

Smart Coaching

Managing Mistakes To The Players' Advantage!

By John Allpress

Learning new things can be like riding a roller-coaster for the learner – some days things seem easy, other days almost impossible. Things can vary depending on what you're doing, how you're feeling, whether you're growing and lots of other things too. Learners are taking risks – they are daring not to know. They are going out on a limb and exposing themselves to possible ridicule for not being able to perform at the same level as others.

Learning new things can be the best experience or the most scary thing you've ever done because if you're truly learning you don't really know what to do - so learners can be fragile or strong and this can easily change. There are so many factors involved that are constantly changing, developing and evolving but there is one constant – the learner. The individual who takes the learning path, teachers and coaches, players and team-mates, even husbands and wives, come and go but the person who looks back from the mirror every morning is always there. That's why ultimate responsibility for learning lays squarely with the player and not the coach.

Coaches and coaching are some of the many vehicles that support learning. Coaches are not there primarily to show or tell players what they know, they are there to create environments for learning that challenge the players, but also give them enjoyment, security and support. Coaches should also give players choice and ownership, allowing them to practice and experiment with the new techniques, skills or tactical ideas they present in their training activities.

In order to help the players learn effectively coaches should understand their players' learning needs and this includes the ability to judge when the players do not need their help, instruction or advice.

Practising, Experimenting and Competing

Every time a group of players begin new challenges three distinct learning groups seem to develop – those who sit where they should those who are forging ahead and those who are striving to catch up. These groups are fluid and will probably change when the group moves onto a

new technique, skill or tactical challenge. We learn football through our different modes of play – practising, experimenting and competing – and these require different mind sets.

While there is no substitute for practising to get better at things, experimenting and competing also have a major role in the process. As coaches, our understanding of where these different modes of play sit within learning is vital if the players are to be supported effectively.

Research has shown that it takes around 10,000 hours of practice and experimenting to get really good at something complicated like football techniques and skills or playing the violin or piano.

In football, when practising passing, receiving, shooting or dribbling, the aim should be precision, efficiency and reliability and such repetition leads to smooth, effortless, automated expertise.

However simply practising can also make players rigid and predictable. So after practising for a bit players need to try something different. They need to mess around with the techniques, skills and tactics and see what happens. A simple example may be to try out new techniques and skills with the weaker foot or see what happens when you cross the ball into the penalty area earlier or later than the coach has suggested. Players need to experiment with the new skills and concepts they have practised. Practice gives players the foundation for experimenting. Experimenting develops flexibility and the ability to be unpredictable and the perception to see the tiny differences in an opponent's body position or a team-mate's movement that cannot be seen by the coach from the side-lines.

Experimenting helps develop creativity, innovation and inventiveness - hallmarks of the best and most effective footballers.

But experimentation can lead to things sometimes going wrong and mistakes being made. When young players compete in matches they are not the finished article. They should always strive to win but never be afraid to







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push the barriers and experiment even during matches. In order for this to happen the coaches need to be mentally strong and to understand their temporary place in the evolution of the developing player – in other words the coaches should endeavour to put the learning needs of the players first and model learning and all the behaviour that goes with it. Send out a message that you don't like experimenting and the players will stop doing it and their learning will probably be hindered as a result.

Guy Claxton (Professor of Learning Sciences at Bristol University) says "learning is what we do when we don't know what to do," and if we don't know what to do, sometimes we'll get it wrong and mistakes will happen. The big question is how can players and coaches use this to their advantage?

Firstly players need to know whether they are expected to practice or experiment. Practising is aimed at precision, efficiency and reliability. Experimenting, at pushing the limits of our practice so that we can see what may happen if we try it a new way or that, if a coach and players get their wires crossed and one thinks it practice and the other experimenting, chaos and a breakdown in communication will occur.

Secondly coaches need to clarify the learning objectives for the players – ie what is this activity or drill all about? And also build in benefits for all those taking part. Understanding how players learn is central to the whole process – some learning is almost instantaneous but some takes time to mature and become fluid and natural. Players who take more time to learn are not bad learners, they may simply need more time – fast learning is not necessarily the best learning.

After setting up a new learning activity the coaches first task should be to conduct a needs analysis – who really needs my help? Or am I just being self indulgent and showing the players what I know?

Listening to the players is a vital skill and one that coaches need to develop. Also, asking the right questions in the right way and at the right time. Instructions should be clear and precise and directed at

those players who need them. Players who do not need help should be given the time and opportunity to practice or experiment without interruption. Coaches must understand that when players are learning something new there will be mistakes and that not every mistake requires intervention or correction. (Your knowledge base is not being assessed now in order to pass a UEFA Coaching Award – you do not have to make 25 coaching points in 25 minutes!)

How do Mistakes Help Learning?

We might not like our players making mistakes but they do happen even when the players are experienced and know a lot about what they are doing. The fact that we talk about learning through trial and error suggests that the error part is not going to be eradicated, unless at the expense of practice, experimentation and learning.

There is also our recognition that in order to win games of football there is often the need to take risks and try out the new things from the training field. This may mean attempting more difficult techniques, applying new skills or experimenting with new strategies or tactics ie taking the training into the game.

There are risks involved in this process and risks would not be risks if there were not a significant likelihood of things going wrong – of making mistakes.

All players, including those who are evolving, should put effort into avoiding mistakes, but not at the expense of attempting to accomplish their various learning challenges – ie experimenting to learn and consolidate new things.

If as coaches we encourage our players to take the actions that are required to learn new things we have to recognise that there will be errors. The question is how do we as Coaches respond to our players making such errors?

Highlighting Mistakes

Learning new things is a high-risk business for the players. It means daring not to know and it may mean facing up to the fact that you may not yet be as

competent as others within your group or team. Therefore the player must see the relevance of the new technique, skill or tactic, otherwise they may perceive the risk of daring not to know as too great and not bother to try and just stay within the boundaries of what they can already do instead. So motive to learn is high on the agenda.

During this transitional state players could be fragile and only highlighting their mistakes may not be the best way to encourage them to practice and experiment with new things. Players need to be given the licence by the coach to experiment and try out the new and exciting things thus pushing out the boundaries of what they currently know or can do – moving on into the unknown. Highlighting mistakes may send out the message that not being able to do something is a personal flaw so players may not want to risk being seen as incompetent or inadequate within their group and again not try. Players and coaches need to recognise that not knowing how to do something yet is fine. This shift takes us away from a 'culture of denial' into one of gaining learning from our mistakes.

If coaches create the right learning challenge for their players, sometimes the most constructive response to mistakes could well be a sort of 'skilful neglect'.

In other words leave the players alone as much as possible to work out as much for themselves as they can.

If they really need your help then of course help them but also try to give out the message that it's acceptable not to be able to do something yet.

Recognise and acknowledge how players may be feeling when faced with new or difficult tasks, eg 'We're now going to work with our weaker foot. I understand that things may go wrong and sometimes passes may not be as good as you would like but that's OK. Just try to steadily improve that weaker side.'





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Possible Benefits

Apart from the learning that is available through mistakes there is another benefit. That is, that action is taken by the player to learn, and things are done to improve.

Nothing can be done in football unless it is done against a back-drop of potential mistakes. In football there is no such thing as a 'sure thing'. Bottom team beats top team. Minnow knocks giant out of The FA Cup etc. The history of the game is filled with legendary examples of sure things coming unstuck.

Mistakes are a reminder that our control of any situation is never absolute – even if we play well and dominate the match we can still be felled by the 'fickle finger of fate' and end up losing.

Become Your Own 'Coach Inside Your Head'.

It is possible to reflect on mistakes later when the emotion of the moment and the match has drained away. Some players will find developing this questioning process useful:

- Where did the mistake occur?
- When did it occur?
- What did you do?
- How did you feel about what happened at the time?
- Why was it a mistake?
- What did you learn?
- How will you improve?
- Why was it a mistake?
- What did you learn?
- How will you improve?

Possible Problems with Mistakes

The biggest limitation of mistakes is the fear that making them may well hinder our development and evolution as learners and players. That is why it is important to reassess the role of mistakes in player development, recognise that they are merely staging posts on the learning pathway and can never be completely avoided. They can be costly in competitive matches but if we are talking about player development which is a long-term

process, the short-term reversal versus the long-term gain should be a price worth paying.

Summary

As the Coach you help the players best by encouraging them to face their mistakes head on. Players cannot learn anything in denial. Remember that learning is what you do when you don't know what to do – so mistakes are part of learning new things and it is OK not to be able to do something yet.

Encourage players to try not to repeat errors but to accept that this may happen and that that is no reflection upon them as people or their ability to get there in the end. Remember, slow learning is not bad learning.

If things do go really well, accept this too as part of the learning process. Accept also that goals may now have to be re-aligned in order to move forward to new challenges.

Coaches should aim to help the players to learn what to do when they don't know what to do. Help them to begin to develop their own coach 'inside their head' and to analyse their mistakes (ie what kind are they?) when the emotion has died away.

Recognise that mistakes are not bad things and when learning something new they are simply part of the process. The challenge facing the players and coaches is learning to use the mistakes to their advantage.

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