

Friday, April 16, 2010

Don't be a 'Joystick' Coach

By Alex Kos

I first heard the term "Joystick Coaching" a few years back. What a wonderfully descriptive term. As with video games, joystick coaches want to dictate and control the movement of all players on the field. Hence the term "joystick."

However, there is very little joy to be had by players when they are coached in this manner.

Joystick coaching has reached epidemic proportions (and parents are just as guilty). Why is this happening?

* Look at other popular youth sports such as football, baseball and basketball. Football and baseball coaches are joystick experts. Even in basketball where the game is more fluid (like soccer) and, therefore, more difficult to control and manipulate, coaches still try their best to dictate the action. Since many soccer coaches come from these backgrounds, it is only natural that joystick coaching carries over into soccer.

* We are a sports nation hung up on X's and O's. Joysticking is a natural by-product of this fascination. How many times do you see defenders standing in one spot because that is where the defenders were positioned on the dry-erase board?

* Soccer is not an easy sport to learn. No matter how many times coaches tell young players to spread out and not play bunch-ball, they still do. As such, coaches feel compelled to 'help' position and move their players about.

Besides early player retirements, there are other consequences of this "helping" behavior.

* In a sport that is very fluid where the action happens so quickly, players must be able to think on their feet and solve or address problems immediately. However, the more players are told what to do, the less they will be able to think for themselves.

* Players lose their sense of purpose. They are out there to play a game and try their best yet are constantly being told how to play.

* Once one adult starts maneuvering players on the field, other adults feel empowered to do the same. Soon, players are being told how to play and where to stand by coaches, parents, and complete strangers. And often, the three groups are giving three completely different instructions. What is a player to do?

These are some simple tips that will help coaches curb the joystick epidemic and truly help players.

* Lead by example. Limited joystick coaching during games as much as possible.

* Set ground rules for your assistant coaches and parents. Explain the drawback of joystick coaching and having multiple adults "help" players with conflicting instructions.

* Rather than telling players what to do and where to play, ask them how and where they should be playing. Let them think of the answer and assist only if they don't know the answer.

Coaches (and parents), leave your joysticks hooked up to your game consoles at home for use with FIFA 10. If you don't, you'll be using the actual joystick much more since Saturday mornings will soon be free.

(Alex Kos' experiences as a player, coach, referee, parent and fan are shared in his blog, [Improving Soccer in the United States](#), where this article first appeared.)