

# Behaviour Analysis to Improve Your Coaching and the Coaching Environment

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Youth coaching is an area, unsurprisingly, in which the majority of coaches work. The youth coach, particularly at the elite level, has a specialised task where expectations and demands for both player and coach are different from other levels. For example, coach behaviour, as well as the contingency and appropriateness of information, is crucial to the holistic development of young players. This is because an important determinant of the effects of participation in coaching programmes is the coach's relationship with the players. As coaches, we occupy a position of centrality and influence in the athletic setting. Through our words and actions, we assume a crucial role influencing, not only the players' performance, but also their social and emotional development as well as their well being.

Regardless of the level of knowledge and 'footballing skill' of the coach, it is the application of that knowledge and skill which will separate the excellent practitioner from the average. Crucial to enhancing players' performance therefore, is how the coach facilitates learning in that player; a central tenet of which is the coach's instructional behaviour. Yet, whilst players frequently receive feedback regarding their performance, it is rarely the case for the coach to receive feedback pertaining to their coaching. Most coaches, however, are continually looking for new ideas and strategies for improving their teaching, as well as the learning environment that they provide for players. Moreover, it is through feedback about our coaching practice, that current strengths and limitations become clarified, and development of practice becomes possible. Put simply, if you don't know what's broken, you can't fix it! Similarly, if we do not know what good coaches do, we are unable to incorporate their good practice into our sessions and into broader coach education.

By and large in recent years, coach education generally, and in football specifically, has made huge strides forward. Now courses are more detailed and sophisticated, and include, in addition to the tactical and technical, elements of sport science that undoubtedly help coaches, such as; psychology, physiology, and sports medicine. However, an area that is not often considered is sport pedagogy, particularly the

area of behavioural or observational analysis. This is a growing body of knowledge, with over 1900 articles produced over the last 25 years in a number of sports including football; demonstrating that direct observation of coaches is an appropriate and successful method for analysing coach behaviour in a variety of settings. The findings from this research, and the ongoing analysis of coach behaviour, have the potential to assist us in conducting more effective and productive practice sessions. Indeed, numerous aspects of coaching practice and sessions can be analysed. These include for example, how often do we instruct, motivate, demonstrate, ask questions or punish? This, of course, is not an exhaustive list, but begins to give a flavour of the possibilities.

## What's Happening During Practice: What do We Know Already?

The extent of knowledge regarding coach behaviour during practice is continually being updated and expanded, including in particular, knowledge about football coaches. Some general findings that appear consistent when dealing with youth players include:

- Players respond most favourably to behaviour that is supportive and instructional
- Supportiveness (reinforcing desirable performance and efforts, and encouraging following mistakes) will positively affect players self esteem, and motivation and lowers competitive anxiety.
- Coach behaviour is more important as an attitudinal determinant than winning or losing.

A significant finding is, that we as coaches, have a limited awareness of the frequency that we engage in particular forms of behaviour. In other words, we think we behave one way, but often this is not the case. This was illustrated to me in my own recent research (Cushion & Jones, 2001), where an Academy coach, prior to observation, reported that his coaching behaviour consisted of 'mainly question' and answer'. Of his coaching behaviour, which was observed over three sessions, only 3.4% of his behaviour was questioning (a little above average in the sample). He was a little shocked.

The study that he took part in was conducted with a sample of youth coaches (Under 17 and Under 19) working for both Nationwide League and Premiership Clubs, all of which had Academy status. The combined data for all coaches is illustrated in Table 1, which gives the gross number of behaviours (the frequency), how often each behaviour occurred per minute (the RPM), and also gives each category expressed as a percentage of the coaches total behaviour. Generally, the coaches' largest behaviour category, not surprisingly, was instruction, accounting for over 60% of their behaviours. Of this the most frequently used behaviour was concurrent instruction (instruction given during skill execution), this type of instruction was limited to short informative phrases or cue words, such as 'head up', 'relax', 'keep the ball moving'. All instruction was directly related to task performance. The next most frequently employed behaviour was praise, with the scold to praise ratio at approximately 1:9, suggesting a positive learning environment, where the reinforcement of correct actions is to the fore. Silence appeared as the third largest behaviour category, noteworthy was that the coaches were not 'off task' but silently monitoring. A pattern of coaching emerged, with silence interspersed with judicious comments and feedback to individuals and the whole group. In summary then, it is possible to draw preliminary conclusions from the coaches observed, particularly in relation to the predominance of instructionally related behaviours, the positive and measured specificity of the feedback given, and the willingness to observe practices closely at length before intervening.

## Becoming more analytical: Understanding and Improving your behaviour

By adopting an analytical approach, there are a number of aspects that could be considered with regards to analysing your own coaching behaviour. Through obtaining an understanding of your own coaching practice and behaviour, it may only require minor adjustments to improve the instructional and motivational aspects of your coaching and practice sessions. Before making wholesale changes to your behaviour and the way sessions are conducted, it is

important to systematically analyse current behaviour. Remember of course, that we are notoriously bad at accurately describing our own behaviour. In addition, changes are more likely to occur with knowledge of how we presently behave. The coach establishes and controls the amount of instruction, and is responsible for maintaining a positive and motivated atmosphere. Consequently, it is important to know how (or indeed if) you are contributing to these factors.

A good place for self-analysis to start, is to examine how you interact with your players, in particular how you feedback to the players. Feedback is the information given to the players regarding their performance, for example, 'good, keep your head up'. Divide your feedback statements into 'positive' or 'negative', and using a simple technique called event recording, just mark (or get an observer to mark) each time that behaviour occurs. Record your feedback statements for fifteen minute segments over 3 or 4 sessions. After each session, establish totals and calculate a ratio of positive to negative statements, also do the same for the whole of the period observed. Whilst there remains no definitive 'model' for coaching behaviour, research has indicated that a ratio of 3:1 positive to negative will help facilitate a positive learning environment. If your ratio for the observation period is less than 3:1, consider becoming more positive. This can be achieved for example, by looking for positive things from your players in your sessions and reinforcing them, or trying to include encouragement after mistakes. Another example might be to try to substitute 'don't do it like this', for 'do it like this', thus re-framing a negative to a positive.

It is possible to further divide your feedback into 'general' and 'specific'. An example of the difference between the two would be, 'well done' which is general against, 'well done, good weight on the pass', which is an example of specific. Another type of specific feedback is 'corrective' and is simply aimed at changing the next attempt, for example, 'open your body to receive the ball'. This time divide your feedback into 'positive general', 'positive specific', and 'corrective specific'. Following the same procedure outlined earlier, record (or get an observer to record) your feedback statements.

Research suggests that general feedback will motivate players initially, over time however, it loses its effect and can become, to some, annoying. What does 'good shot' and 'that's great' actually mean? Specific feedback is of more value to players learning, and increases the probability of repeating or improving the desired performance. While at the same time,

limited or entirely corrective feedback will affect the coaching environment, the players, and your effectiveness. If you are concerned with your feedback, try to link a positive statement to your corrective feedback, for example, 'good try, but this time try to lock out your ankle'. Also try to make general statements more specific, you have seen something to positively reinforce, simply say what you see, for example, 'good first touch, well done'.

After collecting data, it is useful to convert this into a unit of measurement for comparison. By using the simple recording method of event recording, it is possible to use 'rate per minute', which gives the average number of times a behaviour occurs per minute. So by measuring say, criticism or scolds over the course of a twenty minute 6 v 6, and the total came to 80, then the rate per minute would be  $80/20 = 4$ . This could then be compared with other similar sessions or indeed other coaches.

Observational analysis can be used for more than assessing feedback patterns. As with the study reported above, it is possible to produce relatively objective descriptive data on the frequency that coaches, hustle, criticise, use questioning, demonstrate, even use players names and so on.

### Closing thoughts

There is a significant relationship between adult coaching behaviours and youth players' evaluative reactions and their athletic experience. Of course there remain many variables that contribute to coaching sessions, and ensure that behaviours are, to a large extent, situation specific. As coaches within these situations however, our interaction pattern's with our players is a controllable. With knowledge of how we behave and interact with our players, and conduct our sessions, it is possible to cultivate an environment that is positive, and encouraging, with the specific purpose of enhancing the effectiveness of learning. Indeed, the data you collect can help you understand your behaviour, and highlight areas that are effective, and other areas that may require adjustment in some way. By collecting data this way you have relatively objective data upon which you can make informed decisions, rather than inappropriate decisions based on the passing remarks of others, or on feelings of how things are. The development of coaching excellence requires a reflective

approach, and self-analysis is a tool that may facilitate a part of meaningful reflection.

### References

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### Further Reading

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Behaviour	Frequency (Event)	R.P.M	%
First Name	*1,363	1.26	10.33
Pre-Instruction	1,910	1.76	14.48
Concurrent Instruction	3,916	3.62	29.7
Post-Instruction	1,640	1.51	12.43
Questioning	409	0.37	3.1
Physical Assistance	74	0.06	0.56
Positive Modelling	423	0.39	3.2
Negative Modelling	28	0.02	0.21
Hustle	521	0.48	3.95
Praise	1,947	1.8	14.76
Scold	240	0.22	1.82
Management	367	0.33	2.65
Uncodeable	281	0.3	2.51
Silence	1,378	1.27	10.45
Total not including *	*13,134		
<b>Total</b>	<b>14,497</b>	<b>13.39</b>	

Table 1 Total frequency, R P M and percentage of behaviours for all coaches