

How The Screaming Hurts

What makes the epidemic of sideline shouting particularly egregious is that the instructions are usually misguided.

By Mike Woitalla (Soccer America Magazine, June 2008)

What better venue for an endless array of amusement and bemusement than the youth soccer field? Much is predictable, like the adult sideline behavior, but the unexpected never ceases.

We recently witnessed three ducks make smooth landings in the center circle during a U-10 girls game. Then the front two started romancing until the third broke it up and they all took to the sky.

A week later, I had to take my eyes off the game to help a girl remove a Chinese finger-trap. There was also the time when the field was so soggy, the referee had to dislodge little players from mud holes.

Even the dreadful adult noise can provide a chuckle.

Like the burly man who continually berated the referee, and at one point, when the ref blew his whistle long and hard, screamed, "What the hell is that for?"

It was the halftime whistle.

A U-10 coach screamed, "Over here! Over here!" at the top of his lungs while a little goalkeeper had the ball in his hands. The coach apparently wanted the keeper to exploit the right flank instead of the left. And so the keeper punted the ball - more precisely than I imagined he had the skill for - and it rolled out of bounds, right to the coach's feet. Well done!

Eavesdropping on a coach addressing his 9-year-old troops at halftime, I heard him commanding that, "We need to neutralize No. 10!"

I later surveyed a small group of similarly aged children to confirm my notion that "neutralize" is not a word they're likely to comprehend. And one wonders what he had in mind, because it seemed his players had been trying darn hard already to get the ball from her.

I'm guessing that most of the long-winded advice or sideline screaming sounds to the children like the "whaa-whaa-whaa" of Charlie Brown's teacher.

But for sure there are those shouts that come from such a powerful parent-coach chorus that they make an impact.

Take for example the "shoot, shoot, shoot" scream that comes from the sidelines when a youngster dribbles toward goal. The instruction is misguided on many levels.

Does it help a child perform the difficult task of striking the ball while running as fast as he can by being screamed at during the process?

Does anybody believe that even the most novice player doesn't know she must shoot the ball while approaching the goal on a breakaway? "Actually, I thought I might pick it up and try to balance it on my head."

Most importantly, the "shoot" scream encourages players to pull the trigger earlier than they should.

Think about it. How do great players score on breakaways? They usually wait until they get close to the goalkeeper. It's much harder for the keeper to save a shot from four yards away than from 15.

There's also the option of rounding the keeper, especially when a patient attacker forces the keeper to commit.

My investigations on how great scorers beat keepers reveal that a key attribute is indeed patience. The bad shots are attributed to "rushing it" and not realizing one has more time than one thinks.

There may be no situation in the game that puts more pressure on a player than when he has a scoring chance - especially one in which he has time to assess the situation, as opposed to headers from aerial battles. Who really believes that screaming at the shooter provides any aid whatsoever?

Indeed, so much of the sideline instruction is detrimental to the developing of creative and intelligent players.

What happens when little players have the smarts to retreat with the ball? So often they're hammered with, "You're going the wrong way!" Watch a soccer game played by sophisticated players and you'll find that they're constantly moving the ball in all directions to find space and time.

Young players taking the ball away from the bunch are the clever ones. Will they sometimes put their team at risk? Maybe. But so what? Giving up a goal in a U-8 game isn't nearly as important as allowing young players to figure out how to keep possession.

Considering the dearth of exceptional dribblers in American soccer, it's time for a ban on the "Pass it! Pass it! Pass it!" shout.

Besides the fact that young players should be encouraged to dribble - because dribbling is the first step to mastering all ball skills - there are far better ways to introduce a passing game to youngsters than screaming at them.

When youngsters hit the stage at which they can comprehend teamwork, encouraging passing can be done more effectively with practice games than through instruction.

When a coach plays along with his team at practice, he can constantly demonstrate passing. And when he passes the ball back to the player he got it from, he sends the message that sharing pays off.

A 5 v 2 keepaway game puts players in constant passing situations. Awarding "goals" for give-and-goes during scrimmages is a fun way to prod passing.

What's crucial for coaches to keep in mind is when they continually instruct players during games they're denying players the chance to learn how to make their own decisions. It's why higher-level coaches complain that players come through the ranks without having developed good soccer instincts.

Sideline coaching does not create an environment conducive to producing creative players - those with the ability to improvise and pull off the unpredictable maneuvers.

At the very young ages there's hardly a need for coaches to instruct players, but instruction does have a place as children advance. How it's conveyed, however, determines its effectiveness.

What makes the popularity of the shouting approach so puzzling is that the screamers themselves probably wouldn't appreciate receiving advice in such a manner.

The more reasonable and effective approach would be to deliver advice with a calm, one-on-one conversation - at halftime or after the game. A concise sentence or two is much more likely to make an impression than a shout or a rant.

For sure, overcoaching can be the product of good intentions - the belief that the coach is supposed to be "teaching." Also, many parents expect coaches to provide loads of instructions. Lots of coaches have told me they field complaints from parents who believe the coach isn't doing his job if he isn't screaming from the sideline.

But sideline shouting isn't evidence of good coaching. In fact, what a coach does to create a nurturing relationship with her players may often go unnoticed.

Take the coach who, at every practice or after every game, calmly says one thing to each player. It may be short praise for a specific maneuver, a suggestion that could help the player next time out, or simple encouragement. Parents may not notice that kind of coaching, but the players will.

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