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Where to Start?

Congratulations Coach! You are about to embark on an incredibly rewarding journey! As a youth soccer coach, you have the privilege of positively influencing children as they learn about sports, teamwork, healthy lifestyles, and life lessons.

How you became a coach is likely to vary: perhaps you played the game growing up and want to impart your knowledge to this next generation of players. Or your child and their friends enrolled this season, and you and another parent want to provide them a great experience. Or maybe you were “volun-told” to sign up by your spouse or partner to ensure your child had a spot in the program. Or perhaps you have no idea how you got here, and no idea what to do next.

Regardless of why you’re here or how you started, all coaches each season begin at the same place, by first identifying their:

- Coaching Philosophy
- Personal and Team Values

In any team environment (athletics, workplace, family, etc.), culture is key. It’s up to the leader of each team to create this culture. This culture begins with your Coaching Philosophy.

A Coaching Philosophy is your personal mission statement. Loudoun Soccer’s mission is to create soccer players, coaches, and teams of strong character, committed to achievement on the field and in our community.

Your Coaching Philosophy can mirror this mission, and may build off it. While your philosophy is your own, it should be player-centric, as this is a youth sports program. A positive, player-centric Coach Philosophy is:

“I coach to teach life lessons through sports in order to develop children into better human beings off the field, while helping individuals and the team accomplish their on-field goals and prepare them for their next level of play.”



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Once your Coaching Philosophy is established, identifying your Values is the next step. Core values operate as your compass during the season – they remind you of the qualities and characteristics required to accomplish your mission.

Loudoun Soccer's Core values are:

- **Fun!** It's why we play
- **Integrity** – Character and Principled
- **Fairness** – Sportsmanship and Inclusiveness
- **Teamwork** – Stronger Together
- **Stewardship** – of the Game and the Community

Just like your Coaching Philosophy and the club's Mission, you can utilize these core values as your own, or develop them further.

The Golden State Warriors have four values: Joy, Mindfulness, Compassion, and Competitiveness. It's easy to see those values displayed in their actions on and off the court, and are embodied by their coach.

Your values should be appropriate for the age of your team. Competitiveness and Mindfulness may be heavy (and even inappropriate) concepts for a 1st grade team Rec team, but Fairness and Teamwork may be good fits. For older age teams (middle and high school), it may be worthwhile to include your players in developing their team's Core Values as a method for them to buy-in to what you're offering.

Once your Coaching Philosophy is created, and your Core Values are identified, you are ready to take the next step!



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Qualities, Roles, and Responsibilities of a Good Youth Sports Coach

A good youth sports coach has to wear many “hats,” requiring them to manage several roles. These multiple roles requiring having or developing certain qualities. Check at the end of this document for a full list of qualities.

There are five key roles of a good youth sports coach:

Facilitator

The primary role of a facilitator is to manage logistics – both on and off the field. On the field, this is managing practice plans (like appropriate activities and themes, and eliminating lines, laps, and lectures) and game details (like line-up and playing time). Off the field, this includes communication of schedules and other team-related details.

This also requires the coach to know, adhere to, and enforce the rules and policies of the league or club they participate in or represent.

Facilitator is a key role – the old adage of “failure to prepare is preparing to fail” rings true. It’s important that logistics are sorted first; failing to do so can undermine or sour the entire experience for the players and families, regardless of how effective a coach’s instruction and teaching can be.

Risk Manager

In conjunction with facilitating, an effective youth soccer coach must make their environment safe for their players by minimizing risk and hazards. These include:

- Inclement weather (thunder, lightning, etc.) and enforcing weather policies.
- Extreme temperatures (heat or cold).
- Field Conditions (holes, rocks, slickness)
- Health/Injuries (water breaks, managing the intensity of playing time, concussions, allergies, keeping a First Aid kit available)
- Player equipment: cleats or gym shoes, shin guards, no jewelry, weather-appropriate clothes
- Goals – larger goals must be anchored and secured



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- Activities (spacing, duration, intensity, safety)
- Player behavior (no rough-housing, no bullying)
- Perception (avoid being alone with a child to avoid a nightmare scenario where a false allegation is levied against you)
- Arrival and departure time (arrive early to set-up and greet players, make sure all players are picked up before leaving)
- KidSAFE – ensuring that all adults in a position of trust or authority register so a background check is performed.

These risks to manage may fall under the Facilitator category, but Risk Management is so critical that it deserves its own section.

Educator

Understand WHO we are teaching

Before coaches determine what to teach, they need to remember WHO they're teaching. Youth sports are not like Professional (adult) sports. They're more like music, or academics – whereas in music a child rehearses before performing in a concert, and whereas in math a student studies a subject before taking a test, in sports a child practices a skill or concept and then applies it in a game. Professional (adult) sports are about achieving a score or a result – for professionals this is their job. Youth sports is about learning, developing, and having fun.





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It's also critical to remember that children are not mini-adults, and they function differently than adults. Children will vary by age group in their physical, emotional (social), and mental (cognitive) areas, and they will mature at different rates. This maturity can include a range of plus or minus one to three years, meaning you may have a 10-year old on a team who is physically a 12-year old but emotionally a 7-year old. Additional information on understanding who we are coaching is available in Age Group Characteristics.

Slanty Line Theory

Given these variations, a good coach is able to recognize these differences, and create a practice environment that challenges all of the players by utilizing the Slanty Line Theory.

Imagine a bar held just above the ground, and asking children to jump over it. Once everyone completes the task, the bar is raised. Eventually, children who cannot complete this task are eliminated until the bar is so high that only the most gifted athletes are able to jump over it.

This type of activity is problematic for youth sports, because it eliminates the players who need the most opportunities. At the same time, the bar cannot be kept low, because those more developed children will become bored with the activity.

Now imagine that bar and angle it diagonally so that one end is high, and the other end is low. Have the children start at the lower end, and continue jumping over the next highest level until they reach their highest score. These "slanty line" activities where children compete against their own ability level instead of others are more appropriate, and are beneficial to all children.

A slanty line soccer activity is Gates Dribbling. Set up "gates" (a series of two cones next to each other) and have players dribble through as many gates as possible in 30 seconds. Repeat the game, and ask players to break their record.

Or take the popular game "Knock Out" in which players dribble in a square and attempt to kick other players' balls out while protecting their own. This style of elimination game typically results in the players who need the most touches are the players eliminated



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first. Instead: have players perform 10 toe touches before re-entering the game, or set up two squares so that when a player is eliminated from one square, they move to the next, and the process repeats. Players keep track of how many times they've been knocked out, and then try to break their record.

These types of activities are more inclusive, challenge everyone, and most importantly – are fun!

“Growth” Mindset

An educating coach will motivate, encourage, and teach; they'll introduce new ideas and concepts, while making it safe for players to experiment (and learn from failure and setbacks) by applauding courageousness. A good coach will help develop a “growth” mindset in their players.

A “growth” mindset is the belief that abilities can improve with dedication and hard work, and includes a love of learning and challenges. A core quality of a growth mindset is resiliency, with a common view of setbacks as “we don't lose...we either win or we learn.” Individuals with a growth mindset measure success by their process (in their control), and not the result or outcome (out of their control).

Persons with a “growth” mindset set higher goals; have a healthier attitude toward effort and failure; and are less likely to complain about being “bored” (they become self-motivated, active and curious).

Said Tony Robbins, the famed life and business strategist:

"If you teach them — "Honey you did so great on that because look, you never gave up! You kept persisting." Or, 'Look what you did here, by constantly pushing yourself harder and harder until you broke through. I'm so proud of you!'

That type of shaping will make a person grow up where they will value persistence, hard work [and] effort, which is where all rewards come from — in business and personal life.”

Be Genuine...and remember to laugh



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We have to remember: we're coaching children first, and coaching soccer second. This means our focus is more on the children, and less on the subject itself. It also means we have to be caring and authentic in our actions.

"It's not about the X's and O's – it's about the Jimmy's and Joe's."

"Nobody will care what you know, until they know that you care."

Said legendary basketball coach John Wooden, "Seek opportunities to show you care. The smallest gestures often make the biggest difference."

Lastly – a sense of humor is required. We're working with kids...funny things will be said and done, so remember it's OK to laugh.

Role Model

As a team leader, the coach is a role model for all to follow. This includes players, parents, spectators, other coaches, and anyone else associated with the team.

Coaches should look the part. More importantly, coaches should show respect through their words and actions for:

- Players – yours and opponents
- Fellow coaches
- Spectators
- Referees
- The game itself



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This sets the tone for others to follow. Coaches who demonstrate bad behavior give the green light for other team members to follow.

Guardian of the Game

George Washington University conducted a study with children in sports, and asked them why they participate. Nine out of ten responded “because it’s fun.” The study then delved into what makes sports fun, and identified 81 reasons. The top reasons were:

- Trying your best
- When the coach treats a player with respect
- Getting playing time
- Playing well as a team
- Getting along with teammates
- Being active

“Winning” was #48 – not even in the top half.

Approximately 71 percent of players quit a sport or an activity around age 12 because it is no longer fun. For many kids, they quit to focus more time on a different sport or activity. Sadly for those who only play one sport, quitting can mean adopting a sedentary lifestyle (sitting on the couch watching YouTube videos and playing video



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games), and missing out on developing a healthy lifestyle and habits learned through sports.

Youth soccer coaches are “guardians” of this game. For players new to soccer, coaches can make-or-break their initial experience – they may fall in love with the game, or turn their backs to it. Even kids who have played several years of soccer can sour on the sport if their coach creates a negative environment. It’s up to coaches to keep it fun, so we keep kids coming back each season.



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Characteristics of Effective Youth Coaches (US Youth Soccer)

High Moral and Ethical Standards.

- Be an appropriate role model.
- Honesty.
- Be fair, no one likes it if you cheat.

Respect of Players, Parents, and Community.

- Develop strategies to develop positive relationships with all involved.

Understanding Readiness Factors for Participation.

- Maturation — when to begin, how the game is structured.
- Learning — what are children able to comprehend and how do they learn.
- Motivation — internal desire to play and have fun.

Communication.

- Appropriate verbal and nonverbal responses (body language & gestures).
- Appropriate language (words, tone, volume, rhythm, articulation).

Development of an Appropriate Temperament for Coaching Children.

- Be sensitive to each child.
- Exhibit a calm personality.
- Show patience.
- Observe and Guide; Don't Direct.
- Use your normal voice, not a whistle.

Ability to Motivate Positively.

- Develop high levels of self-confidence.
- Positive coaching.
- Don't yell.



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Possess Leadership Qualities.

- Be prepared.
- Be organized.
- Demonstrate discipline — identify appropriate and inappropriate behavior and enforce team rules.
- Learn to be critical of behavior, not a player's personality.

Be Dedicated to Child Development and the Sport of Soccer.

- Understand what is appropriate for different ages and levels of play.
- Let every child play (and play a lot).

Be Enthusiastic.

- Your enthusiasm is contagious.
- Celebrate!

Have a Good Sense of Humor.

- Keep things light.
- Have fun.
- Smile and laugh.

Must Have Current Knowledge of Coaching Youth Soccer.

- Learn about children and how they learn.
- Learn the rules.
- Learn appropriate practices, activities, and content.
- Learn appropriate tactics and strategy.
- Learn how to have fun.



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Age Group Characteristics

As mentioned previously – knowing WHO you’re coaching is more important than WHAT you’re coaching. Although a range exists in the physical, mental, and emotional levels of players, there are several common traits associated with each age group of soccer. Below is a broad chart identifying key qualities in the age groups of youth soccer – remember that players will range +/- one to three years in these areas.

Regardless of the age of the players, the training implications are clear:

- Keep it fun, and make the environment safe.
- Encourage creativity and exploration – teach players it’s OK to try something and fail.
- Incorporate as many activities that include a ball (one ball-to-one player ratio, or one ball-to-two players) as possible, emphasizing technical (dribbling, passing, shooting) mastery.
- Incorporate movement education (running, skipping, jumping, etc.) into activities.

Please review the Practice Planning session for additional information.

Pre-K and Kindergarten (ages 5-6)

Physical	Mental	Emotional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement (running, jumping, skipping) not fully developed • Primitive eye-foot coordination • Falls easily due to high center of gravity • Will run to exhaustion, but can recover after a brief rest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directional and spatial awareness non-existent (aka: swarm soccer) • Visual demonstrations often needed • Little to no regard for boundaries (sidelines) • Can process simple directions • Individually oriented (me, my, mine) – they are naturally selfish • Little-to-no concern with team activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This may be their first “team” – their “world” is their family and a few close friends. • Easily bruised psychologically



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Grades 1-2 (Ages 7-8)

Physical	Mental	Emotional/Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coordination and pace improves from ages 5-6, but immaturity of body still obvious• Skeleton is growing – be aware of growth plate injuries• Body temperatures rise faster, and take longer to recover than an adult's	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attention span grows but can still only focus on one task.• Understanding of time and space, as well as direction improves• Self-evaluation is limited – performance is synonymous with effort (I tried hard so I did well).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Praise from adults is important – they like to show off their skills• Still very sensitive to negative comments.• Their “world” consists mainly of their family, and their school.• Inclined more toward small group (partner) activities – true playmates emerge.• Social acceptance is important.• Team identify grows but still limited.



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Grades 3-4 (ages 9-10)

Physical	Mental	Emotional/Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical strength, power, and endurance increases Motor performance is most often measured by a variety of motor tasks that require speed, balance, flexibility, explosive strength and muscular endurance. Some children grow faster than others. Difference in genders becomes more noticeable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lengthened attention span – ability to process more than one task at a time, and multiple steps at a time. Focus level improves. Personalities are more apparent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer pressure and need to belong increase “Team” identity more important. Intrinsically motivated – players want to practice Adult leaders outside the home (coach, teacher, etc.) become more influential.

Grades 5-6 (ages 11-12)

Physical	Mental	Emotional/Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strength, speed, and power becomes more influential in performance, and differences in these areas are pronounced. Coordination improves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to process complex instructions and abstract concepts exist Can use teammates to solve on-field problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Players begin to enjoy competition Players are more sensitive to peer pressure and continually look for acceptance. Popularity impacts self-esteem. Self-discovery begins (“Where do I belong?”) Praise and criticism create recognition or embarrassment. Girls form cliques, while boys form more broad team relationships.



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Practice Planning

Creating a practice (training session) plan is critical. An effective session plan:

- Considers both the age and ability level of the players;
- Has an identified topic or theme; and
- Has a stated objective – what are you hoping to accomplish in this practice?

Practices generally follow one of two formats, each with approximately four phases or stages within the practice:

Simple to Complex: this is a traditional practice format consisting of four stages:

(1) Ignition Activity

Welcome players

Burn/Raise energy

Tag games, game with a ball, or
play a small-sided game

(2) Spotlight Activity

An activity that spotlights the theme
of the practice

Individual or small-group activity

Introduce opposition

(3) Spotlight Game

A directional game that spotlights
the theme of practice

Play to two goals, one goal,
endzone, targets, etc.

(4) Game

Even-numbered game to two goals

No restrictions or conditions

Apply laws of the game



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Play-Practice-Play: also referred to Whole-Part-Whole, this is receiving greater emphasis from US Soccer in its Grassroots Courses:

(1) Play

Welcome players

Burn/Raise energy

Small sided games, add players in as they arrive

(2) Practice Part 1

An activity that spotlights the theme of the practice

Individual or small-group activity

Introduce opposition

(3) Practice Part 2

A directional game that spotlights the theme of practice

Play to two goals, one goal, endzone, targets, etc.

(4) Play

Even-numbered game to two goals

No restrictions or conditions

Apply laws of the game

Either format is effective. Consider the age of your players, as well as the theme of the session when determining which method to use.



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As you organize your session and the activities you wish to utilize, consider the following variables:

- The number of players present
- Equipment needs: balls, cones, vests, goals
- Field space: how much do you have?
- Player Set-Up within each activity
- Field/grid dimensions
- Rules, conditions, length of each activity. In terms of duration – each activity may have multiple rounds.
- Objectives for each team – should include transition from attacking to defending, and defending to attacking.
- Key coaching points of each activity and of the session
- Coaching position – off to the side to give the best vantage point, and to minimize interference with the game.
- Progression of activities – organize equipment so one activity flows to the next.
- Make it dynamic and incorporate the 4 Pillars of the Game (Technique, Tactics, Physical, Psychological)

Practice Session

No.	Week	Day/Date	Field	Weather	Objectives (tech-tact)	Objectives (cond)	Range %	Intensity %
Pos.	Name	present	absent	Activity	Duration			
GK	1.			Warm-up				
	2.							
Def	3.			Main session				
	4.							
	5.							
	6.							
	7.							
	8.							
MF	9.			Cool-down				
	10.							
	11.							
	12.							
	13.							
	14.							
	15.							
OF	16.			Comments:				
	17.							
	18.							
	19.							
	20.							
	21.							
	22.							
	23.							
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When possible, avoid using drills in your practice. Activities are more effective. What's the difference?



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DRILLS	ACTIVITIES
STATIC	DYNAMIC
LINES	FREE MOVEMENT
REGIMENTED	UNSTRUCTURED
NO DECISION-MAKING	NUMEROUS DECISIONS TO MAKE
BORING	FUN!

Assessing your Session:

While your session is flowing, step back and assess to make sure they're as effective as possible.

- Questions to ask: Does it make sense? Does it flow? Is it game-like?
- If an activity is too easy: make space smaller or add pressure (opponent and/or time), or add conditions or incentives to encourage players to bring out the theme – just make sure they are reality-based. For example: if you want a 5th grade team to pass more, you can reward them with connecting five consecutive passes. However, requiring them to connect five passes before scoring is unrealistic.
- If an activity is too challenging: increase space, and reduce pressure. This gives players more time.
- If an activity is too complicated: simplify the rules

Session Reflection:



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After each practice, it's helpful to reflect on it in order to determine what worked, what didn't, and how you can become a better coach. Questions to ask yourself include:

- Is my coaching behavior effective for my players? If not, what can I do to improve it?
- Are my players meeting the goal of the training session or game? If not, what can I do to improve it?
- Are they applying what they've learned to the game? If not, what can I do to improve it?



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Teaching Tips

An effective coach is both knowledgeable and knows how to share that knowledge. Educators have the benefit of understanding how children learn and process information. For those of us who don't have the background, here's a crash course in Teaching 101:

Catch their attention

Use varying techniques to capture the players' attention. Children are ingrained to respond to "1-2-3 Eyes on Me" with "1-2 Eyes on You." You might also try clapping (clap once if you can hear me. Clap twice. Clap three times). You may also shine a spotlight on someone who is paying attention to reward good behavior ("Tommy – I really like the way you're paying attention"). Be sure to compliment others who follow that behavior.

Make eye contact

Take off your sunglasses. Remove your hat. Eye contact improves the delivery of your message, by making it more personal.

This may also mean kneeling – get to the height of your players to better connect.

Additionally: when addressing your team, have their backs to the sun so that they can see you, and the sun is in your eyes.

Limit information

Avoid lectures. Keep things simple. Remember your audience (they're kids).

Use key, consistent, age-appropriate words



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You may encourage players to accelerate when dribbling, or dribble “faster than a cheetah with a jetpack on.” Be consistent with terminology – both within your team and within the world of soccer (e.g. positions).

Differentiate

Coaches must tailor their instruction to meet individual needs of players. Some players learn from verbal direction. Others need to see a visual demonstration. Some will need to physically perform or walk-through it. Most may need to do all three!

Differentiation also means coaches may have to vary one or more of the following:

- Content – what players learn or how they access it;
- Process – the activities to learn or master content
- Products – additional opportunities to rehearse, apply, and extend what they learned;
- Learning environment – how the session works and feels.

For example: you may organize an activity so that the more advanced players compete against each other, while those still developing face off against similar abilities. Just be cautious about doing this too often, as it may create negative stigmas or perceptions for some of those players.

Check for Understanding

Ask the players to explain what you just told them, or ask them to demonstrate it. This helps to ensure your measure was received clearly.

Command vs. Cooperative Coaching:

A command-style coach issues directives to players (WHAT to do), which is the common coaching style in sports like football and basketball. Soccer is a free-flowing



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and player-centric sport, which means most decisions are made on the field by players in real-time. There are no timeouts in soccer to draw up a play. Once the game starts, coaches have little influence.

This means most instruction should consist of cooperative coaching – where players are asked questions to consider not just WHAT to do but HOW, WHEN, WHERE, and WHY. The use of asking questions to deliver information is called Guided Discovery. Coaches can utilize this technique to help players think about the game. While it's lead by the coach, it gives athletes a voice in the process. It also gives them more buy-in because the answers they reach were accomplished by their work, instead of being delivered information by the coach.

Guided discovery questions can be factual (do you want to dribble in front of your own goal?), conceptual (where you should we avoid dribbling near on the field?), or provocative (why don't you want to dribble in front of your own goal? When might you have to?). The goal is to ask provocative questions, which help players learn about the game.

The command-style of coaching can still be utilized – such as during half-time talks – but should be used cautiously in the flow of a game or training activity. It can cause cognitive overload for the player, because the game is already complicated enough. Coaches need to avoid “joy-sticking” their players and team. Even if the results are effective, the ramifications (players don't learn and improve, players don't enjoy having decisions stolen from them, etc.) are far greater.

Coaches are encouraged to use the cooperative approach as often as possible. The end result is that players improve their ability and knowledge, which increases their enjoyment, which in the end keeps them playing.

Vary your Coaching using the Coaches “Tool Kit”

The Coaches “Tool Kit” allows each coach to deliver information and teach in a variety of methods. Variety is important for players, as each have different learning styles. The



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same approach from the coach will often result in players tuning them out. Here are five ways to deliver coaching points:

Coach within the flow of the game.

- Provides clear, brief instruction to individuals or small groups of players as the ball is moving
- Not an ongoing monologue (no joy-stick coaching!) but at a critical time to influence play

Coach the individual player as the game continues.

- Stop an individual player but not the activity
- His/her team plays down as they receive brief and concise instruction, and then returns to play.

Coach at natural stoppages.

Address groups of players when game is still (ball out of play, water break, etc.)

Focus on a problem while it is fresh in the players' minds

Least intrusive method since the play is already stopped.

Allow the conditions of the activity to coach the theme.

- The conditions of the activity provide the problem for the players to solve.
- Example: a 1v1 game to coach attacking moves forces players to dribble and may incentivize the use of moves (e.g. use a move and score = 2 pts)

Coach using the "freeze" method.

- Game is "frozen" or stopped at coach's command.
- Used to paint a visual picture for players.
- Use with caution – too much disrupts the game and frustrates the player.
- Be brief but brilliant.