Teenagers - Why I Should Have Been Ready!

Published 29/05/17 by Rich Bland

Like so many others, my Coaching Journey began as a 'Grassroots Dad'. Readers of my previous blogs will have an idea of and perhaps relate to much of the experience. Dads begin with the best intentions and form various philosophies along the way. Sometimes these philosophies link to our own children and our knowledge and learning evolves as we go. Being open to new ideas, talking to parents, players and countless other coaches has helped me develop. However, if there is one thing I hadn't prepared for or expected was the metamorphosis that I should have seen coming...

...The Rise of the Teenager!

Over the last seven or eight years, I've spent most of my weekends (several hundred days, to put it into context) with the same kids. Some I've known since nursery school and most through primary school age. I've been privileged to coach some since they were six years old, others have joined us as older children but the majority have been together since the Foundation Stage. It has always been a nice little team, ticking the participation boxes, winning across the four corners and a real community within a larger club society. I've loved it but this last season has been the most challenging to date. They've reached the age of 16. They've changed!

It's not as if I hadn't been warned. The excellent Youth Modules are heavy on the different psychological and social needs of the adolescent player. They show the how they are likely to react differently to both praise and pressure. Course content reflects on the outside influences of the 11-16 age groups and how the likelihood of them giving you honest feedback diminishes, along with a growing fear of how they are perceived in the group. Looking back on a season now, I wonder if my preparation for this year was adequate. Did own confidence in my coaching philosophies, language and attitude around younger players mean that I neglected the need for change? Did I pay enough attention to my own template, produced ready for the FGHS assessment? It's one thing knowing the answers on paper. We need to put them into practice.

FGHS assessment

Let's take the positives of the season first. The learning environment was set as always. Players free to experiment. Mistakes an opportunity for correction rather than humiliation. Player rotation was set (as agreed with parents) with player ownership on session content and match formations to the fore. Players of other clubs were not targeted and won at all cost mentalities were not encouraged. Unlike some, we still did things "right" and I'm still glad we stuck to these principles. However, these kids had changed.

Some were now turning up without parents as they enjoyed more social freedom and autonomy, the technical zones now surrounded by bibs as well as bags. The normal variables and then 10km start were still well supported but we battled for time on a Saturday morning with the 9ers or the 3s or 2s+ both. with some attending or being on line well into the early hours (or night before). I'll admit to a disappointment that football with us was no longer a focal point for some and reflected on the fateful day if they're enjoying it they would turn up. Was this a theory that belonged with younger children or was I suddenly doing something wrong? Was it the dress of when activities or should I take it personally? Do they now see their Coach as yet another authority figure in their lives, rather than just 'Rich - the football guy'? Some players were in a local Advanced Programme and when Grassroots trading occasionally clashed with higher profile games, they certainly chose to play at the higher level. My passion, organisation and planning remained the same but outside influences for young people began impacting on their decisions. I could see the changes in growth and body shapes as nature took effect, lowering later than it's fair season to spot the visual evidence) than it is to notice the changes in their nature and the language we need to use. Psychological and Social attitudes were shifting. Quickly!

The problem was not that I was doing everything differently but I was trying to remain the same. Up to now, I've always worked with children and treated them as such but I should this jump into young adulthood. Pre-exam Six' seemed, your late was a good one' or 'Shirt Up. Avoid the Abs Glad you tried to pass early' were no longer adequate. Very young players are aware of relationships at an either self-centred or need to positive encouragement. Clearly now, these older players became more aware of the COMPOSITION of the mistake in game play. A misplaced pass, bad touch or dropped cross were more of an issue than they ever had been. Their emotions were their own and the pressure to do well came from within. The small differences in character that were noticeable in the early years opened up and became wider. Some of the players that had showed early leadership became quieter, preferring the background rather than shouldering the responsibility. The de-construction of performances at the school gates loomed large and for some, the evaluation set in that the innocent childhood dream of being a footballer would never become a reality, resulting in them taking solace by making sure the rest knew they weren't the same player in the group (and who they believed was). A new social order started to develop which I couldn't influence and our philosophies were questioned on the playground. I'll play a player whenever the circumstances but some kids haven't put the effort into making practice or working hard on the weeks they are there. Some knew their game time was "safe" whether they worked to improve or not. Other players sat this and no longer accept that they should share playing time with a bet that doesn't seem to care enough. Some still live for the game, for others it's just a part of a busy, interesting life where they enjoy many things. Every Child Counts and we need to see creative, giving everybody a game but some players began to ask otherwise, especially when taunted by schoolmates from other clubs. It didn't matter a few years ago, I doubt it will matter in a few years' time but I do understand that it DOES matter now.

Did we learn from the season? Most definitely and while disappointed I wasn't prepared for what lay ahead, writing this has helped me understand how I can best learn from this and take it forward. Communication techniques have to change. I've enjoyed the days of being the smiley faced clown as we pretend to be sharks, super heroes or Harold Henry but these days have gone. They are more individual than ever, studying different subjects at school and forming new interests and social groups. Sessions have to be well presented, mirror the game but importantly be interesting and varied. There has to be a 'point' to doing everything otherwise it will be met with a message shrug. They've also reached an age where little is offered free and have to put the necessary effort in for themselves and their team and I have to be stronger if they don't.

My previous Blog Start a Coaching Revolution was one that we don't immediately condemn the new coach at U7 level as he learns his new trade. Perhaps there are Coaches of older children reading this that find the teenage player easier to work with and wondering what my issue is, forgetting that they may have once been the same. It's a learning process for me. The next set of fourteen year olds I work with will have a better coach, ready to understand the challenge ahead. Unfortunately, with most Grassroots teams, the coach grows old with the players and only gets one shot, so should we be looking much closer at age group specialisation? I've learnt so much this year away from that Comfort Zone of the Foundation Stage player. Time to move forward.

Thanks for Reading

Rob

If you enjoyed this you can find all my other ConnectedCoaches blogs here.

Login to follow, share, comment and participate. Not a member? Join for free now

tags : coaching, coaching-children, creative-coaching, behaviour, behaviour-management, disruptive-behaviour, positive-behaviour-management, coaching-philosophy