

A Case Study of Representative Youth Soccer And Learning Styles Application

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The purpose of this case study is to review how learning styles research can be applied to meet the holistic (physical, mental, social and emotional) needs of representative male youth soccer players, aged 13-16. Traditionally, soccer coaches tend to focus on players' physical (skill and fitness) development without careful consideration of their holistic needs. The coaching session focus tends to involve a series of 'drills' and exercises, with a small-sided game being played at the end of the practice. Consequently, players' participation experiences can vary enormously in degrees of enjoyment and learning, and motivation for further involvement. The development of an effective approach to coaching soccer becomes more complex when not only elements of the game are considered, but also differences in individual players' learning styles and sensory modes.

Playing soccer favours kinesthetic or experiential approaches to teaching and learning. The experiential cycle involves reflection on game experiences and leads to increased self-awareness, improved skills and game performance. However, it should be recognised that players with visual preferences may respond better to instructions being drawn on a whiteboard using pin figures or for the learners to see themselves on a video play back. Similarly, a learner with an auditory preference may respond better to keywords when learning a specific skill. Children not only learn in a variety of ways, they are at different stages of learning and progress at different rates. This diversity requires the coach to implementing a wide range of learning strategies to provide a balance challenging experiences for the team, while enabling individuals to develop a broad set of their skills related to their level of ability.

The coach

My own Coaching Styles Analysis (CSA) indicated that my current coaching methods were spread between traditional/analytic and individual/holistic approaches in the sensory areas, but I was aware that there was a need to be more flexible in my session planning and management. My coaching philosophy is based on the belief that the success and challenge of my teaching depends on more than just achieving results, but providing and developing an environment and activities that give a positive learning experience, whilst improving the players' knowledge. The players' enjoyment and development is not just about the skills of soccer, but involves a number of other factors, such as social and team involvement. This social aspect and feeling of belonging are often more important factors in sustaining players' interest and involvement, than the sport itself. It is my role to develop a positive learning environment using a variety of facilitation methods that aim to enhance the learning process for the individual players. For example, my awareness of a player's left/right eye dominance led to switching the player from the right to the left side of the pitch. The player's performance improved dramatically, as did their enjoyment of the game.

The players

At the beginning of each season it is important for me to share my coaching philosophy with both players and parents. This includes sharing views on game aspects such as player rotation, which allows all players within a squad to participate at their development level equally during the season. Players are also asked what they enjoy about soccer, their goals for the representative soccer season, and how the coach, parents and other players can help

achieve these goals. From this written feedback team goals are formed and shared. On going evaluation is also received from the players, particularly at the end of the season.

The learning environment

Emphasis is placed on creating a positive learning environment, for example, coach-player-parent interactions, and developmentally appropriate fun and challenging soccer practices. Important aspects of social and emotional development may involve opportunities for individual players to develop self-confidence, personal responsibility, interpersonal skills, and friendships away from the soccer sessions, but within the team environment, for example, overnight camps or social evenings.

Improving decision-making and game understanding

Physical and technical superiority at the elite level of sport is not enough. What makes the difference is greater tactical awareness and a thinking approach by players. Understanding how to play games can also improve their intrinsic motivation and enjoyment. The development of *game sense* uses a questioning style to guide players, rather than telling them what to do. Using this style can increase role clarity and improve team cohesion. When a player understands why a particular technique is necessary, they can be assisted with technique on an individual basis, but within the context of the game.

Questioning

The use of a questioning approach aims to link modified game and skill practices when applying skills and tactical understanding in a game. Further questioning of the players about the consequences of their actions may examine their understanding the underlying game principle, for example creating space. The players' cognitive understanding and kinesthetic awareness of body position in space and body movements are crucial to learning and performing. Playing well in soccer means consciously/unconsciously choosing the right course of action (effectiveness) at the right moment and doing it well (efficiency). What differentiates the expert player from the novice is their ability to select and adapt techniques, and make decisions related to environmental cues and game situations with more successful outcomes. The following is an example of feedback about the questioning approach from one of the representative players: *"Good because it makes you think for yourself and helps me understand the game better."*

Playing games

Under the traditional approach techniques are often practised in isolation, but the key to successful practice is how the skills are performed during the game, where skill is technique placed under pressure. Modified games provide skill practice and also provide players practice with the tactical challenges of the game. It is much easier for a player to appreciate the worth of maintaining possession, for example in a specifically designed small-sided game, than it is in a full game. Similarly, the width of the field can be exaggerated in order to get the players to think about the benefits of getting the ball wide. The game is the focus of the practice, rather than technique, with the coach challenging players to think about what they are doing and why. Players are not told the key principles from the outset, but are given the opportunity to work these ideas out for themselves through the design of the games. The player's responses indicated positive evaluation of using games: *"... because it's good to teach kids in a way they enjoy it."* and *"Because in a game we know what to do. It makes training much more fun."* and *"It was good and helped me get into position to receive a pass and find someone to pass to."*

Modified game examples

Figure 1 illustrates a 2v2 game where the aim is to get the ball to a target player. This game provides opportunities to develop the main principles of attack, which are the creation and exploitation of space, by providing support, depth, width and mobility. This game can be extended into a 3v3 practice with the extra attacking player used as a target player. A question to the players would be “how could the attacking team create space?” A possible answer may be, “by moving wide”.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 2 illustrates a 5v5 game where the use of a target player aims to create shooting opportunities for supporting players. The three players in the defending half (X) play the ball between each other and try to get an early pass to one of the two target players (XT), then support. A question to the players could be “where is a good place for support?” Answer: “in a position in space to receive a pass and shoot”.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

There are also different levels of tactical complexity to consider dependent on the stage of player development. For example, in soccer, defence in its simplest form involves marking and closing down an opponent to deny access to the ball. However, as tactical awareness develops, players need to defend as a team by delaying the opponents and providing cover for team mates who challenge for the ball.

Summary

This case study has illustrated how a holistic experiential approach and linking of learning styles research can be used to develop a positive learning environment and enhance the enjoyment and skill development for youth soccer players. Session planning that involves placing emphasis on understanding tactical aspects of the game, rather than focusing on technique, caters for all ability levels and coaches with limited technique and experience. The management of the group is easier as the players love to play games, have fun and are involved all the time. However, rather than just presenting a series of drills the good coach needs to utilise these modified games to enhance the players understanding of specific aspects of the game. This is particularly important in soccer as players do not have access to the coach during a game and, as a consequence, are required to make decisions for themselves.

Bibliography

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Figure 1

2v2 game to develop the principles of attack

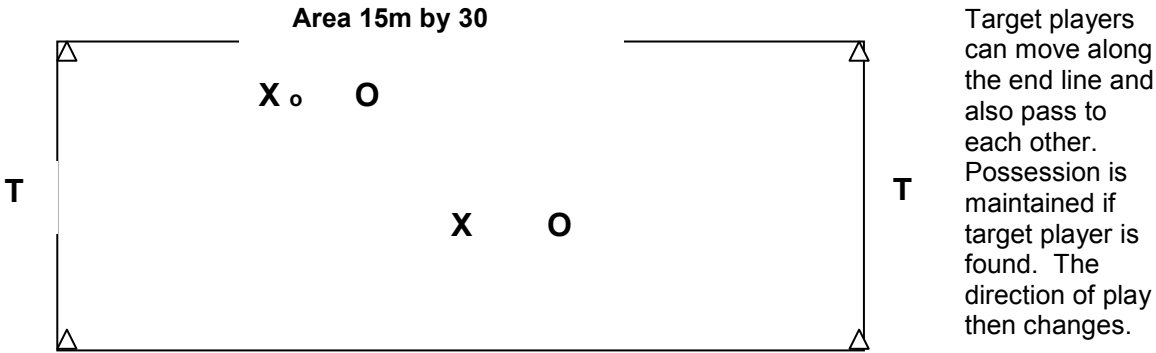


Figure 2 5v5 game using target players to create shooting opportunities

