage, it is usually best to teach one thing at a time, and not to have multiple

elements enmpeting for players' attention. However, at later stages, where skills and choice principles have been learned, and what is called for is their exercise under game conditions, economical drills become highly useful and appropriate.

Summary

In this chapter, the crucial matter of learning in team athletics has been the focus. Taking our cue from Lombardi's assertion that "coaching is really teaching," three highly practical questions have been raised and subsequently addressed. The first of these concerned the ultimate goal of teaching in team athletics: "What must players learn?" The position taken was that the basic objective of the learning process in athletics is the development of players (a) with great technical skills; (b) who make good decisions based on sound choice principles both in game situations and in team life in general; and (c) who are capable, without constant direction from the coach, of monitoring their own behavior, staying with what is working, and making appropriate adjustments in what is not working.

The second question addressed in this chapter concerned what conditions coaches should seek to create in order to promote optimum learning. The response to this question centered around the promotion of four such conditions, (a) high player motivation, (b) players' possession of a sense of personal eligibility, (c) an optimum relationship between coach and athletes, and (d) freedom from distracting factors in the learning situation. Measures to create and maintain all of these conditions were discussed.

The third and final question addressed in this chapter concerned the process of teaching itself: "What teaching policies should coaches employ in order to facilitate the best possible acquisition of skills and concepts on the part of players?" In response to this question, eleven teaching principles were advanced and discussed.

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