

How to keep your participants returning to your coaching sessions

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Many coaches can deliver a good session, but how do we coach to ensure our participants return week after week? How do we keep their interest? In my opinion, it is similar in schools – while the students have to attend lessons, can you keep their interest over two terms, or can you maintain the interest of an after-school club?

I think it depends on the motivations and interests of your participants. Most sport, even the sport that caters for those in competitive leagues, is recreational. Why are those players taking part? When I ask my players, the answers will vary, but generally, they are a variation on the following:

- social
- love the sport/game
- fun
- fitness
- being part of a team
- quality of the coaching
- enjoy a challenge
- wish to improve skills/knowledge.

The majority of my club players in hockey wish to be a valuable member of a team and enjoy the camaraderie of that team. Some adults wish to progress to higher teams. Students wish to improve to play in their university first team. My young players wish to learn and progress in the game, and often wish to develop in order to play representative hockey at county and regional levels and above. My club offers opportunities for players of all levels, from novice to national league standard, and has players representing all age groups up to and including England under-21. Players have the opportunity to progress through the teams, but currently, we offer competitive hockey and training for all abilities and every age group.

A key aspect is to have a framework of play that is common to all teams so that progression through the teams is easy. Training sessions need to be structured but replicating game play. As with many coaches, I moved away from dribbling around cones many years ago. I create my own practice games that are pitch- and often position-related, and are directional, leading to goals being scored or points being attained. The sessions need to be relevant to each group of players based on their needs following a game. [Players need to be involved in decision-making scenarios](#) and have plenty of touches of the ball.

I often have an overarching theme for a season – a really simple focus that can be applied to every position and player, but applied in many different situations. For example, **first to the ball** applies to a defender intercepting or a forward ‘posting up’. The key is to find many different ways of coaching particular technical aspects to enable players to develop tactical awareness, rather than setting up the same old practice to develop, say, ‘trapping the ball’. Players will trap the ball differently depending on where they are on the pitch, where the opposition are, and where they may have pre-scanned and intend to make a pass. So much can be set up to keep the interest of the players, with all the techniques of the game being applied to decision-making scenarios to develop skill. It is essential to vary the [game-related practices](#), even if you are working on the same techniques to produce skilful players.

However, having started with the technical and tactical aspects of the game, the soft skills are the most important to keep participants coming back each week:

- Always arrive early and be waiting for them.
- Be committed and don't miss sessions. Players will feel they need to follow your example.
- Have knowledge of your sport.
- Plan and keep a record of what you do along with brief evaluations. This does not need to be detailed, but I use a small notebook each season.
- Greet each player on arrival, know your players, try to ask them something personal (birthday, exam, child's health, new job etc).
- Start the session with [fun](#) activities. It could be chain tag or tag rugby. My players love a version of Aussie rules football (great for hockey with no offside as the ball can be thrown and kicked forward). Make this initial activity the start of a theme that is a thread through the session (eg chain tag – where participants keep splitting into pairs – can be used for the start of a defensive theme where channelling and working together can replicate defending in the game).
- Be fair and consistent.
- Be open and honest about the aims of the session, set the scene.
- Ask participants to contribute to the session, ask for comments and what they wish to do.
- Ensure you set achievable goals in activities.
- Stretch players with medium, achievable goals.
- If playing competitive games is what your participants are there for, motivate them by making sessions challenging and competitive in game play.
- Set appropriate [constraints](#) to enhance learning.
- Agree some goals for the season, with them having ownership.
- Differentiate and agree goals with individuals.
- [Praise effort](#) and high quality skill. Don't overpraise, but praise where praise is due.
- Ask questions, encourage participants to ask questions and challenge.
- Give qualitative [feedback](#). (Why is it good?)
- Keep sessions high tempo, high intensity.
- Stretch the players you know wish to be stretched, and demand high quality and commitment to the team.
- Ensure players have a sense of belonging.
- Ensure there is continuity and each session progresses, leading to the next. Players will not want to miss the next session.
- Above all, [have fun](#), have a joke with players, give them chatting time at the start of a session.

My teams are all different. Two high-performing young teams are very committed and motivated, training twice a week. Two further teams are very sociable but have a desire to succeed, one always leaving early for away matches to have breakfast together, and another of mainly adults who socialise frequently and attend charity fun runs together. The other team is a starter team of young players having their first league experience and some adults. These all require different approaches in training sessions.

Training sessions usually take place from the start of August to the end of March, with a break at Christmas. The participants in the top two teams will attend 28 sessions before Christmas and 24 after Christmas, with one or two matches each week. Planning is crucial to maintain the interest of players for 52 sessions. The other teams will have 28 sessions.

Yes, it's challenging, but it can be very rewarding to see players arrive and be excited about what the session may contain. Try to keep sessions fresh, relevant and exciting. As a coach, be [enthusiastic](#), encouraging and motivating. If the majority of your participants attend most of your sessions in a season, can you replicate that year after year? If you move with the changes in your sport, it is entirely possible.

How do you keep your participants returning to your sessions? Add a comment to let me know

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