

Underage coaching should be child's play

COMING home recently from delivering a course to underage coaches in Simonstown, Meath, I reflected on how, currently, Gaelic football, like many other sports is awash with development squads or 'to use their latest term, Academies.

On further reflecting, every club with an efficiently working coaching structure is technically an academy as coaching, by definition, is simply 'to make better' so that players can be 'the best they can be'.

I do wonder how much development and learning actually does take place and how any assessment of such is arrived at. Assessing by game results only is a flawed method.

All players, especially young players, just want to be playing the game. Bearing in mind the natural development of a child, from four years old to 18, there are perhaps strong lessons for coaches to take on board at varying stages in that 4-18 age growth.

- Stage 1 Playing with (approx 4-6 yrs)

Here children are self-centred (he took my ball) and are easily distracted. Their attention span is short and they expect others to adapt to and meet their needs. They have no understanding of Gaelic football as a game and will simply play with a ball as if it's a toy, rolling, throwing, smelting, biting it and have as yet no tendency to lift it to kick it (good time to establish the 'foe down' kick). Thus in decision-making they need to be led, shown, involved repeatedly with coach at times a 'co-mentor' during activities.

Encourage them to use both



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hands, both feet (nobody has a 'bad' foot). Allow them to make mistakes and learn from them. Realise they are more likely to play alongside others rather than beside.

- Lesson 1

Coaches by showing a positive, caring, fun approach, full of encouragement and reward achievement ('high fives') ignites the 'love' of the sport in the child. This is motivation for young players at its best.

- Stage 2 Playing at (approx 6-10 years)

Here the emphasis is on basic/medium skills (gross and fine motor) using muscle memory activities.

Players, now, are able to assume different roles and understand basic competition games and rules. 'Small to big' is the approach, ie, small pitch, small numbers of rules, smaller ball (let children pick one to play with), one skill at a time, small numbers in teams, etc. Players still depend on the coach regularly feeding back how they are developing/performing.

Catch them doing good and praise them. Lift them up in public, build them up in private. Make sure they understand fully what they're doing and make activities routine but varied as routine is the essence of

learning. Act like a commentator for part of games to sharpen their decision making.

Now they 'mimic' their favourite players/role models so saturate them with photos, videos, etc, of their favourite players performing skills to perfection - this is a strong re-inforcement approach.

- Lesson 2

Use 'deep practice' when teaching skills, ie, the 'baby' steps and 'mastering the movement' approach. This is done in five ways:

- (i) Absorb the whole skill
- (ii) Break the skill into its global parts
- (iii) Train each part as slow as possible, slow it down.
- (iv) Repeat/practice it more often.
- (v) Learn to 'feel' mistakes so they will not be afraid to fix them.

- Stage 3 Playing To (approx 10-12 years)

Young players here form small, close friendship groups.

They start to 'compare' each other and a strong competitive nature (not winning) is forming. Group or peer opinion is often 'more important' than the coach for evaluation and coach must deal with this positively. Players now definitely want to play strictly to the rules. This is a good time to introduce the rule book, explanation simply/fully the game rules, pitch lines and the concepts of good and bad spaces in games. Time to develop 'head-up' and the 'look/see/decide/act' approach to playing in games now, eg, 9 v 9, 10 v 10, 13 v 13, etc. A good time to introduce and set team standards and start 'one to one' or 'clinic' areas for 'snot and fix' coaching



GAME ON... Young players should slowly learn the rules of the game. The priority early on should be fun

- Lesson 3

Don't coach by 'right' and 'wrong'. Being 'right' suggests only one solution, being 'wrong' often lead to players avoiding that part/whole skill.

Use the terms 'working for you' or 'not working for you yet' instead of 'right' and 'wrong'.

- Stage 4 Playing (approx 12-14 years)

Here players are ready for concentrated and specific training programmes. They are better able to work together with others and find it easier to develop teamwork while noticing differences in their abilities.

Players now like to make their own decisions (not made for them), using their own criteria. Here they need to be taught the value of questioning, assessing, judging - the see/feel approach. Elementary tactics and basic game plans develop now.

- Lesson 4

Within reason, allow the young player to be as creative as possible where he tells coach, "See what I can do now." While you as coach become the 'guide on the side' rather than 'the sage on the stage'.

- Stage 5 Playing for (14-16/18 years)

Players here feel the need for almost individual, concentrated and specific training programmes and the coach needs to be on top of this game in a 'one-to-one' sense.

Players respond well to 'praise and challenge'. They are very strong on self-valuation and how best to introduce self-appraisal assessments post games.

They need to be taught how. Players now expect to be consulted on decisions. Essentially 'coach' has become 'mentor'.

- Lesson 5

Coach and players must learn/accept that strong 'teams' not individuals win championships. 'Play as an individual, lose as a team'. It's all 'Child's Play' really