

Developing game management skills in your players: Encouraging creativity and technical excellence

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Encouraging Creativity

"You can't be a creative thinker if you don't stimulate your mind, just as you can't be an Olympic athlete if you don't train regularly" - Sir Ken Robinson. Expert on education, creativity and innovation.

Due to the open and unpredictable nature of football, players have to be able to process information and make decisions almost instantly. These decisions are informed by an individual's game understanding and how they interpret the scenario. Because they have to make decisions quickly and often, players need to rely on instinct and forces creativity in their decision making. It is important that young players are encouraged to express themselves and attempt new things in practice.

As coaches, we cannot manufacture creativity! It is a spontaneous process brought about from the imagination and insight of the individual involved. We can create an environment to facilitate and promote creativity though, by giving players the freedom and confidence to experiment and express themselves.

As part of this process, coaches must also understand that mistakes will happen, and it's the coaches response to these mistakes that will determine whether players continue to be creative or attempt to appease the coach.

For example, if an 11 year player attempts the 'Bergkamp' flick in training and it doesn't come off, a coach that shouts and screams at the player for losing possession may now have killed the creative instinct of the player in that environment. A coach who asks "What did you see and what were you attempting?" may now gain information on the creative insight of the player. Technical and tactical information can still be given, however, the imagination of the individual is also respected and nurtured.

Player Led Sessions

Giving ownership of rules, activities and structure of the session mean that player led sessions are a great way for coaches to encourage creativity. Coaches can still give guidance to ensure that the practices are relevant to the game and learning outcomes for the team. However, the main role of the coach should then be to observe and provide guiding questions or challenges for the players.

In an era when young players don't have the opportunity to experiment in the street football games of yesteryear, coaches can provide a platform to allow this kind of development. However, just as street football has no interference from coaches, the player led games should also be allowed to take their own natural course.

In the related content section of this article there are examples of player led sessions filmed with our academy partner, Southampton FC.

Technical Excellence

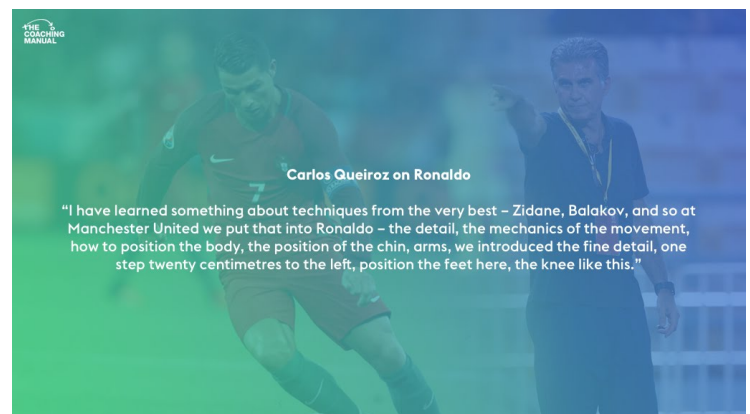
The ability to execute decisions our players make are influenced, and limited, by their technical capability. For example, a young player in possession may recognise the option to play the ball between the opposition full back and centre back in order to break the defensive line and allow a team mate to receive. However, the player may not be able to technically pass the ball over the required distance with the correct weight and accuracy. Thus, the outcome will be unsuccessful.

The general consensus among elite coaches is by the age of 14 an individual must possess a technical base that allows him or her to adequately meet the demands of the game. By the age of 18 the game is quicker, decision-making time on the ball reduces and the execution of technique is of a higher standard.

So, if coaches are facilitating activities that allow players to partake in game-related activities in order to make decisions, when do we coach the improvement and refinement of technique?

We should be encouraging our players to strive for technical excellence, and in a perfect world, players would be technically excellent and be able to make the correct decisions at the appropriate times. However, making the right decision with the 'wrong technique' may still result in a positive outcome!

For example, very few coaches will encourage or teach a toe poke when finishing on goal yet a player may recognise in a game that they need to finish in one touch and the toe poke is the most appropriate technique in that situation.



Also what is technical excellence? Is it the aesthetics of a player and the perceived visual technique that a coach is looking for? Or is it the fact that every decision a player makes and carries out can be fulfilled no matter how it looks to the coach?

Whilst a player who possesses technical excellence with appropriate decisions is utopia, a player who can make appropriate decisions teamed with an ability to meet the technical demands, may be more effective than a player who has technical excellence but inappropriate decision making capacity.

Give them time to learn

Younger players need more time and require more guidance when developing their technical mastery, due to their experience and continued development of gross and fine motor skills. Technical, or unopposed, activities can be built into the session so that players are comfortable on the ball.

However, as soon as the players can meet the technical demands of the session, opposition and pressure should be added so that the players now have to interpret the game and make game-related decisions with the appropriate technical execution.

As players begin to enter the 11v11 format, the need to spend time developing technique should decrease and coaches focuses should be on improving game understanding and executing tactical concepts across the 4 phases of the game (in possession, out of possession, transition to attack, transition to defend).

Players should still be aiming to improve and maintain their technical abilities, and players of all ages and levels are responsible for their own development and can work on these technical components individually, away from training. This practice culture and drive to master the ball is often what separates good players from great players!

The Coaching Manual have a wide range of age-appropriate individual skills that young players can set up and practice on their own. These can be found in the 'player skills' section of the 'training ground' here [Player Skills \(https://www.thecoachingmanual.com/playerskills\)](https://www.thecoachingmanual.com/playerskills)

