

The YMCA Games Approach to Coaching

Do you remember how as a kid you were taught by adults to play a sport, either in an organized sports program or physical education class? They probably taught you the basic skills using a series of drills that, if the truth be known, you found very boring. As you began to learn the basic skills, they eventually taught you the tactics of the game, showing you when to use these skills in various game situations. Do you remember how impatient you became during what seemed to be endless instruction, and how much you just wanted to play? Well, forget this traditional approach to teaching sports.

Now can you recall learning a sport by playing with a group of your friends in the neighborhood? You didn't learn the basic skills first; there was no time for that. You began playing immediately. If you didn't know the basic things to do, your friends told you quickly during the game so they could keep playing. Try to remember, because we're going to ask you to use a very similar approach to teaching sports to young people called the games approach, an approach we think knocks the socks off the traditional approach.

On the surface, it would seem to make sense to introduce a sport by first teaching the basic skills of the sport and then the tactics of the game, but we've discovered that this approach has disadvantages.

- First, it teaches the skills of the sport out of the context of the game. Kids may learn to pass, dribble, and shoot the ball, but they find it difficult to use these skills in the real game. This is because they do not yet understand the fundamental tactics of the sport and do not appreciate how best to use their newfound skills.
- Second, learning skills by doing drills outside of the context of the game is so-o-o-o boring. The single biggest turnoff about adults teaching kids sports is that we over-organize the instruction and deprive kids of their intrinsic desire to play the game.

As a YMCA coach we're asking that you teach the sport the YMCA way, the games approach way. Clear the traditional approach out of your mind. Once you fully understand the games approach, you'll quickly see its superiority in teaching. Not only will kids learn the game better, but you and they will have much more fun. And as a bonus, you'll have far fewer discipline problems.

With the games approach to teaching, we begin with a game. This will be a modified and much smaller game designed to suit the age and ability of the players. As the kids play in these "mini" games, you can begin to help them understand the nature of the game and to appreciate simple concepts of positioning and tactics. When your players understand what they must do in the game, they are then eager to develop the skills to play the game. With players now motivated to learn skills, you can demonstrate those skills, practice using game-like drills, and provide individual instruction by identifying players' errors and helping to correct them.

In the traditional approach to teaching sports, players do this:

Learn the skill → Learn the Tactics → Play the game

In the games approach players do this:

Play the game → Learn the tactics → Learn the skill

In the past we have placed too much emphasis on the learning of skills and not enough on learning how to play skillfully—that is, how to use those skills in competition.

The games approach, in contrast, emphasizes learning what to do first, then how to do it. Moreover—and this is a really important point—the games approach lets kids discover what to do in the game not by you telling them, but by their experiencing it. What you do as an effective coach is help them discover what they’ve experienced. It empowers your kids to solve the problems that arise in the game, and that’s a big part of the fun in learning a game.

Now let’s look more closely at the games approach to see the four-step process for teaching:

- Step 1: Play a modified game.
- Step 2: Help the players discover what they need to do
- Step 3: Teach the skills of the game.
- Step 4: Practice the skills in another game.

Step 1: Play a Modified Game

Okay, it’s the first day of practice; some of the kids are eager to get started, while others are obviously apprehensive. Some have little experience, don’t know the rules, and none knows the positions in the sport. What do you do?

If you use the traditional approach, you start with a little warm-up activity, then line the players up for a simple shooting drill and go from there. With the games approach, you begin by playing a modified game which is developmentally appropriate for the level of the players and also designed to focus on learning a specific part of the game. Through the modified game, emphasis is placed on a limited number of situations in the game. This is one way you “guide” your players to discover certain tactics in the game.

Here’s a Basketball example: You have your players play a 3 v 3 (three players versus three players) half-court game. The objective of the game is to make three passes before attempting to score. Playing the game this way forces players to think about what they have to do to keep possession of the ball.

Step 2: Help the Players Discover What They Need to Do

As your players are playing the game, look for the right spot to “freeze” the action, step in, and hold a brief question-and-answer session to discuss problems they were having in carrying out the goals of the game. You don’t need to pop in on the first miscue, but if they repeat the same types of mental or

physical mistakes a few times in a row, step in and ask them questions that relate to the aim of the game and the necessary skills required.

The best time to interrupt the game is when you notice that they are having trouble carrying out the main goal, or aim, of the game. By stopping the game, freezing action, and asking questions, you'll help them understand

- The aim of the game.
- What they must do to achieve that aim and...
- Which skills they must use to achieve that aim.

To return to the Basketball example, if your players are playing the modified game described above, in which the objective is to make three passes before attempting to score, but they are having trouble doing so, interrupt the action and ask the following questions.

- Coach: What are you supposed to do in this game?
- Athlete: Pass the ball three times before scoring.
- Coach: What does your team have to do to keep the ball for three passes in a row?
- Athlete: Pass the ball.
- Coach: Yes, and what else?
- Athlete: You have to be able to get the pass, too.
- Coach: OK. You have to be able to pass the ball and catch the ball when it's passed. Why don't we practice passing the ball and catching the pass?

Through the modified game and skillful questioning on your part, your players realize that accurate passing and catching skills are essential to their success in controlling the ball. Just as important, rather than TELLING them that passing and catching skills are critical, you lead them to that discovery through a well-designed modified game and through questions. *This questioning that leads to players' discovery is a crucial part of the games approach.* Essentially you'll be asking your players—usually literally—“What do you need to do to succeed in this situation?”

At first, asking questions will be difficult because your players may have little or no experience with the game. And if you've learned sports through the traditional approach, you'll be tempted to tell your players how to play the game, and not waste time asking them questions. Resist this powerful temptation to tell them what to do, and especially don't do so before they begin to play the game.

If your players have trouble understanding what to do, phrase your questions to let them choose between one option and another. For example, if you ask them, “What's the fastest way to get the ball down the court?” and get answers such as “Throw it” or “Hit it,” then ask, “Is it passing or dribbling?”

Immediately following the question-and-answer session you will begin a skill practice, which is Step 3 of the four-step process.

Sometimes players simply need to have more time playing the game, or you may need to modify the game further so that it is even easier for them to discover what they are to do. It'll take more patience on your part, but it's a powerful way to learn. Don't be reluctant to change the numbers in the teams or some aspect of the structure of the game to aid this discovery. In fact, we advocate playing "lopsided" games in the second game of each practice; we'll explain this concept in a moment.

Step 3: Teach the Skills of the Game

Only when your players recognize the skills they need to be successful in the game do you want to teach the specific skills through focused drills. This is the time to use a more traditional approach to teaching sports skills. Use the IDEA approach:

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

Step 4. Practice the Skills in Another Game

Once the players have practiced the skill, you then put them in another game situation—this time a lopsided game in which one side has more players than the other.

To return to the basketball example, this could mean 3 v 1 or 3 v 2. Why use lopsided teams? It's simple: As a coach, you want your players to experience success as they're learning skills. The best way to experience success early on is to create an advantage for the players. This makes it more likely that, for instance, in a 3 v 1 game, your three offensive players will be able to make three passes before attempting to score.

Over the course of a practice, we use even-sided games in Game 1 and lopsided games in Game 2. The reasoning behind this is to introduce players to a situation similar to what they will experience in competition, and to let them discover the challenges they face in performing the necessary skill. Then you teach them the skill, have them practice it, and put them back in another game—this time a lopsided one to give them a greater chance of experiencing success.

As players improve their skills, you may choose to reduce the degree of lopsidedness, or to completely even up the teams. The key is to set up situations in which your athletes experience success, yet are challenged in doing so. This will take careful monitoring on your part, but playing lopsided games as kids are learning skills is a very effective way of helping athletes learn and improve.

And that's the games approach. Your players will get to play more in practice, and once they learn how the skill fits into their performance and enjoyment of the game, they'll be more motivated to work on those skills, which will help them to be successful.