

YOUTH SOCCER LETTER – Traits and Gifts of a Good Youth Coach

By Dan Woog

In nearly three decades in youth soccer, Dean Conway has seen plenty. However, the Massachusetts Youth Soccer Association director of coaching says there is always more to learn. Recently he and Tim Castle, MYSA vice president of instruction, compiled a list of important talents, aptitudes and characteristics of good youth coaches. "This is all derivative – it's not me speaking alone," Conway noted. "I'm fortunate to have been exposed to great people talking about great things." Nonetheless, the ideas are persuasive, and worth passing along.

Conway and Castle divide the elements of good coaching into three areas: personal qualities, organizational abilities and soccer expertise. "No two coaches are exactly the same, so there will always be differences," Conway emphasized. "But generally, with younger players – U-6, U-8 – by far the most important qualities are personal. Then comes organizational, with soccer expertise a distant third.

"At U-10 and U-12 the personal qualities are no less important, but organizational abilities become more so. Players at that age need enjoyable, challenging games, in appropriate spaces for the appropriate amount of time. And soccer expertise is good to have, because these are critical learning years.

"At U-14 and U-16 personal qualities are still very important, but kids are more self-reliant and resourceful. Organizational abilities are still important too, but coaches don't necessarily need more refinement. Soccer expertise is now very important. Kids may pass coaches by; they've played for years, and are asking questions coaches can't answer."

Conway cited several important personal qualities for youth coaches:

Energy and enthusiasm. "Kids have abundant energy. It's important to match that energy, in order to guide and lead," Conway said. "A coach may love soccer, but if he has 'adult self-control' he won't inspire his players. A coach needs good body language, to move around with the kids and demonstrate enthusiastically."

Humor. Conway calls this quality "very big. Today's world is increasingly serious, but soccer is really playful and humorous. Fun should always be in the air. It lightens kids up, and decreases anxiety."

Affection. "This speaks for itself. It's about human sensitivity. Kids should know that we look at them as emerging human beings, not just athletes to throw on the field."

Patience. According to Conway, "a lot of adults are so concerned with kids not making mistakes, that they lose patience. Coaches have to accept that mistakes are good. Mistakes are how you learn, how you prove you're willing to take risks." Coaches must keep cool in what Conway calls "the constant stream of mistakes that make up a soccer game." It is unrealistic to expect consistency of young players ("or professionals," he laughed), so patience is crucial. Playing well one night and poorly the next afternoon is simply "the nature of kids," said Conway.

Self-control. "A coach should be reasonably dignified," Conway explained. "You have to watch your verbal language, your body language, your entire demeanor." It is not easy for a coach to manage frustration, but it is vital. "It's so odd to see an otherwise rational adult lose it in a game or practice," Conway mused. "We all must look at ourselves in the mirror, and listen to ourselves constantly."

Selflessness. "None of this stuff is about us. It's about the kids," Conway insisted. "Soccer is a wonderful game, with tremendous opportunities for players to grow upright, be strong and persistent. We have to always realize it's about them and their growth, not us and our whims."

Generosity. Conway called this "the little gestures about extending ourselves to others." Particularly important is the gift of time, in short order today.

Confidence. A good youth coach must exude the sense that everything is fine, Conway said. "If you're secure in the decisions you make, the kids pick up on it. That doesn't mean being brash or

cocky, and you don't want your kids to be overconfident. But conveying security sends a good message to the kids: 'Let's roll.'"

Open-mindedness and eagerness to learn. "We can never know enough," Conway said. "I've coached for nearly 30 years, and the elusive point of 'getting it' keeps receding. But my advancement is rich, and never stops." Coaches should be eager to talk to other soccer people, and read and watch matches. This open-mindedness extends to knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, and working to improve both.

Conway's second major category, organizational abilities, included these qualities:

Good preparation; a realistic sense of how much can be accomplished. At G and F license courses – the foundation of coaching – Conway and his staff tell attendees to consider themselves "activity leaders." That means planning a few activities well, and understanding time constraints. The best youth coaches, Conway said, "organize their sessions ahead of time, put the cones down, step back and lead."

A clear, linear way of thinking and speaking. "Speak coherently, but as little as possible," Conway advised. "Kids come to play, not to listen to adults. It's human nature for grownups to talk, and human nature for kids to roll their eyes."

Excellent sense of time and space. "Wear a watch, and keep looking at it," said Conway. "It's easy to lose track of time. And using space – too much, too little or the right amount – can be motivating or de-motivating. A good coach needs a good grip on what's appropriate."

Focusing simultaneously on both details and the big picture. Conway acknowledged that this is both subtle and difficult. It is easy for coaches to get caught up in minor details, or be so concerned with the entire practice that they forget to stop, teach and communicate with each player individually.

Finally, the qualities of soccer expertise include:

Sound understanding of children. This always precedes knowledge of the game itself, Conway said. "If you don't understand kids' limitations, you'll never get to techniques and tactics. You need to know social, physical, emotional and cognitive development – things like stages of development and characteristics. In other words, you have to get to know kids."

Good, comprehensive technical knowledge. Through at least the U-14 level, Conway said, technique is the most important part of soccer instruction. A good coach must be able to help youngsters learn how to control the ball, dribble, pass, shoot, play goal and move their bodies.

A solid grasp of (at least basic) tactics. Conway called this "a distant second" to technical knowledge. He warned youth coaches against getting bogged down in trivial details. Teaching the basics is fine; coaches at more advanced levels can add more refined tactics.

Awareness of improving fitness, preventing and dealing with injuries, and interpreting rules. Of these, Conway said, fitness is the least important. "Soccer is not about running kids into the ground, 'toughening them up.' If they play lots of small-sided games they'll get the strength, agility, balance and other components of fitness they need."

Keeping up to date on new ideas and trends. Soccer is a simple game, Conway stressed. But the more a coach is aware of innovations, the more enjoyable youth coaching becomes.

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