

The Effective Assistant Coach

A true partner or simply a "yes-man" or a glorified "go-fer"?

By Lawrence Fine



This is a subject that I have rarely seen addressed but which I also consider to be of extreme importance. Many teams have either assistant coaches or co-coaches who end up playing the role of cone-fetcher or, even worse, merely stands around and has no input at all. This is a tragically wasted opportunity for players to learn from different perspectives. Even at higher levels (which for now I will consider to be college soccer), from what I can see, most assistant coaches end up being "gofers" and "yes men" (or women).

For whatever reason, many assistant coaches think the head coach wants to hear affirmations about their decisions rather than hearing an honest opinion from a differing viewpoint. Even worse are head coaches who really don't want to here another opinion and instead become angered by the disagreement. By stifling any type of true exchange of ideas, the head coach loses out, the assistant loses out and, most importantly, the team loses out.

How can this be avoided? First, create an environment of open communication. Without this, nothing else will work. I strongly recommend that a head coach and assistant coach meet before each training session to discuss what will take place during that session. Note that I did not say the head coach tells the assistant coach what is planned. This is a process that should be done together. By taking both coaches' views into consideration, the assistant coach will sense some ownership of the practice. This also will allow either coach to be able to run a drill or set up for the next drill. Without this important step, it is difficult to believe that any two coaches can coexist successfully.

Often I see a head coach and an assistant stand together through most of a training session. That's a pretty good indicator that one of them is not being utilized properly. One of the advantages of having two coaches is that the team can benefit from the observation of two sets of eyes instead of one. This advantage is somewhat negated if those eyes are observing from the same angle.

The director of one of the largest camps in the country talks about the grenade theory. Simply explained, coaches should be spread out so that if a grenade were tossed onto the field, it would only affect one coach. When the coaches must speak, they should get together, have their discussion, then separate. If the coaches have met beforehand and discussed the training session, they should be able to get by with minimal communication that distracts their attention from the players.

In order for coaches to work together, there must be truly open communication. Too often, I have spoken to two members of a coaching staff where one thinks the communication is excellent while the other thinks it's nonexistent. How can this be? Sometimes it's because the head coach doesn't want to hear different opinions, so the assistant coach gives only the feedback he or she thinks the head coach wants to hear. Other times, it's because the assistant coach thinks the head coach wants affirmation while in reality he or she wants an honest opinion.

Most of the time, the head coach is responsible for creating an environment for open communication. This isn't always easy to do. If the coaches can't be honest with themselves and communicate openly, how can they expect the players to communicate with the coaches? One of the most-asked questions I get via email is from coaches asking how they can get their players to communicate better. Is it surprising that players can't communicate effectively when, in reality, many coaches can't communicate properly?

During games, assistant coaches should take a more subservient role. It doesn't help if the head coach is saying one thing and the assistant coach is saying something else. During games, there should be two sets of eyes but only one mouth. It's important that the players hear only one voice. At halftime, coaches should meet and discuss anything should be brought to the attention of the players, then one of them (usually the head coach) should speak to the team. Again, the emphasis is on one voice but two sets of eyes.

If coaches were to spend more time working on being able to coach together, they would find themselves much more effective in the long run.

Lawrence Fine produces FineSoccer.com, an online resource for a variety of tips, ideas and newsletters related to soccer coaching. A member of the NSCAA Website Development Committee, Fine also serves as volunteer assistant coach for an NCAA Division I men's team.