

MATCHDAY PREPARATION

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Even when results matter the best coaches are not fooled by them, they know what is really happening. They know who is struggling and who isn't, and also where improvement has to be made.

One of the biggest challenges facing coaches working with young and developing players is taking the 'learning outcomes' identified in training and coaching sessions into the match day. In this article we look at the way the 'warm up' period prior to the match can be used effectively in this regard.

Match day preparation should be closely linked to the overall team or club philosophy a possible example of which is outlined below

1. Every squad member plays at least 50% of the time (taking injury and other factors into account)
2. We try to be more sporting than our opponents – i.e. we give less fouls away than they do
3. We try to play attractive, attacking, creative football
4. We try to win the match but not at the expense of points 1, 2 and 3

Match days are different to training, they are emotionally charged. The tariff involved in match day mistakes is far higher than those mistakes made in training any player will tell you that. Match days are not another training session but they are a great opportunity to learn, if they are managed correctly by the coaching staff.

Warm up elements – 45 minutes time frame

1. Physical warm up – 15 minutes
2. Reminders of how we try to play our football linked to the overall philosophy – 1 minute
3. Objectives for today's match linked to work carried out by the coaches during the week – 1 minute
4. Small sided game which allows players to practise the objectives in a physical sense – 15 minutes
5. Pre-match talk – 2 minutes
6. Players own time – 5 minutes
7. Huddle – 1 minute
8. *5 minutes overlap to allow movement from one activity to the next activity & drinks breaks

Physical warm up

There are numerous examples of a physical warm ups and there are people far more qualified than me to detail what should and should not go into one, but suffice to say that a physical warm up should be designed to prepare the players for the physical challenge ahead. Generally we are excellent in this regard and have quite a comprehensive understanding of how to design appropriate and effective physical preparation.

Reminders linked to philosophy

It is important that the players have confidence that you (their coaches) are all singing from the same song sheet, so reminders around the philosophy are good things to do. Philosophies can be very different but it is vital that the players know where they stand and why certain things are in place.

For example it is important that players get the opportunity to develop within a team or squad. Knowing that they will be given that opportunity by playing at least 50% of the time is very reassuring and helps

them be prepared to take the risks that will help them learn. Learning to give less fouls away than the opposition is also very useful as a high percentage of goals conceded in football matches are done so from free-kicks 'against', where the opposition has a 'free' go at putting the ball where they want. I think we would all agree that encouraging our young players to play attractive, attacking, creative football is a worthwhile objective and as nobody sends out teams to lose – trying to win the match is a good idea, but significantly not at the expense of the first three points.

Objectives for the match

It is helpful for players' learning if their match day objectives bring together what they have been working on in recent coaching sessions. The number three is very useful in learning as people seem to readily be able to cope with remembering three things. That is also handy for football as it means we can connect the players with one defensive aspect, one attacking aspect and one aspect of transition. Outlined below are three aspects that were used with some centre of excellence under 12s playing in one of their early 11 v 11 matches and were associated with recent coaching sessions.

1. Try to mark ball side - defensive
2. Try to keep possession of the ball after re-gains - transition
3. Try to play 1 and 2 touch football when it is on to do so – attacking

Significantly it is also not necessary to overload players with too many things to think about. Giving them a focus for their learning is good, overburdening them is not.



Small sided game

This is very useful for the players once the match day objectives have been announced. Footballers like to learn in movement and playing a small sided game helps them clarify cues, and situations that they may face in the coming match. The small sided game can take place in a quarter of the pitch and last for 15 minutes. It serves as a great mental warm up. Coaches can have input to keep players on task but try not to turn the game into a coaching session – that is not its purpose.

Pre-match talk

This is the coaches chance to chat with the players about the fact that you understand that sometimes things will go wrong (especially when youngsters are trying out new stuff), but if they do go wrong players should try to get back 'into credit' by trying to make the next thing they do (e.g. header, tackle, pass) a good one.

Players' own time with the ball

It is important that players get some time to practice something for themselves, either individually or in small groups. This also gives the coaches a chance to have a 'quiet word' of encouragement or set some individual objectives for the players.

The Huddle

Just before the captain has to go for the coin toss get every player together in a huddle. Encourage them to close their eyes and picture themselves 'in their minds eye' doing things well – good passes, interceptions, shots at goal etc. Then they can break off and sprint away ready to go.

Summary

The work coaches do in the warm up phase of match day will reap many learning benefits for the young players in their care. Building the bond between their coaching

sessions and match days is vital and as they grow older players need to see the connections between the two.

Working in this way with the players also makes half-time or breaks in play easier to manage as developing players begin to realise that while trying to win a match has importance so has the process of learning to 'get better' and improving performance.

Again the way the coach relates to the players is crucial here. For example, asking the players to give themselves a mark out of 10 for their performance (and to keep that mark to themselves) and then think how they can make their performance just one mark better (e.g. if you gave yourself 7 how can you make your performance an 8). Or – "how do you think we are doing against our 3 objectives?" "Think to yourself how much success you have had – now how can you improve? What could you change in the second half to make things even better?"

Coach feedback is essential too. Most young player performance is a series of cameos where things go well for a time then go off the boil. There are always things to improve on as very few performances are ten out of ten. So constructive but honest feedback connected to players' performance is important as the players know what is going on. Over praise the players and they will know in the same way as going over the top with criticism is usually unfair. Often a simple: "this and that were very good, but we need to try to improve here and here" or "that last 15 minutes was excellent we achieved all three of our objectives in that passage of play. Well done" will suffice.

The key to success in any work with players comes with planning and the above 'warm up' is just an example of what can be done. Coaches will often go into great detail planning their coaching sessions but planning for a match day is equally necessary if youngsters are to learn effectively.



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