

Know Your Players

It's important to know the people you're leading, therefore, coaches should take the time to get to know each of their players. Develop ongoing relationships with each player, with an open line of communication and trust. It's never too soon to begin to get to know your players. As early as tryouts, coaches should be making decisions about players based on their performance in the tryouts and based on other factors.

Coaches should consider the following factors:

What motivates each player and why they're playing. Keep in mind there are many reasons people may be trying out for your team. Some may play because they love to play and they're up for a challenge, or may just want to have fun. Others may play because their friends are playing and they want to be with their friends. Some may play to make friends. Others may play because their parents have pressured them into it and don't want to let their parents down. Players also may use your team as a stepping stone toward making another team.

Who knows if one reason for playing is better than another, but this type of information may help coaches to build a cohesive team, where the players play for similar reasons and may share similar goals. It's better to find things out early, so there are fewer surprises throughout the season.

Do any of the players have medical, physical, or other conditions that the coach should be aware of? Could the conditions limit the players performance? Is it safe for the player to attempt to perform at the expected level of your team?

Are the players able to make the commitment as identified by the coach? Players and parents should be informed up front, of what is expected of them throughout the year. The team's tentative agenda should be developed prior to tryouts. The agenda can be discussed with the players and families during the team's tryouts, and should be provided to each player in the form of a flyer or pamphlet.

The agenda should include: a practice schedule with dates, times, and location, consequences for missing practices and games, and tentative league and tournament schedules.

Collect vacation dates and other known dates that players may miss practices, games, tournaments, or any other team function. This should be done shortly after the team's registration meeting, allowing time to adjust the team's agenda and possibly borrow players for tournaments or reschedule games or tournaments. Finalize the team's agenda appropriately for the team you've selected. Be prepared to be flexible, but use the team's agenda as a reference throughout the remainder of the year!

Confidence? From time to time, some players don't realize their ability and may need their confidence boosted, and there are times when players are too confident and need a reality check.

When a player needs a confidence boost, team that player up with above average players during small sided games. Compliments and words of encouragement at the right time are crucial to boosting a player's self confidence.

A reality check can easily be given during a tryout or practice. If a player seems over confident compared to their ability level or just plain cocky, simply place them in a small sided game where they must showcase their ability. Place the over confident (cocky) player on a team with two other average or below average players and have them compete against a team of three above average players, and you'll learn about the player's character and ability. If they quit or complain, you've got a look at their true character. If they lose, without complaining and don't give up, they may have heart and willingness to work hard, but may lack skill. The same reality check can be done in one on one games, making it even more clear, as players are beaten one on one. However, you run the risk of the cocky player beating the ringer, thus, becoming even more cocky.

I've used reality checks at tryouts, as an unspoken means of preparing players to be cut. Sometimes, players rise to the occasion and perform better than I expected, and other times the players cut themselves! In, either case, you and the players may gain a clearer picture of who will make the team and who will not.

My strategy is to be as subtle as possible when boosting a player's confidence or setting a player up for a reality check. I don't over use either strategy. Use confidence boosts and reality checks just enough to maintain balance within the team. The trick is to be in touch with your players enough to notice a key moment when someone needs a confidence boost or a reality check!

Do the players fit in with your system or does your system need to adjust to fit your players? In almost every situation the coach has to adjust to the players' strengths and weaknesses, so be flexible and ready to incorporate a system that plays to the various strengths and personalities of your players.

After assessing your players individual skills and overall team playing style. Select a variety of strategies that play to their strengths. Introduce and practice one strategy at a time, until the players show signs of using the strategy in game related play, then introduce the next strategy. Incorporate these strategies regularly in game related situations, such as drills performed at game pace, scrimmages, and games, until they become instinctive!