

Now that I'm a coach, I strive to imitate the qualities and characteristics that I admired in the coaches I had growing up. I've certainly adopted styles from past coaches, some more than others. I think most coaches can't help but take bits and pieces from the influential coaches in their lives and turn those into their own personal styles.

ESTABLISHING OBJECTIVES

Once you've defined your philosophy and developed your coaching style, you need to be clear about your objectives for yourself, for each member of the team, and for the team as a whole.

Objectives for Yourself

As a coach, you should stay true to your strongest character traits and strive to improve on those qualities that don't come as naturally to you. If you focus on your strengths and lead with good character, you'll be confident in your abilities and continue to seek excellence both on and off the field. Following are some elements to consider as part of your overall objective:

- *Staying current in the sport of soccer.* Consider joining professional organizations affiliated with soccer and coaching, such as the National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA) or the American Sport Education Program (ASEP). You can also subscribe to magazines that focus on coaching and teaching in general. There is a wealth of information online for every soccer component, such as drills, systems of play, and player development. In addition, spend time reading books by successful soccer coaches and players such as Anson Dorrance and Mia Hamm. Books written by coaches of other sports, such as Pat Summitt and John Wooden on basketball, can also have a powerful impact on your coaching style and philosophy. Sometimes, though, your best resource is your own experience. Trust your intuition, which comes from your own playing and coaching experiences and knowledge of the game.

- *Trusting yourself and the decisions you make for your team.* It takes practice to make decisions in stressful, split-second situations. Just as your athletes must practice making decisions based on game situations, you'll need to practice listening to your inner voice. Get into the habit of writing down when you've made good decisions based on your "gut feelings," to help you learn how to trust your instincts. In chapter 2, I



When communicating with your team, focus on recognizing areas for improvement, acknowledging what the team does well, and praising individual stand-out performances.

explain a program in which I require each girl on the team to keep a folder of reflections on performance and competition. Just like my athletes, I keep a folder to record game-day thoughts, team moods, energy levels, and the degree of focus at practices and other team events. These entries help me keep track of what is happening with individual players as well as the highs and lows of the team. I also find it helpful to talk with my coaching staff and other mentors in my life to gain perspective.

- *Providing a secure environment for your athletes.* Your athletes need an environment in which they are allowed to fail. Rather than criticize them, critique them to help them improve (for more information, see *Communicating with Players* on page 9 of chapter 2). Teach your athletes to think for themselves and become confident decision makers. They, too, need to learn how to trust their intuition, and they can only do so if they have the freedom to take chances and make mistakes.

Individual Athlete Objectives

Because the girls on your team may vary in age and maturity level, their personal goals should also vary. On a high school team, for example, seniors will have different goals than freshmen. College, scholarships, work, and moving out on their own can weigh heavily on their minds. Respect their personal goals as long as they don't interfere with the team's goals. If you have a player who is focusing on just her personal or school life, you might have her fill out a separate goal sheet for soccer, stating what she would like to accomplish for the season.

Athletes should have both short-term and long-term goals. Short-term goals are what they hope to accomplish in the first half of the season; long-term goals are what they hope to accomplish by the end of the season and beyond.

Following are tips for helping athletes set goals:

- Have them list their goals and objectives and a paragraph or two of how they visualize meeting their goals.
- Have them list ways they can determine whether they met each goal.
- Have them prioritize their goals and create positive affirmations for their most important goals.
- Have them give a copy of their goals to you, and plan to monitor these goals often during the season and record their progress in meeting these goals.
- Have each athlete give a copy of her goals to a teammate. Halfway through the season, the teammate can evaluate whether she has achieved her goals.

In addition, you should have nonnegotiable expectations of your players based on the standards and values that are important to your coaching staff and the traditions of the program. These are behaviors that you want your players to focus on both in their personal lives and on the soccer field. Following are some examples:

- Be responsible and respectful.
- Be on time and be dependable.
- Be honest with your coaches and your teammates.
- Represent your team, school or club, and community with pride.
- Always work hard and maintain a winning attitude.
- Be respectful to officials, opponents, and teammates.
- Develop a leadership role based on your own strengths.
- Always put the team before yourself.

Team Objectives

Coaches who do not include the athletes' perspective when developing team objectives inevitably find themselves alone in the pursuit of those goals. Do not try to micromanage this process. Whether you are developing objectives for the season or a particular game, the athletes need to know that their voices count!

The Importance of Spirit

Sometimes players start the season with a particular position or role in mind and then redefine it as the season progresses. One such player was Leah, our backup goalkeeper, who was more than content with her role. She was always eager to

get the starting keeper warmed up at practice or before a game, and she was a verbal leader for the rest of the team and enjoyed getting people fired up for games. When the opportunity allowed us to put Leah in and get some playing time, she said she didn't really want to go in. I had never had a player tell me she didn't want to get in the game, but it was evident from her tone that Leah was telling the truth. She said she'd rather focus on the team from the sideline and not focus on her own game.

Leah had become more of an assistant coach than a player. She loved the camaraderie and friendships that soccer brought to her life, and that was enough for her. She cared little about the game except for how others were playing and whether we were winning. Leah was a motivating and positive force on the team, and she embraced her role with enthusiasm.

When Leah "tried out" for the team again her senior year, I had to decide whether to take her, a player who didn't want to play, or give her spot to another athlete. Making her a manager was not going to cut it; she would not have felt she were truly a part of the team. The decision really was not difficult to make; of course, I took Leah! The athletes and I were all better because of Leah's love of life, not soccer.

As you and your team work to develop team objectives, explain that they are defining some-

thing that is greater than the vision or desires of one person and that taking on an attitude of selflessness and service to each other will help create a strong, well-connected team with individual and team accountability. As a coach, your role is to guide them in focusing on what they want, not on what they don't want. The feelings behind the objectives are just as important as the words used to define them. They must truly believe in their objectives to see them manifest. Following are some examples of things to consider when developing your team objectives:

- *Maintaining respect.* Young people, especially girls, can have a lot of rules when it comes to defining their friends and whom they associate with. Often they dislike people they don't even know based on reputation or hearsay. Remind your girls that although being friends with each other is important, the most important factor is treating each other with respect both on and off the field through their actions and their words.

- *Being honest.* Teach your athletes how to be honest with each other. Tension off the field can turn into tension on the field and potentially affect game situations as well as team dynamics. Talk to the girls about convictions and explain that you do not tolerate double standards. If they want their teammates to be honest with them, they must be honest with their teammates.



The day before a big game, keep things lighthearted at practice to help calm players' nerves.

- *Learning to forgive.* Every season inevitably has problems and setbacks. Players become academically ineligible, get injured in practices and games, and struggle with friendships. The greatest mistake you can make is to ignore these problems. You must be willing to deal with uncomfortable emotions and confront negative situations. When problems are confronted and out in the open, the players learn to deal with difficult issues, reach compromises, forgive each other, and move forward with their focus on the team's goals. One of the signs of a successful season is athletes who have truly learned empathy for each other.

- *Learning the importance of self-discipline.* Self-discipline helps athletes believe in themselves and gives them the confidence to take risks. Self-disciplined athletes influence the entire team by believing they deserve success because of all the hard work they have put in. This attitude will carry your team through setbacks and difficult times. Ultimately, being a coach is about shaping your athletes' lives so they are capable of making good decisions on their own. By embracing these values, your athletes will learn to achieve more than they ever thought possible.

- *Enjoying the process.* We've all been in situations in which we are so focused on the result, we forget to enjoy the process of getting there (for more information on how to keep the sport fun, see page 18 in chapter 3). When athletes are focused on results only, they become stressed and anxious. They are afraid to make mistakes

and therefore play tense while focusing on things they cannot control. Allow your athletes the freedom to fail and take risks. Redirect their focus to the things they can control such as their courage, enthusiasm, and work ethic. They will become more confident players by focusing on performing at their best for themselves and their teammates.

- *Building strong relationships.* When teammates build strong relationships, they experience the cohesion and sense of unity that can help them achieve their goals. To maintain these relationships, athletes must learn to define and accept their roles on the team. You can help by encouraging them to become passionate leaders, while setting realistic personal goals. This way they continue to have a purpose for working hard.

- *Prioritizing what is important.* Even the most dedicated athletes appreciate the coach who doesn't make soccer the most important thing in their lives. The preteen and teenage years are confusing and emotional, and girls need guidance making decisions on how to manage their time and commitments. I encourage my athletes to prioritize in the following order: health, family, school, soccer and other sports, and friends. This doesn't mean I expect less from them when they are with me, quite the opposite. I expect them to be in the moment and to give fully of themselves because they have taken care of the other things in their lives. Although girls learn valuable lessons and develop lifelong relationships through soccer, soccer at this level is not life!