

Sideline Coaching –

Dump the GPS and let the kids drive

By Scott Nelson

While observing U7 games a few seasons ago I got into a conversation with a disgruntled parent. It turns out that this parent was constantly being told to stop coaching from the sidelines by the team's actual coach. This parent felt justified "getting involved" from the sidelines because, he explained, the designated coach of the team "wasn't coaching enough."

Now, I had observed this parent's sideline behavior several times, and had also seen him silenced by his daughter's coach on more than one occasion. This parent's pearls of coaching wisdom included phrases like "Go!" "Get the ball!" "Shoot it!" "Get back!" "Hard kicks!" "Don't Bunch!" and liberal doses of the one phrase guaranteed to make me cringe whenever I hear it: "Boot it!"

Without a hint of irony, this parent would also yell at his child to "Pay attention to the game" on the many occasions when she stopped playing to look over at him on the sidelines.

His daughter's coach, much to this parent's consternation, gave out none of this crucially needed guidance. Instead he would stand watching from the sidelines, giving out plenty of encouragement, praising good intentions (even when they weren't successful!) but mostly leaving the kids to their own devices unless they needed help figuring out what to do on their restarts.

When he did intervene, he would ask his players questions instead of giving commands. "Where do you need to be?" "Where do you think they will go if they get the ball?" "Where do you think she will kick the ball?" "What shape should we be in?" "Can you try and dribble instead of kicking the ball away next time?" In a season of observing this coach, I had never once heard him say "Boot it!" It was a testament to the natural ability of the kids, this parent said, that the team managed to dominate most of their games even without "real" coaching.

The truth was just the opposite. The team was playing well in part *because* of the lack of "traditional" youth sideline coaching. This coach and others in his club had been trained to act as facilitators, not directors. Coaches were encouraged to let the kids play and make their own decisions (both good and bad), not to micro-manage every dribble and kick.

Obviously, most of what this parent in question wanted to yell from the sidelines was just useless noise (Just once I'd love to see a little 6 year old turn to the sidelines and

say “Kick the ball? During a soccer game? Dang! Never thought of that before ...”) but what if it wasn’t just superfluous information and noise? Suppose these sideline coaches were actually giving out proper advice in agreement with the coach’s policies and philosophy. What could be bad about that?

I’ll answer that by comparing coaching from the sidelines to driving with a GPS. A GPS system is great for getting from point A to point B, but most of the people who use a GPS tend to pay a lot less attention to where they are going. Many people end up relying on the GPS to the point where they cannot find their way without it, even when they have been on the same route multiple times. In a similar manner, coaching from the sidelines can hinder players from developing the crucial ability to make their own decisions and think for themselves.

For drivers who do know where they are going, the GPS can be a real annoyance, cutting into the songs on the radio and interrupting conversations with the passengers to tell the driver information they already know. At worst it is a distraction that might prevent the driver from concentrating on the road.

Now imagine if your GPS could not be turned off, and that it always presumed to know where you were going without ever asking you. Let’s further suppose it didn’t appreciate you exploring a side road or detouring to that espresso stand, and got increasingly loud and angry if you failed to follow its directions. “Take the next right turn ...” “When possible make a U-turn” “Recalculating route ...” “When possible make a U-turn ...” “Recalculating rout ...” “HEY DUMMY, YOU'RE GOING THE WRONG WAY!”

What would driving be like if you had a GPS like this? It would be a lot like trying to play soccer while people on the sidelines were constantly yelling at you.

Bottom line: If we want our young players to develop and have fun, we need to learn to shut up and let them drive.

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