

Why do you coach?

I coach to share a love of the beautiful game. I coach for players who love the joy of competition, who want to develop resilience and self-reliance and improve their soccer abilities along the way.

Why do I coach the way I do today?

From my first coaching experience as an assistant to my mom coaching my younger brother's team when I was 10, I've seen the importance that fun plays in developing better soccer players. Now, I care more about developing better people while improving their soccer ability, but fun and joy remain at the forefront. The goal each season is to help each and every player improve no matter their starting level. At the youngest ages, for some that may just mean building enough confidence to leave their mother's side and join their team on the pitch. For older players, developing resilience, social graces and self reliance are important goals beyond soccer skill acquisition. Having had the pleasure of great coaches like [Marikae Cerami](#) as a youth player myself, I try to bring the same joy, enthusiasm and dedication to coaching. I started with drills my coaches taught me and graduated to finding drills on the internet before beginning to think more holistically about a complete coaching methodology. My approach has been developed over years of coaching experience, observation of young players, and studying academy methodologies in person at FC Barcelona and Legia Warsaw. And although I am a firm believer in people's skills and abilities being [far more important](#) than their credentials, I have completed coach education courses and workshops with the NSCAA, TOVO Institute and Canada Soccer C-License in addition to decades of on-field coaching experience. After competing on the rowing team in college, I played semi-professionally as a goalkeeper in Chicago, winning the Hispanic League. Utilizing research and communication skills honed on the University of Michigan Debate team, I've explored the research literature and science behind learning and educational best practices. Through interviews with coaches around the world, including Anson Dorrance of the US National Team and North Carolina, Dr. Colleen Hacker of the US National and Olympics Team, and Sandra Doreleijers of PSV Eindhoven, I've garnered insights into player development. I am able to draw on my background as an entrepreneur, CEO and business executive to build relationships, lead people and accomplish goals.

On Leadership Style and Methods

Football is a sport where individual creativity supports collective success. A game which closely resembles life - continuously changing, constant decision making, unpredictable outcomes and no timeouts. Football is about communication, both verbal and non verbal, and tactics are just tools to improve communication among players. While the passing technique of Modric or the finishing ability of Messi is lauded, their execution, their technique is a function of communication and decision making. They are not trick shot artists or circus performers, their talent is performing in service to the team. Where football teams use a formation as a heuristic to make teammates more predictable, corporate leaders use strategy and planning to help employees and partners contribute more effectively. The best coaches are servant leaders, putting the growth and well being of their players first. They get to know them as people, for whom one part of their identity is as a football player, and by understanding them as a whole person, can help create an environment in which they can motivate themselves.

In an increasingly culturally divided world where players are described as 'soft' in one camp and another camp is focused on 'safe spaces' where no criticism exists, we need to move past personal bias and be clear on the science of learning. 'Old school' coaches who were effective were simply holding the players in their care to a high standard. To be effective, they still had to be empathetic, have a strong relationship with each player and be predominantly positive. As [Sir Alex Ferguson](#) explains, 'Once they know you are batting for them, they will accept your way.' Grounded in the science of neuroplasticity and mindset psychology, this coaching style is known as warm/strict or [warm demanding](#). You can hold players to a high standard, while committing to their long-term development. This approach also has many similarities with Transformational Leadership Theory (TFL). TFL builds upon transactional leadership which is "considered a necessary foundation for effective leadership, and involves behaviors that involve reward or punishment contingencies or feedback (Avolio, 1999). Transformational leaders build upon this foundation by developing [person-centered relationships](#) that empower, inspire, and challenge followers (Bass and Riggio, 2006)."

What does it look like to coach players (students) to a high standard?

https://player.vimeo.com/video/362304881?dnt=1&app_id=122963

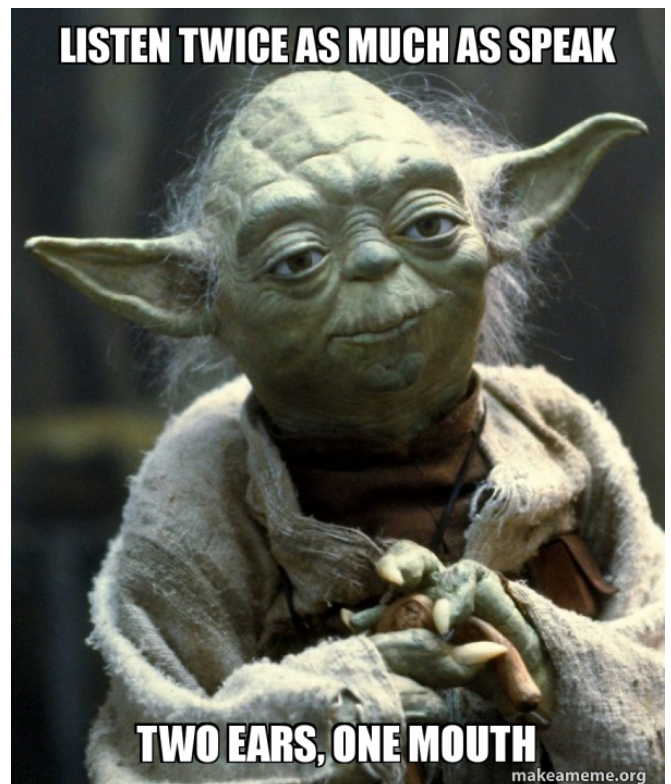
Coaching MUST be positive to be effective. [Anxiety](#) created by motivational pressure from coaches and parents is detrimental to skill execution. Even for elite athletes, it is more important to be 'psyched down' including through breathing and visualization exercises for peak performance. Players who are afraid of making mistakes or a [coach's negative](#) response cannot perform to the best of their ability.

Coaches would do well to remember '[only the learner learns](#)' and focus critical assessment on their role and ability as a facilitator. What is the source of this error? Did I teach this skill? In context? Multiple times? In multiple contexts? With retrieval practice? Did I check for understanding? In this situation (time of day, moment in match, position on field, weather conditions, score, etc)? Is this action, skill, or movement the focus of this session or match? Have I ever seen this mistake made in a professional match? If you breathe and take even a brief second to focus your criticism inward, your self-assessment will likely reveal an exhausting list of things you personally could have done better. This is a more productive use of your criticism than focusing on the natural learning mistake of a child. Learning is about making new mistakes as often as possible.

State of mind is the single most important factor that affects performance - athletes need a **positive** high performance mindset. Coaches [can support this](#) by building a relationship with each individual person (seeing them as a person reminds you that they are complex and have multiple roles in life, athlete, student, son/daughter, friend, sibling), utilize the neuroscience of trust and igniting positive emotions. [Calm, Happy and Energized](#) mindsets drive the greatest levels of effectiveness and performance.

On Observation

Effective coaching requires effort and dedication off the pitch. On the pitch, observation is critical to self-improvement and development of your players. To the old adage of 'two ears, one mouth', good coaches add 'two eyes.' On the sideline, there are a few basic principles that support learning to apply. First, recall that teaching new concepts during a competition will be quite difficult, as learning something new requires use of working memory and has a high cognitive load. During games you can remind players of things you are **sure** they already know using language you have familiarized them with. Even then, you should strive to do it during breaks in play. Second, remember that matches are just part of the development of a player ('training in fancier uniforms,' as Todd Beane puts it). Follow the [model of the Belgian Football](#)



[Association](#) to move from 66th to 1st in the FIFA rankings if in doubt - team competition results are meaningless through U17; focus on the development of players as individuals. Third, half-time and postgame talks should be brief and focused on the reflection topic. For specific guidance, Doug Lemov, founder of Uncommon Schools and author of *Teach Like a Champion* and *Coach Like a Champion* [suggests](#), 'Steady players emotions. Offer one or two insights for reflection. Give them a question to respond to or a topic to reflect on before practice. Stop talking. Three minutes max.'

On Effective Feedback

[TOVO](#) incorporates the idea of reflection into training and match preparation. The purpose is to focus players on a topic, goal, area of interest or principle of play for the upcoming session. This concept is good for coaches too. It reinforces what the objective is for the session or match and reminds you to provide aligned feedback. While there may be 100s of things you could correct or encourage, focus on the decisions, behaviors and executions relevant to the session or match goal. Anything else important, make a note of it. Feedback should be infrequent as the player will already be getting external results based evidence. Feedback that avoids reference to a player's body parts/movements and instead directs attention to movement effects (e.g., the ball, an opponent, etc.) [produces better learning outcomes](#). Aligning feedback with an external focus of success instead of internal to a player's technique is also critical to development and self-ownership of learning. Feedback is too often viewed as unnecessary criticism or received with defensiveness. One solution is to think of it and present it in the context of 'feedforward.' Offer your advice in the context of helping someone improve, achieve their goals and accomplish more in the future.

What does [effective feedback](#) look like? <https://vimeo.com/310869952>

This is not just a methodology for teens and young adults. It works for the youngest students too. Joy, competition, focus, shared knowledge, positive feedback and high standards in action with a group of 5 year old students - <https://vimeo.com/310378272>

On Learning (and forgetting)

While children (and all humans really) are learning a new skill they move through a [competence matrix](#). Originally developed as a competence ladder moving from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence through to conscious competence and unconscious competence. Unconscious competence representing mastery of a skill. A matrix approach better supports learning and development, as it is clear that regressions are natural on a process to mastery AND there are always new

skills to learn. Humans struggle with new skills when they begin to learn them. And the moment we've learned them, we begin to forget. Forgetting is not something to be chastised, as it is a normal part of the learning process. In fact, ['forgetting' enhances learning](#) and coaches should utilize techniques like interleaving, retrieval practice and desirable difficulty into their planning.

Learning is [non-linear](#).

On Self-determination and development

The player is the protagonist. The 'best' players are self-motivated and self-determined. The coach is a facilitator. The 'best' coaches are caring mentors. Strive to be positive and encouraging while reinforcing self-determination through reflection and self-assessment exercises and journaling. Again, coaches do not need to make up an approach. There are [science-based lessons](#) to be learned from education. Treating each player as an individual who is capable of leading their own development journey is valuable beyond the pitch. Learning to learn, to reflect, to self-assess, to improve and to adapt are critical skills for succeeding in the world today.

These skills are hallmarks of individuals who have a [growth mindset](#). These people understand that talents and abilities are not fixed, but can be developed through effort, practice and learning. Intelligence can be developed. Of course, most coaches espouse a belief in this mindset, but as with many educators, understanding the nuance and work required to apply it often manifests as a ['false growth mindset'](#). Especially in the sporting world it is far too easy to fall into the trap of 'natural talent.' But as Omid Fotuhi of the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center [writes](#), "Ultimately, effective teaching requires an embrace of the never-ending and bidirectional process of learning between students and teachers. And with that comes the recognition that our own beliefs as teachers can be strengthened and developed. As Carol Dweck sometimes reminds me, "We all have a combination of both growth and fixed mind-sets." The goal is not to "arrive" at the right set of beliefs or practices; it's to embark on the voyage of moving toward endless growth."

On Fouls in the Youth Game

Let the kids play. FIFA rules are indeed the laws of the game, but all too often they are enforced more rigidly than in any World Cup final. These are children, learning the game. The priority should be as much playing time as possible. Pedantry around throw-in perfection, a slightly moving ball on a goal kick or a substitute being 2 steps

from leaving the field should not rule the day. As long as it isn't creating an unfair advantage for one team, let the kids play.

Letting the kids play extends to 'fouls' as well. While being 'rule-followers' helps Canada when faced with a global pandemic, it undermines its ability to develop footballers. Referees seem to be taught to blow their whistle early, and often engage in the practice of 'coaching' the game. Football, even at the youth level, is a contact sport. Stopping the game just because a kid has fallen over should not happen unless it is a serious injury. Not to mention the terrible habit of some coaches (and even parents) running onto the field for every kick, toe stepped on or shoulder to shoulder challenge that little Susie falls over for without even being waived on by the referee. Much like a scraped knee at the playground, most kids will dust themselves off and get back to playing without being carried off by an overbearing adult.

Seeing > Scanning

Teaching players to 'scan' is necessary, but insufficient. To be effective, players need to learn to [see and interpret visual cues](#). Understanding the role of perception-action coupling and the need to place decision-making and skills in context, this is an excellent area for coaches to facilitate significant player improvements. Instead of artificial devices like looking for colours or numbers, coach players to look for sensory cues. For example, a striker should recognize their centreback is about to play a long pass because their hips shift back to deliver more power. Or a midfielder should see which side of their teammate a defender is on before receiving the ball themselves. Legendary coach educator Dick Bate recounts details of using sensory abilities at the highest levels of the game in this video.
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