

Teaching and Shaping Skills



Coaching is about teaching students how to compete by teaching them technique, fitness, and values. It's also about "coaching" student athletes before, during, and after interscholastic competitions. Teaching and coaching are closely related, but there are important differences. In this chapter we focus on the principles of teaching, especially on teaching technical skills and tactics. But these principles apply to teaching fitness concepts and values as well. Armed with these principles, you will be able to design effective and efficient practices and will understand how to deal with misbehavior. Then you will be able to teach the skills and tactics necessary to be successful in your sport.

Teaching Sport Skills

Many people believe that the only qualification needed to teach a skill is to have performed it. Although it's helpful to have performed it, teaching it successfully requires much more than that. And even if you haven't performed the skill before, you can learn to teach successfully with the useful acronym IDEA:

- I Introduce the skill.
- D Demonstrate the skill.
- E Explain the skill.
- A Attend to athletes practicing the skill.

Introduce the Skill

Athletes, especially those who are young and inexperienced, need to know which skill they are learning and why they are learning it. You should therefore follow these three steps every time you introduce a skill:

1. Get your student athletes' attention.
2. Name the skill.
3. Explain the importance of the skill.

Get Your Athletes' Attention

Because middle schoolers are easily distracted, do something to get their attention. Some coaches use interesting news items or stories. Others use jokes. And still others simply project enthusiasm to get their athletes to listen. Whatever method you use, speak slightly above your normal volume and look your athletes in the eye when you speak.

Also, position athletes so that they can see and hear you. Arrange the athletes in two or three evenly spaced rows, facing you. (Make sure they aren't

looking into the sun or at a distracting activity.) Then ask if all of them can see you before you begin to speak.

Name the Skill

Although there may be other common names for the skill you are introducing, decide as a staff before the start of the season which one you'll use and stick with it. This will help prevent confusion and enhance communication among your athletes. When you introduce the new skill, name it so that the athletes automatically correlate the name with the skill in later discussions.

Explain the Importance of the Skill

As Rainer Martens, the founder of the American Sport Education Program (ASEP), has said, "The most difficult aspect of coaching is this: Coaches must learn to let athletes learn. Sport skills should be taught so they have meaning to the child, not just meaning to the coach." Although the importance of a skill may be apparent to you, your students may be less able to see how the skill will help them become better athletes. Offer them a reason for learning the skill and describe how the skill relates to more advanced skills.

Demonstrate the Skill

The demonstration step is the most important part of teaching sport skills to athletes who may never have done anything closely resembling it. They need a picture, not just words. They need to see how the skill is performed. If you are unable to perform the skill correctly, ask an assistant coach, one of your team members, or someone more skilled to perform the demonstration.

These tips will help make your demonstrations more effective:

- Use correct form.
- Demonstrate the skill several times.
- Slow the action, if possible, during one or two performances so athletes can see every movement involved in the skill.
- Perform the skill at different angles so your athletes can get a full perspective of it.
- Demonstrate the skill with both the right and the left arms or legs.

Explain the Skill

Athletes learn more effectively when they're given a brief explanation of the skill along with the demonstration. Use simple terms and, if possible, relate the skill to previously learned skills. Ask your athletes whether they understand your description. A good technique is to ask the team to repeat your

Coaching Tip

Writing out in detail each skill you will teach clarifies what you will say and how you will demonstrate and teach each skill to your student athletes.

explanation. Ask questions like “What are you going to do first?” and “Then what?” Should athletes look confused or uncertain, repeat your explanation and demonstration. If possible, use different words so that your athletes get a chance to try to understand the skill from a different perspective.

Complex skills often are better understood when they are explained in more manageable parts. When breaking down a skill, you might take the following steps:

1. Show them a correct performance of the entire skill and explain its function in the sport.
2. Break down the skill and then point out its component parts to your athletes.
3. Have athletes perform each of the component skills you have already taught them.
4. After athletes have demonstrated their ability to perform the separate parts of the skill in sequence, reexplain the entire skill.
5. Have athletes practice the skill in conditions similar to a competition.

Young athletes have short attention spans. Long demonstration or explanation of a skill may cause them to lose focus. Therefore, spend no more than a few minutes altogether on the introduction, demonstration, and explanation phases. Then involve the athletes in drills or games that call on them to perform the skill.

Attend to Athletes Practicing the Skill

If the skill you selected was within your athletes’ capabilities and you have done an effective job of introducing, demonstrating, and explaining it, your athletes should be ready to attempt the skill. Some athletes may need to be physically guided through the movements during their first few attempts. Walking unsure athletes through the skill this way will help them gain the confidence to perform the skill on their own.

Your teaching duties, though, don’t end when all your athletes have demonstrated that they understand how to perform a skill. In fact, your teaching role is just beginning as you help your athletes improve their skills. A significant part of your teaching consists of closely observing the hit-and-miss trial performances of your athletes. You will shape athletes’ skills by detecting errors and correcting them using positive feedback. Keep in mind that your positive feedback will have a great influence on your athletes’ motivation to practice and improve their performances.

Remember, too, that athletes may need individual instruction. So set aside a time before, during, or after practice to give individual help.

Helping Athletes Improve Skills

After you have successfully taught your student athletes the fundamentals of a skill, your focus will be on helping them improve it. Athletes learn skills and improve upon them at different rates, so don't get frustrated if progress seems slow. Instead, help athletes improve by shaping their skills and detecting and correcting errors.

Shaping Athletes' Skills

One of your principal teaching duties is to reward positive effort and behavior—in terms of successful skill execution—when you see it. A swimmer does a great job streamlining off the wall, keeping his body straight with his head and sandwiched tightly between his arms, and his hands together. You immediately say, "That's the way to do it! Great effort and pursuit!" This, plus a smile and a thumbs-up gesture, goes a long way toward reinforcing that technique in that athlete. However, sometimes you may have a long, dry spell before you see correct techniques to reinforce. It's difficult to reward athletes when they don't execute skills correctly. How can you shape their skills if this is the case?

Shaping skills takes practice on your athletes' part and patience on yours. Expect your athletes to make errors. Telling the swimmer who made the good turn in the last example that he did a good job doesn't ensure that he'll have the same success next time. Seeing inconsistency in your athletes' technique can be frustrating. It's even more challenging to stay positive when your athletes repeatedly perform a skill incorrectly or lack enthusiasm for learning. It can certainly be frustrating to see athletes who seemingly don't heed your advice and continue to make the same mistakes. And when the athletes don't seem to care, you may wonder why you should.

Please know that it is normal to get frustrated sometimes when teaching skills. Nevertheless, part of successful coaching is controlling this frustration. Instead of getting upset, use these six guidelines for shaping skills:

1. *Think small initially.*

Reward the first signs of behavior that approximate what you want. Then reward closer and closer approximations of the desired behavior. In short, use your reward power to shape the behavior you seek.

2. *Break skills into small steps.*

For instance, in baseball or softball, you have infielders learning to field grounders and throw to a base. One of your athletes does well in getting into position and watching the ball into the glove, but then throws rather flat-footed to the base. Reinforce the correct techniques of getting into proper position and watching the ball into the glove, and then teach how to skip forward and prepare to throw. When this is mastered, focus

on getting the complete skill accomplished by pushing off the back leg after skipping forward and throwing the ball over the top.

3. *Develop one component of a skill at a time.*

Don't try to shape two components of a skill at once. For example, when cheerleaders are working on a shoulder stand to triple base extended splits, the shoulder stand must be secure before moving on to the second part of the stunt. The shoulder stand must be steady with the top person standing and the base person grabbing the top person's calves. Then they are ready to move into the triple base extended splits. Athletes who have problems mastering a skill often do so because they're trying to improve two or more components at once. Help these athletes to isolate a single component.

4. *As athletes become more proficient at a skill, reinforce them only occasionally and only for the best examples of the skill behavior.*

By focusing only on the best examples of a skill, you will help athletes continue to improve once they've mastered the basics.

5. *When athletes are trying to master a new skill, temporarily relax your standards for how you reward them.*

As athletes focus on the new skill or attempt to integrate it with other skills, the old, well-learned skills may temporarily degenerate.

6. *Go back to the basics.*

If, however, a well-learned skill degenerates for long, you may need to restore it by going back to the basics.

Coaches often have more-skilled athletes provide feedback to teammates as they practice skills. This can be effective, but proceed with caution: You must tell the skilled athletes exactly what to look for when their teammates are performing the skills. You must also tell them the corrections for the common errors of that skill.

Detecting and Correcting Errors

Good coaches recognize that student athletes make two types of errors: learning errors and performance errors. Learning errors are those that occur because athletes don't know how to perform a skill; that is, they have not yet developed the correct motor pattern in the brain to perform a particular skill. Performance errors are made not because athletes don't know how to execute the skill, but because they have made a mistake in executing what they do know. There is no easy way to know whether an athlete is making learning or performance errors, and part of the art of coaching is being able to sort out which type of error each mistake is.

The process of helping your athletes correct errors begins with your observing and evaluating their performances to determine if the mistakes are learning

or performance errors. Carefully watch your athletes to see if they routinely make the errors in both practice and interscholastic competition settings, or if the errors tend to occur only in competition settings. If the latter is the case, then your athletes are making performance errors. For performance errors, you need to look for the reasons your athletes are not performing as well as they know how; perhaps they are nervous, or maybe they get distracted by the competition setting. Find out the reason for the decline in performance and help them to tackle those issues. If the mistakes are learning errors, then you need to help them learn the skill, which is the focus of this section.

When correcting learning errors, there is no substitute for the coach knowing the skills well. The better you understand a skill—not only how it is performed correctly but also what causes learning errors—the more helpful you will be in correcting mistakes.

One of the most common coaching mistakes is to provide inaccurate feedback and advice on how to correct errors. Don't rush into error correction; wrong feedback or poor advice will hurt the learning process more than no feedback or advice at all. If you are uncertain about the cause of the problem or how to correct it, continue to observe and analyze until you are more sure. As a rule, you should see the error repeated several times before attempting to correct it.

Correct One Error at a Time

Let's look at an example from a volleyball coach. Suppose one of your outside hitters is having trouble with her hitting. She's doing most things well, but you notice that she's swinging her arms forward and up rather late as she approaches the ball, and she's contacting the ball behind her hitting shoulder, thus causing her spikes to sail high. What do you do?

First, decide which error to correct first, because athletes learn more effectively when they attempt to correct one error at a time. Determine whether one error is causing the other; if so, have the athlete correct that error first, because it may eliminate the other error. In this volleyball example, raising her arms late may be causing her to contact the ball behind her hitting shoulder, so you should correct her late arm motion first. In cases where neither error is necessarily causing the other, correct the error that will bring the greatest improvement when remedied. Correcting one error often motivates athletes to correct other errors.

Use Positive Feedback to Correct Errors

The positive approach to correcting errors includes emphasizing what to do instead of what not to do. Use compliments, praise, rewards, and encouragement to correct errors. Acknowledge correct performance as well as efforts to improve. By using positive feedback, you can help your athletes feel good about themselves and promote a strong desire to achieve.

When you're working with one athlete at a time, the positive approach to correcting errors includes four steps:

1. *Praise effort and correct performance.*

Praise your athlete for trying to perform a skill correctly and for performing any parts of it correctly. Praise the athlete immediately after he or she performs the skill, if possible. Keep the praise simple: "Good try," "Way to hustle," "Good form," or "That's the way to follow through." You can also use nonverbal feedback, such as smiling, clapping your hands, or any facial or body expression that shows approval.

Coaching Tip

Eliminate starting your feedback to athletes with the word "Don't." By telling them what you want them to do instead of what not to do, you will create success rather than failure.

Make sure you're sincere with your praise. Don't indicate that an athlete's effort was good when it wasn't. Usually an athlete knows when he has made a sincere effort to perform the skill correctly and perceives undeserved praise for what it is-

untruthful feedback to make him feel good. Likewise, don't indicate that an athlete's performance was correct when it wasn't.

2. *Give simple and precise feedback to correct errors.*

Don't burden an athlete with a long or detailed explanation of how to correct an error. Give just enough feedback that the athlete can correct one error at a time. Before giving feedback, recognize that some athletes readily accept it immediately after the error; others will respond better if you slightly delay the correction.

For errors that are complicated to explain and difficult to correct, try the following:

- Explain and demonstrate what the athlete should have done. Do not demonstrate what the athlete did wrong.
- Explain the cause or causes of the error, if it isn't obvious.
- Explain why you are recommending the correction you have selected, if it's not obvious.

3. *Make sure the athlete understands your feedback.*

If the athlete doesn't understand your feedback, she won't be able to correct the error. Ask the athlete to repeat the feedback and to explain and demonstrate how it will be used. If she can't do this, be patient and present your feedback again. Then ask the athlete to repeat the feedback after you're finished.

4. *Provide an environment that motivates the athlete to improve.*

Your athletes won't always be able to correct their errors immediately, even if they do understand your feedback. Encourage them to "hang tough" and stick with it when corrections are difficult or they seem discouraged. For more difficult corrections, remind them that it will take time, and the improvement will happen only if they work at it. Encourage athletes with little self-confidence. For example, a basketball coach might say something like, "You're doing a great job aligning your shoulder and hips, squaring your feet, and following through after your release when you shoot your free throws. With more practice, and a set routine, you'll be able to relax more and drain your free-throw shots in no time." This can motivate an athlete to continue to refine her free throws.

Other athletes may be very self-motivated and need little help from you in this area; with them you can practically ignore step 4 when correcting an error. Although motivation comes from within, try to provide an environment of positive instruction and encouragement to help your athletes improve.

A final note on correcting errors: Team sports provide unique challenges in this endeavor. How do you provide individual feedback in a group setting using a positive approach? Instead of yelling across the field to correct an error (and embarrass the athlete), substitute for the athlete who erred, and then make the correction off to the side. This type of feedback has three advantages:

Coaching Tip

Recognize that the introduction of competition and contact may initially adversely affect an athlete's focus on learning proper skills, but with practice this can be overcome. Start your teaching at half speed and then as the skill is mastered and the athletes become comfortable executing the skill, you can increase the level of contact and competition.

- The athlete will be more receptive to the one-on-one feedback.
- The other athletes are still active and still practicing skills and unable to hear your discussion.
- Because the rest of the team is still competing, you'll feel compelled to make your comments simple and concise—which is more helpful to the athlete.

This doesn't mean you can't use the team setting to give specific, positive feedback. You can do so to emphasize correct group and individual performances. Use this team-feedback approach only for positive statements, though. Keep negative feedback for individual discussions.

Dealing With Misbehavior

Student athletes will misbehave at times; it's only natural. You can respond to misbehavior in two ways: extinction or discipline.

Extinction

Ignoring a misbehavior—neither rewarding nor disciplining it—is called extinction. This can be effective in certain circumstances. In some situations, disciplining middle schoolers' misbehavior only encourages them to act up further because of the recognition they get. Ignoring misbehavior teaches students that it is not worth your attention.

Sometimes, though, you cannot wait for a behavior to fizzle out. When athletes cause danger to themselves or others or disrupt the activities of others, you need to take immediate action. Tell the offending athlete that the behavior must stop and that discipline will follow if it doesn't. If the athlete doesn't stop misbehaving after the warning, use discipline.

Extinction also doesn't work well when a misbehavior is self-rewarding. For example, you may be able to keep from grimacing if a student kicks you in the shin, but even so, he still knows you were hurt. Therein lies the reward. In these circumstances, it is also necessary to discipline the athlete for the undesirable behavior.

Extinction works best in situations in which athletes are seeking recognition through mischievous behaviors, clowning, or grandstanding. Usually, if you are patient, their failure to get your attention will cause the behavior to disappear.

However, be sure that you don't extinguish desirable behavior. When students do something well, they expect to be positively reinforced. Not rewarding them will likely cause them to discontinue the desired behavior.

Discipline

Some educators say we should never discipline students, but should only reinforce their positive behaviors. They argue that discipline does not work, that it creates hostility and sometimes develops avoidance behaviors that may be more unwholesome than the original problem behavior. It is true that discipline does not always work and that it can create problems when used ineffectively, but when used appropriately, discipline is effective in eliminating undesirable behaviors without creating other undesirable consequences. You must use discipline effectively, because it is impossible to guide athletes through positive reinforcement and extinction alone. Discipline is part of the positive approach when these guidelines are followed:

- Discipline in a corrective way to help athletes improve now and in the future. Don't discipline to retaliate and make yourself feel better.
- Impose discipline in an impersonal way when athletes break team rules or otherwise misbehave. Shouting at or scolding athletes indicates that your attitude is one of revenge.
- Once a rule has been agreed upon, ensure that athletes who violate it experience the unpleasant consequences of their misbehavior. Don't wave discipline threateningly over their heads. Just do it, but warn an athlete once before disciplining.
- Be consistent in administering discipline.
- Don't discipline using consequences that may cause you guilt. If you can't think of an appropriate consequence right away, tell the athlete you will talk with her after you think about it. You might consider involving the athlete in designing a consequence.
- Once the discipline is completed, don't make athletes feel that they are "in the doghouse." Always make them feel that they're valued members of the team.
- Make sure that what you think is discipline isn't perceived by the athlete as a positive reinforcement, for instance, keeping an athlete out of doing a certain drill or portion of the practice may be just what the athlete desired.
- Never discipline athletes for making errors when they are competing.
- Never use physical activity—running laps or doing push-ups—as discipline. To do so only causes athletes to resent physical activity, something we want them to learn to enjoy throughout their lives.
- Discipline sparingly. Constant discipline and criticism cause athletes to turn their interests elsewhere and to resent you as well.

Player Code of Conduct

Many coaches ask their athletes to sign a team code of conduct pledge at the beginning of the season. This code of conduct is based on your team and school policies. Refer to the appendix for the "IESA Code of Conduct" on page 66 for an example.