

# Coaching from the Sidelines

Many sports allow coaches to coach from the sideline. This raises the question about the skills needed to do so and how coaches develop such skills. Dr Chris Harwood discusses the impact and role of the coach on the sideline. His research gives some thought-provoking outcomes, even for coaches who are only allowed to observe play.

*It's interesting how, at the beginning of a game, the manager or the coach gets sole territory of the technical area and everyone else sits down. As the game gets on, depending on the momentum, in the last five minutes or so everybody thinks they've got the right to get up and shout and that happens quite often. Hence, the pitch invasion of the whole bench when the goal goes in. Now that, for me, is an area that needs managing. No doubt people will say that, by then, it's all over, but history keeps telling us it's those two or three minutes that can be crucial.*

Les Reed in Higham, Harwood and Cale, 2005

The quote refers to the important performance-related issue of sideline coaching and the careful, informed management of coach behaviour. This article gives insights for coaches to help them make informed decisions about this particular coaching role.

When a match or competition begins, one of the key psychological roles of a coach is to distinguish between those elements of his team's performance that he may be able to impact, from those elements over which he has no control. For the coach, this should be a serious and crucial personal exercise in self-awareness and acceptance. Ostensibly, the only aspect of a match the coach can control is the *process* and *quality of communication* to players. Therefore, the key coaching role and influence is in the 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'how' of communication as the match unfolds.

In the heat of a match, players' psychological state is likely to govern their decision making, technical executions and perceptions of physical skills. Plainly stated, the mind governs what is possible physically, technically and tactically in terms of immediate performance. Therefore, any influence the coach has on a player's ongoing performance is likely to be through *communication episodes* that promote confidence, praise effort, encourage and elevate concentration, reinforce self-control/composure, and acknowledge support given to another teammate (ie contributions to the team). Motivation, concentration, emotional control, communication and confidence are key ingredients for players maintaining a positive psychological state. So, the coach needs to know what players would ideally want from him to help them both *create* and *maintain* this state. The coach can only find this out in a one-to-one coaching role and leadership responsibility away from competition, in order to be prepared for his sideline-coaching role on matchday.

Of course, one fundamental difficulty of sideline coaching is whether communication can be received or heard during a match. When this difficulty is apparent, the time, place and content of quality feedback to players may only happen during a half-time period or timeout. During actual play, the coach could follow the principle that a calm and composed bench will facilitate a calm and composed team, with the coach fulfilling an emotionally controlled, observational role in readiness for giving information during a break in play.

Nonetheless, when sideline coaching is possible, coaches should know that effective sideline coaching is about appreciating which information and behavioural cues are typically ineffective, and indeed destructive, from a psychological point of view. Effective sideline and timeout coaches are excellent *instrumental communicators*. They send task-relevant information to player recipients, captains and leaders on the pitch, to *improve* or *maintain performance* in given target areas.

As noted in Higham, Harwood and Cale, they will:

- praise the process (eg a well-delivered pass, quick recovery after a mistake) as well as the outcome (eg winning a major second ball, winning back possession)
- offer clear instructions that are skill-related (eg 'tuck in behind him') and follow up with praise (eg 'that's it, well done')
- praise decisions and offer feedback even if the execution was poor

- provide specific information of a tactical nature for players on the bench to spread through the team
- uphold a physical image of confidence in players when communicating, so players know the coach has a positive belief in their capability.

Instrumental communicators *serve players and serve the team* in their coaching role. They ask themselves the question: how can I behave towards my players in order to help them play well, play better and contribute positively to the momentum of the match? And they answer the question by considering carefully the positive components of their own psychological influence on each player and the team as a whole.

This lies in sharp contrast to coaches who are *emotional communicators* and who tend to get expressively caught up in the emotions of the match, including mistakes, incidents and events over which they have absolutely no control. Whether it is from the sideline, during a timeout, or in the dressing room, emotional communicators will tend to:

- illustrate their disappointment or anger at the slightest mistakes
- focus on the outcome of events, not on the processes
- magnify problems and ignore the positive details, while also failing to offer routine praise
- attack the player, as opposed to the behaviour or lack of skill
- attack the execution even if the decision was correct
- exhibit negative body language in their technical area that can serve to embarrass and unnerve players
- create an atmosphere of fear, anxiety, tension and relief, as opposed to one of challenge, positivity, composure, opportunism and excitement.

Emotional communicators tend to *serve themselves and their own insecurities*, as opposed to the team. Becoming publicly angry at a mistake distances the coach from the perpetrator of the mistake and leaves the player even more isolated. If communication is about sending and receiving information, then effective sideline coaching is about sending information that players will receive in a manner that drives their energy and behaviour forwards without fear.

It is clear, therefore, that there should be science, structure and planning behind sideline coaching. For starters, coaches need to know what leadership and communication style their players want. Secondly, coaches have a choice both verbally and non-verbally about how they want the bench or dugout to look, act and talk. How the bench looks, acts, reacts and talks can impact on how the team thinks, feels, acts and reacts on the pitch. Thirdly, the bench of substitutes has ears and it is important to curb personal comments and reactions about on-field players made within earshot of their teammates on the bench. A more functional sideline role for the coach is to use substitutes proactively in setting observation tasks for them, tasking them with supporting a particular player and mentally preparing them for their own potential contribution.

In summary, a coach can have a positive and negative influence on the performance of the players and the team from the sideline. This influence stems from the coach's knowledge of (or lack of) how to promote a positive psychological climate that facilitates motivation, attention, emotional control and communication. The effects of tactical and strategic information given to players are likely to be far more productive when delivered in this psychologically astute sideline-coaching environment. Coaches who work on the sidelines should self-reflect on their tendencies to offer instrumental versus emotional communication episodes and consider the where, when, how and what of their communication. They should also plan and structure their sideline-coaching role, and view it as a distinct coaching performance competency that supports the team on the field of play.

## References

Higham, A., Harwood, C.G. and Cale, A. (2005) *Momentum in Soccer: Controlling the Game*. Leeds: Coachwise Business Solutions. ISBN: 978-1-902523-73-3.

## Profile

**Dr Chris Harwood** is a member of the Sport and Exercise Psychology Research Group in the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at Loughborough University. He has conducted research in football and tennis in particular.

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