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Chapter **1**

Teaching Football to Children

Congratulations for taking on the special — and important — role of coaching a youth football team. Your journey during the season will be packed with moments that make you smile and that you and your players — regardless of their age, skill level, or experience playing the sport — will remember for the rest of your lives.

Before you step on the field, please be aware that you're taking on a position that can have far-reaching implications on your players for years to come. How you approach the season and how you interact with your players during practices and games impact how they feel about themselves, the sport of football, and you. The methods you employ for handling all the responsibilities that come with the job can either help them develop an unquenchable passion for the game or sabotage their interest in ever putting on a helmet again.

But don't worry. All you need — besides a whistle and clipboard — is some quality information on all the different aspects of the game. In these pages, we give you everything you need to navigate your players through a safe, fun, and rewarding season.

Gearing Up

You may have volunteered to coach this season because you want to spend a little more time with your child and help introduce them to the exciting world of youth football. Maybe the league has a shortage of coaches and you're willing to step forward to help. Or perhaps you love football, played it throughout your childhood, and want to share your knowledge and passion for the game with kids. Whatever your reasons, you're accepting an enormous responsibility. Before any youngster puts on the shoulder pads and buckles their chinstrap, you have lots of work to do behind the scenes to ensure that the season gets off to a smooth start.

Keeping the emphasis on everyone but you!

No matter how talented a football player you were during your playing days or how much you know about the sport, keeping the focus on your squad is vital because the season is about them and their journey. Your coaching philosophy (you can learn more about the importance of crafting one and adhering to it in Chapter 2) must be player-focused at all times. The season isn't about you and how many wins you can stack up to showcase your coaching acumen to all the other parents. The season is about all the kids, what you can teach them, and how positive you can make their experience.



WARNING

Don't make the mistake of using the team's won-loss record as a barometer of your impact as a coach. The true measure is whether the kids can't wait to get to the field to compete and learn from you — and have so much fun under your guidance that they return to play the following season.

Getting parents on your side

The overwhelming majority of parents with children in organized youth football programs are wonderful, supportive, and caring, and they want only the best for their kids. Of course, some parents can end up being a source of season-long aggravation that has you reaching for the aspirin.



TIP

Be prepared to deal with these situations quickly and efficiently so that they don't become a distraction and detract from the kids' enjoyment of the season and your ability to have a positive and meaningful impact. You can sidestep a lot of potential problems by conducting a parents' meeting before the season kicks off, where your agenda covers everything from laying the ground rules on what you expect in terms of behavior during games to outlining the parents' roles and responsibilities, and so much more. We run down how to plan and pull off this all-important meeting in detail in Chapter 4.

As you work with your players, you'll stress the importance of teamwork all season long; your interaction with parents is really no different. When coaches and parents find ways to work together — the adult form of teamwork — you have a really special formula that produces tremendous benefits for the youngsters. On the other hand, coaches and parents who clash over playing time issues, bicker about who gets to play specific positions, and even argue over whether the team should use more passing plays spoil the experience for everyone involved. These types of disagreements cast a shadow over the entire team and can turn practices and games into activities the children no longer look forward to.



REMEMBER

Parents play big roles in youth football programs. Keep the following advice in mind to help make your dealings with parents go smoothly:

» **Be proactive with parents.** Outline your expectations for them and their kids. Explain your coaching methods. Detail what you want everyone to take away from the experience before the first practice. Painting a clear picture leaves little room for those dreaded misunderstandings to occur, and parents who've never had a child involved in organized football will especially appreciate the information and how much thought and care you've put into making the experience a positive one for all involved.

Telling parents firsthand that you're committed to skill development, fun, and safety over winning or that you adhere to the league's equal playing time rule can prevent petty squabbles. If you don't clarify these issues for parents well in advance, you'll invite more problems than you can imagine — and you'll get them, too. Chapter 2 helps you develop that all-important coaching philosophy and become knowledgeable about all your league's policies and rules so you can clearly communicate this information to the parents.

» **Involve them.** Parents invest a lot of time and money in their child's football experience. That experience can be much more enjoyable for them and their youngsters if you find ways to include Mom and Dad on your season-long journey — and that's a wonderful gesture. Parents can do so much more than bring snacks and drinks to games, too. Find ways to involve them at your practices and recruit the right ones to serve as assistant coaches. If you're coaching a large squad, having assistants you can lean on who abide by your philosophies can be a huge help by running practice drills and handling game-day tasks so that you're free to focus your attention on the field. You can make the season memorable and rewarding for everyone involved. In Chapter 4, you find a variety of tips on boosting parental involvement.

» **Communicate with parents.** Besides conducting a preseason parents meeting to get the season on the right track from the start, you have to keep those communication lines open all season long. Talk to parents about their children's progress; share your thoughts on areas of the game where the kids are really making improvements; offer suggestions for things parents can do

to help their youngsters develop in other areas; and check in from time to time to make sure the kids are having fun when they play for you. Including parents in all facets of the season is the right thing to do, the smart thing to do, and one of the key factors in helping to ensure that the children have a positive experience.

Despite everything you do to include the parents and make them feel a valuable part of the season, problems may still arise. You should remain calm and in control of your emotions and never allow situations to escalate. In Chapter 18, we run down some of the more common problems that coaches face, and we offer the best approaches for solving them before they can impact the season.

Figuring out the rules and lingo

To be an effective coach, you need a really good handle on the basics of the game. Most importantly, you have to be able to explain rules, introduce terminology, and teach strategies to your young players. That's not as complicated as it may seem, but becoming comfortable with some of the quirkiest rules that you're not completely familiar with, such as what types of blocks are allowed on kickoffs and punts, and refreshers on common terms, such as illegal motion and false start, takes some time and effort.

We present the rule book and help you get a handle on everything from terminology to penalties in Chapter 3. Throughout Parts 2, 3, and 4 of this book, we give you a detailed rundown of the skills, techniques, and strategies that you need to pass along to your players. We also offer a refresher on some of the fundamental skills to teach a beginning team and provide more detailed information for an older, more football-savvy squad.



TIP

Knowing any special rules that are in place in your league is important. Quite often, a league's rules depend on the players' ages and experience levels — everything from the size of the field to which rules are enforced change from community to community. Knowing these rules and being able to share them with your players make a tremendous difference in their enjoyment of the sport.

Taking the Field

The kids' smiles, the excitement in their eyes, and their enthusiasm to play and learn from you are what coaching youth football is all about. What you say and how you say it from day one and throughout the season make a significant difference. The kids may become passionate about the game and play it for years to

come. Or they may walk away disappointed in their experience and will look to other sports in the future. Plan ahead, focus on fun and skill development, and don't stray from your coaching philosophy when challenges arise and you can keep interest levels soaring.

Practice planning

How you design your practices and the drills you choose to teach impact the kids' enjoyment of playing for you. Practices that kids look forward to can send the learning and skill development skyrocketing. Practices that you put together while sitting in your car five minutes before the players arrive tend to be unproductive and uninteresting while smothering learning and fun.

While working with your team, keep the following thoughts in mind to help squeeze the most out of every practice:

- » **Be more than a coach.** Sure, you'll teach kids the basics of football, but your impact on their lives can extend far beyond how to properly run a slant pattern or make a tackle. Your position as coach gives you a special opportunity to make a significant difference in a lot of other areas. For example, while the kids are warming up, you can briefly talk to them about the importance of doing well in school or speak about staying away from tobacco and drugs and how those choices can not only affect their lives but also their ability to perform at their best on the football field. The words you deliver may stick with a child for the rest of his life.
- » **Create a positive atmosphere.** Make your practices stress-free sessions where youngsters can make mistakes without the fear of criticism or embarrassment. Let the kids know from the first practice of the season that mistakes are a part of the game and that all you ask is that they listen to your instructions and give their all. Kids who know they can make mistakes without unpleasant repercussions will be much more relaxed and will perform better. Plus, if you help them understand that making mistakes is vital for improving and developing (and you don't overreact when they occur in practices and games), your players won't fear them and will be more likely to flourish from them.



TIP

When choosing practice drills, opt for those that keep kids moving and are challenging enough to hold their interest. Using drills that force kids to stand in line awaiting turns are boring and cut into how much time each child actually gets to work on that particular skill. The array of drills for offense, defense, and special teams in Chapters 11 and 14, can challenge and excite beginning, intermediate, and advanced players.

Game day

Coaching youth football requires constantly adapting to ever-changing conditions. This is especially true on game day, when you're challenged to make all sorts of decisions with little time and lots of distractions. You have playing time to monitor, plays to call, formations to adjust, and pregame, halftime, and postgame talks to deliver. Yes, game day brings a lengthy list of responsibilities, but don't go reaching for the antacid tablets just yet. In Chapter 7, you can find all you need to help your game day go smoothly.



REMEMBER

Besides giving kids the chance to use their skills against opponents, game days provide some great teachable moments. Reinforce what you brought up during practice, such as the importance of working together as a team and supporting each other, displaying good sportsmanship toward the opponents and officials, abiding by the rules, doing their best at all times — and having fun, regardless of what the scoreboard reads.

Coaching Your Own Child

Coaching your own child in football isn't as easy as it may seem. Most of you already know that being a parent presents daily challenges and is enormously difficult at times. Well, that doesn't stop after you step on the football field with your youngster and dozens of other kids. A number of parent-child issues can arise during the season. Most of these challenges are as minor as getting your child to go to bed on time so that he gets plenty of rest for tomorrow's game. But problems that you never dreamed of when you volunteered to coach this season can appear. Don't panic!

Yes, the job of coaching your own child can be complex and confusing, but when you handle it properly, it's one of the most rewarding experiences you'll ever have. Sure, chances are pretty good that there'll be the occasional bump along the way, but by being aware of the potential problem areas and working together, you can enjoy some very special memories that you and your child will savor for a lifetime.

Kicking around the coaching decision with your kid

At the beginning levels of youth football, coaching your own child isn't accompanied with a lot of challenges because the programs are typically recreation-based and policies are in place dictating equal playing time for all the kids. At the more

advanced levels of play, where skill level equates to playing time, a lot of challenges and difficult decisions must be made regarding kids, including your own.



WARNING

Before you decide to grab the clipboard and assume the role of football coach at these older and more advanced levels of play, sit down with your child and gauge how they feel about your coaching the team this season. The decision isn't about fulfilling your dream of coaching a football team. It's about ensuring that your child will be comfortable with your instructing them and their teammates all season long. If you don't ask them how they feel, you'll never know. Many kids are thrilled to have their parent as coach, and if you see that grin on your child's face and the sparkle in his eyes when you bring up the subject, that makes all the time and effort you'll be putting into the season well worth it.

On the other hand, some children, for whatever reasons, don't feel comfortable with the idea and would prefer that their parent didn't coach the team. Take their wishes into account before deciding to step forward.



TIP

Here are a few tips to help you reach the right decision on whether you and your child are ready for you to start diagramming plays, teaching tackling techniques, and giving pregame pep talks:

- » **With your child's help, put together a list of all the positives and negatives about being the coach.** On the positive side, you may list that the two of you can spend more time together and that as the coach, you'll ensure that your child and the rest of the team have fun as they learn new skills. Resolve the negatives by working with your child to develop solutions. For example, your child may automatically expect to play the position of their favorite professional player simply because you're their parent. Explain ahead of time that you must be fair to everyone and can't show favoritism and that your child and their teammates will have an equal chance to play different positions.
- » **Examine your own motivations.** Don't take on the task of coaching your child if your goal is to make them a star. You have to be willing to do whatever is best for your child's overall development, and harboring thoughts of college scholarships and athletic stardom is simply a blueprint for trouble.
- » **Explain to your child that being the coach is a great honor.** The fact that they'll be "sharing" you with the other kids during games and practice sessions doesn't mean you love them any less. Explain that your responsibility is to help all the players on the team. Taking the time to explain your role to your child helps promote better understanding and reduces the chance of problems arising after the season gets underway.

After the two of you have talked, take your child's thoughts seriously. If they still aren't comfortable with the idea, push your coaching aspirations to the side for the time being. Plenty of seasons are left in their future, and you can revisit the subject with them the following year to measure their feelings again. Just because they aren't ready this season doesn't mean they won't want you guiding their team next season or at some point in the future. The last thing you want to do is turn your child off from the sport and make them uncomfortable. Embrace your role as a supportive parent. Be a positive influence in the stands. At home, help your child work on skills their coach is teaching them, and your youngster may well be open to the idea of playing for you sooner than you think.



TIP

If your child is unsure, you could suggest asking whether they'd be okay with you serving as an assistant coach (if the head coach of the team is in need of assistants). This way, your child will get a sense of what it is like to hear instructions and feedback from you on a smaller scale in a less prominent role. A positive experience for both of you opens the door for you to perhaps take on a head coaching role with your child in the future.

Acting as both parent and coach



TIP

If you and your child agree that coaching his team is a good idea, keep these tips in mind as you navigate through the season to help ensure that everything runs smoothly:

- » **Remember that you're still the parent.** Whether the team wins or loses, you have to put down your playbook and keep in mind that you're a parent first and foremost — and that means postgame conversations on the ride home should focus on asking your child whether they had fun, what their favorite part of the game was, and so on. Steer the chat toward positive aspects of the game, like their effort and enthusiasm. If your child expresses an interest in talking about a fumble they committed or a missed tackle, that's fine to take on those subjects. Just give the child space and time to bring up those tougher topics when they're ready rather than you jumping into them before you have even left the parking lot.
- » **Keep talking.** To effectively monitor how the season is going, you want your child to understand that he can come to you with a concern or problem at any time. Just because you're the coach doesn't mean that certain topics are now off-limits.
- » **Don't force extra practice at home.** If your child has a rough or somewhat unproductive practice, you may be tempted to continue working on a skill with them as soon as you get home. Refrain from pushing your child in this direction. If you sense interest, asking in a casual conversation whether

they'd like to spend some time working on a certain skill at home is okay. If they are, that's great, but if not, let it go. Pushing your child to perform extra repetitions can drain their interest in the sport and even cause friction between the two of you.

- » **Never compare siblings.** Let your child develop at their own rate. They should never feel burdened by your expectations to match the skills or abilities of their older (or younger) siblings if they play football, too. The same applies to their teammates, too. These types of comparisons can crush self-esteem, destroy confidence, and chase them away from playing football in the future.
- » **Praise, praise, praise!** Be sure to praise your child's willingness, understanding, and cooperation in this special venture.



WARNING

As a parent, you naturally want your child to excel on the football field or in any activity they're involved in. Just don't allow yourself to view your coaching position as an opportunity to control your child's destiny. When this happens, you push your child harder than the other kids, demand more from them, and criticize them when they're unable to fulfill your unfair expectations. If you lose sight of the point of youth football, you'll encounter problems that impact your child's emotional well-being and their interest in football. Plus, you can seriously harm your relationship with your child.

THE MULTITUDE OF PARENT-COACHES

If you're coaching your kid, you may be interested to know that you're not alone in this endeavor. Roughly 85 percent of volunteer football coaches have their own child on the team, so you've ventured into common parenting territory that countless other parents have successfully negotiated and reaped the rewards of. Other parents who've coached their own child can be great sources of advice. Check with your local recreation director for names of some parents who are respected coaches in the program who'd be good contacts.

