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As Youth Sport Coaches Take to the Sidelines, Important Pedagogical Practices to Remember

By Christopher Barton Merica

A foundational pillar in American society is the equal opportunity for all school-age children to participate in organized sport (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Jarvie et al., 2013). Participation in sport provides children with a diverse range of advantages, including physical, social, emotional, and cognitive benefits (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion [ODPHP], 2020). They also receive several academic benefits. Children who participate in sport are more likely to have a higher grade point average (Owen et al., 2022), increased daily attendance (Merkel, 2013), and greater high school graduation rates than their nonsport participating peers (ODPHP, 2020). Unfortunately, participation in organized sport has been in decline for almost two decades. Since 2008, nearly 3 million fewer children participated in organized sport and currently less than one in three children between the ages of 6 and 12 participate in a sport (Solomon, 2019).

Several factors are to blame for the downward trend, although the overwhelming research consensus is that children do not perceive sport to be fun due to behaviors of their coaches, such as providing minimal opportunities to participate, displaying poor instructional behaviors, and promoting overly competitive environments (Merkel, 2013; Solomon, 2019). Sport coaches can provide the invaluable opportunity to develop healthy lifestyle behaviors in children that continue into adulthood, including participating in lifetime activities, outdoor pursuits, and fitness-related physical activity (Solomon, 2019; Van Hoye et al., 2016). To facilitate the positive outcomes of participating in sport, practice settings need to include developmentally appropriate skill progressions, ample opportunities for all players to participate and contribute, and an environment that fosters player self-actualization (Martin, 2020; Van Hoye et al., 2016). It is recommended that sport coaches participate in professional development or formal training to increase their pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge of child development in sport settings (Nash et al., 2017). However, a national coaches survey conducted by the Aspen Institute discovered that more than 77% of sport coaches in the United States have no formal pedagogy training (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2022).

Every season, sport coaches in communities across the country prepare practice plans to develop their athletes' knowledge and skills and provide children with the opportunity to experience the "spirit of the game" (Geeraets, 2018). It is important for sport coaches to remember and utilize best practices for developing the motor skills (sport-related skills) of their athletes (Martin, 2020). Designing developmentally appropriate practice tasks is vital to the athlete's motor skill progression throughout the season and for the athlete's self-efficacy to continue to participate in sport (Silverman, 2011). The following are foundational sport pedagogy strategies to help coaches enhance the skill development and progression of their athletes throughout the season. For additional information on each pedagogical strategy, see Table 1.

Task Presentation

One of the most important pedagogical competencies of a coach is the ability to communicate and present instructional tasks to athletes that facilitate appropriate engagement with skill development (Rink, 2019; Silverman, 2011; Spittle, 2021). Motor learning and pedagogy research suggest that when instructors (e.g., coaches, physical educators) present quality task presentations of skill, the performers (e.g., athletes, students) are more likely to retain information regarding the skill and experience greater rates of success performing the skill during practice trials (Kwak, 2005; Magill & Anderson, 2010; Rink 2019; Spittle, 2021). A general framework of task presentation includes a set induction, complete demonstration of the skill with cues using multiple angles and nonexamples, practice trials with process or production-oriented feedback from the instructor, assessment of student achievement, and closure with lessons learned and areas for future growth based on the participant's experience (Rink, 1994; Spittle, 2021).

Prior to teaching a skill, it is important for coaches to establish signals and procedures when they want the athlete's attention and orient them with expectations for the practice session with a set induction. A set induction includes clear communication from the coach to their players that includes an overview of the tasks that will be completed during the session and intended outcomes. Athletes feel more comfortable if they know in advance what they will be doing and why they will be doing it to relate to the larger goal of their performance in game play. For example,

> Today we will be focusing on transitioning from offense to defense. This will be important in game play so that you can make quick transitions to defend space and protect the basket. We will first work on communicating with teammates during transition to defend space and then increase the difficulty by incorporating opponents in small-sided game play.

Once athletes are informed, demonstrating the motor skill is the fundamental first step in teaching and coaching. Motor skills in any setting are often demonstrated by either the instructor, another person, or a video, so performers have a model to guide their performance (Belka, 2002; Rink, 2019). Using a video of performers completing the practice task or intended skill is of great benefit to highlight correct performance cues to athletes (Palao et al., 2015). The demonstration of the skill should occur as close as possible to the speed at which it should be performed in a "game-like" setting. When demonstrating the skill, the coach should position themselves in front of the athletes so everyone can easily see and is attentive. During the demonstration, a coach should perform the skill at multiple angles (i.e., front, side) so athletes can view all the critical elements of the skill (Magill & Anderson, 2010; Rink, 2019).

After providing a demonstration of the whole skill or task, the coach can sequence the presentation in a logical order that is broken down into parts or "cues" to highlight the critical elements. The cues should focus on the preparation (before),

Table 1. Pedagogical Strategies

Pedagogical strategies	Characteristics
Task presentation	• Provide a set induction to orient the learners and explain tasks to be completed • Provide a clear presentation of the skill at full speed • Demonstrate the skill from multiple angles (i.e., front, side, back) • Break down the skill into parts or "cues" ◦ Fewer than three cues for novice learners ◦ Three to five cues for older and more experienced learners • Have performers demonstrate the cues along with the coach • Provide a nonexample or common error of performing the skill
Appropriate practice tasks	• Provide practice tasks that are not too easy nor difficult for performers to complete • Maximize the number of trials/rate of participation ◦ Minimize waiting time between practice trials ◦ Create partner or small-group tasks ◦ Individualize tasks to meet the skill level of each athlete • Active coaching behaviors: ◦ Monitor athlete performance during practice tasks ◦ Make refinements/adjustments based on athlete performance ◦ Provide process-oriented feedback specific to skill performance; minimize the use of general outcome feedback (e.g., good job, nice work)
Applying skills to tactical problems	• Apply skills to solve tactical problems related to: ◦ Scoring (e.g., maintaining possession of the ball, creating space) ◦ Preventing scoring (e.g., defending the goal, defending space) ◦ Restarting play (e.g., sideline pass, throw-in) • Utilize small-sided games to emphasize skills needed to solve tactical problems: ◦ Decrease/adjust the number of players participating ◦ Simplify rules, modify scoring, and adjust start/restart procedures ◦ Adjust the playing area (i.e., smaller, larger) or equipment (e.g., height of nets, size/weight of balls used) • Ask tactical questions during game play that solve problems: ◦ "What can you do to contain the ball on your side?" ◦ "When is the best time to pass the ball?" ◦ "What did you do to keep the opposition from scoring?"

execution (during), and recovery (after) phases of the skill or mechanical aspects that help players execute the skill (Rink, 2019). For example, cues for a novice tennis player learning the forehand stroke skill may include "racket back" (preparation), "swing low to high" (execution), "racket over opposite shoulder" (recovery). The number of cues will depend on the skill level of learner. For novice learners, three or fewer cues will allow the athlete to experience the movement and not overwhelm them. Too much information can confuse a beginning learner and can cause more harm than good. When working with more experienced athletes (late middle school or high school athletes), it is recommended that coaches use three to five cues to correct main errors and provide additional process-oriented feedback (i.e., refinements) on the performance of each cue (Magill & Anderson, 2010).

When a coach demonstrates the cues of a particular skill, it is advantageous for the athletes to perform the cues physically as the coach verbally announces them. Formulating neural–motor connections for developing a skill relies on numerous experiences, and verbal rehearsal is recommended to assist with this process (Belka, 2002; Magill & Anderson, 2010; Spittle, 2021). Furthermore, during the presentation of skill cues, highlighting performance errors as nonexamples can help athletes understand important ideas related to the movement (Rink, 2019). For example, when teaching how to set a volleyball, a coach might demonstrate an incorrect performance by allowing the volleyball to hit the palms of the hands to emphasize the execution cues of using the pads of the fingertips. Remember to keep demonstrations and explanations short and simple; the goal is for athletes to practice the skill (Belka, 2002; Silverman, 2011). Use the KISS principle: "Keep it short and simple!" The attention span of school-age children (even college students) can be short. The longer a coach rambles, the easier it is to lose them. Finally, close the session with a review of what the players did well and what they need to improve on.

Appropriate Practice Tasks

Too often, there is a misconception of what is appropriate practice to develop skill. Unfortunately, many coaches revert to

their former practice experiences in sport without any consideration of their relevance or whether they are appropriate or inappropriate (Richards et al., 2014). For example, the author's middle school football experiences with form-tackling practice included a dreadful "gauntlet drill" which, to 12- and 13-year-olds, was symbolic of a jousting scene from the movie *A Knight's Tale* (Helgeland, 2001). Two long lines of teammates waited across from each other 5 yards apart. One player at the opposite end of each line was designated to be either a tackler or a ball carrier. On the whistle, each player sprinted around his respective line and into the "gauntlet" tunnel to attempt a perfect head-on tackle in front of all their peers. In previous generations, this practice task may have been identified and taught as "appropriate practice." However, decades of motor learning research in sport (Magill & Anderson, 2010, Spittle, 2021) and physical education (Rink, 2019; Silverman, 2011) has identified key critical elements needed for appropriate practice tasks to successfully promote skill development.

Appropriate practice tasks need to be methodically planned and designed to maximize the participation of all athletes, foster self-actualization (the ability to reach one's full potential) for performance at the appropriate difficulty level based on the skills of each athlete, and minimize "spotlighting" in front of their peers to promote self-efficacy (Nesbitt et al., 2021). Appropriate practice tasks are classified as being neither too difficult nor too easy for the performer and should include an element of fun to keep athletes motivated (Clark, 2007; Silverman, 2011). Additionally, one of the most important variables in the learning of motor skill is to include ample opportunities for the athlete to participate and engage with the equipment with minimal time between practice trials or waiting in line (Nesbitt et al., 2021; Rink, 2019). Additional characteristics of appropriate practice include the coach actively monitoring performances (e.g., moving throughout groups, providing encouragement, managing behavior), providing process-oriented feedback (e.g., reinforcing performance cues), and modifying tasks to make them easier or harder based on athlete achievement (Silverman, 2011).

Not all athletes on a team will be at the same skill level, which makes it challenging as a coach to keep every player engaged and motivated during practice. The key to appropriate practice tasks is determining what is appropriate for each athlete and designing learning experiences that align with their skill level (Nesbitt et al., 2021). This is often referred to in educational settings as differentiated instruction (Rink, 2019). Two athletes, one lower skilled and one moderately skilled, will require different tasks to have appropriate practice. For example, during practice tasks for developing passing skills in soccer, some of the advanced-skilled athletes may practice passing to a partner while on the move against defenders in a large, coned area. Students with less skill

may participate in tasks that focus on passing to stationary or moving targets. Initial practice tasks should be relatively simple, and athletes should experience a level of success before the coach extends and progresses the tasks to more complex and game-like situations.

To these points, the design of the practice task is important to consider. When athletes are practicing as individuals or in pairs they will get many practice trials and the exact task can be tailored to the skill level of each person. When in larger groups, particularly when there is limited equipment, each athlete will get less individual practice, making it more difficult to cater practice tasks specific to the skill level of every participant (Rink, 2019). Often times, sport coaches have their athletes wait in long lines when there is enough space and equipment for all athletes to be engaged at the same time. This is infamously called a "one line, one ball, one chance" practice, which children unfortunately experience in many physical education and sport programs (Williams, 1992). When designing practice tasks, always consider how to organize (1) the number of people participating (how/where athletes will be positioned), (2) the space (in what areas tasks will occur), and (3) the equipment used (type and amount per person/group; Rink, 2019). Each of the practice situations previously discussed may appear to keep athletes active and participating, but do not be fooled by athletes being "busy, happy, and good" (Henninger & Coleman, 2008; Placek, 1983). Design practice tasks to maximize engagement time *and* skill development—never mistake activity for achievement!

> Being a top-tier coach does not depend on the wins, losses, or inspirational halftime speeches. Quality coaches get children excited and passionate for sport and help them find competency in their abilities to participate into adulthood.

Applying Skills to Tactical Problems

As athletes progress throughout the season and with their skill development, it is important to incorporate sport skills within appropriate tactical problem scenarios, referred to as the Teaching Games for Understanding instructional approach in physical education and sport (Mitchell et al., 2020). Tactical problems in sport include on-and off-the-ball decisions that athletes must make during a game to be successful, such as maintaining possession or defending space. Each tactical problem requires the athlete to perform skills and make decisions based on the changing environment during game play, referred to as "open skills" in motor development (Magill & Anderson, 2010; Wilson, 2002). Practicing "closed skills" in predictable and stable environments is important for younger and novice learners (Belka, 2002; Magill & Anderson, 2010). However, once athletes have mastered closed skills, it is important to apply them in game-like situations to increase the transfer of learning (Mitchell et al., 2020; Rink, 2019). For example, in football, after wide receivers have mastered running routes and catching a football on the move, it is critical to incorporate game-like situations that the receivers will have to address related to the tactical problem of maintaining possession of the ball. This can include running routes against an opposing cornerback or other members of the defensive secondary. The receiver must make decisions to adjust their route according to changing situational game contexts of the defense to successfully catch a pass from the quarterback.

> To apply skills in tactical settings, coaches can create small-sided games during practice sessions. Small-sided games are modified versions of a sport to emphasize a tactical problem and the motor skills needed to solve the problem.

To apply skills in tactical settings, coaches can create small-sided games during practice sessions. Small-sided games are modified versions of a sport to emphasize a tactical problem and the motor skills needed to solve the problem. Characteristics of small-sided games include (1) adjusting the number of players participating, (2) increasing or decreasing the dimensions of the playing area, and/or (3) modifying rules and equipment (Souza & Oslin, 2008). For example, in volleyball a tactical problem is defending space. To address the tactical problem in a practice setting, a coach can (1) decrease the number of players from 6 v 6 to 3 v 3, (2) adjust traditional rules for scoring by awarding extra points to the offense for attacking specific areas of the court to emphasize defending space, or (3) modifying the equipment by lowering the net or using a lightweight volleyball that floats in the air longer than a traditional volleyball. In addition, another goal of implementing small-sided games to increase skill development is for coaches to build their athletes' tactical knowledge of the sport, or what is often referred to as "sport IQ_[intelligence quotient]" (Mitchell et al., 2020). One strategy is for coaches to pause modified game play when athletes perform a tactical decision correctly or incorrectly and discuss the choices made by players by asking them questions. Framing questions around decisions made by athletes will help them develop higher order thought processes related to the tactical problems that arise in game play (Souza & Oslin, 2008). For example, a coach may ask their players, "How can you create space to get free from your defender?" or "Where is the best place to position yourself on the court to defend space?" Every coach wants high-IQ_players; however, it must be cultivated by the coach through systematic instruction and intervention.

Final Thoughts

Coaches serve as important adult mentors in the development of school-age children, and with great power comes great responsibility. Sport coaches have a duty to provide positive and equitable learning experiences for youngsters to cultivate a love and appreciation of movement and physical activity (Martin, 2020). In a time when children are more sedentary than ever, quality sport coaches are desperately needed (Centers for Disease Control, and Prevention, 2022). Being a top-tier coach does not depend on the wins, losses, or inspirational halftime speeches. Quality coaches get children excited and passionate for sport and help them find competency in their abilities to participate into adulthood. This can be achieved by delivering quality instruction, fostering an environment for learning and self-actualization, and designing appropriate skill-development progressions. Be the agent of change to help get children back into the game.

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