

# A Strategy for Coaches to Develop Life Skills in Youth Sport

Kimberly J. Bodey, EdD

Nathan A. Schaumleffel, PhD, CPRP

Rebecca Zakrajsek, PhD

Sandy Joseph, MA

*Indiana State University*

Organized youth sport refers to a variety of athletic programs offered in a range of settings. Approximately 47 million boys and girls between the ages of 5 and 18 years take part in sport activities each year, primarily in agency and community sponsored programs (Ewing & Seefeldt, 2002). Over 3 million well meaning, but relatively untrained, coaches oversee these athletes (Clark, 2000).

Youth sport advocates assert that sport builds character. Youth sport scholars contend that character development depends more on the philosophy of the sport organization, quality of coaching, nature of parental involvement, and participant experiences and resources than on playing the particular sport itself (Petitpas & Champagne, 2000; Smith & Smoll, 2002). The typical sport program<sup>1</sup> may not be generating the desired youth development outcomes. In fact, studies documenting the relationship between sport participation and acquisition of life skills are inconclusive and, to a large extent, provide only lukewarm support for the value of sport participation in youth development (Bloom, 2000; Ewing, Gano-Overway, Branta, & Seefeldt, 2002). This may be because the vast majority of youth sport programs aim to introduce young people to specific sport competition or structured recreational activity rather than designed to develop values, characteristics, or skills sets.

Since sport's inception it has been valued as a training ground for life. Coaching has evolved into a profession and national standards which specify the coach's responsibility to facilitate positive youth development have been established (NASPE, 2006). Despite these standards, the online training programs currently available to youth sport coaches do not include techniques for how to teach life skills in the sport setting. This paper offers a strategy, based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, to assist coaches incorporate life skill lessons into youth sport practice.

<sup>1</sup> There are programs designed to connect skills and attitudes learned through sport with academic, personal, and career development. These curricula, utilizing clear expectations for achievement and learning, aim to teach sport skills and life skills concurrently. Examples of programs include *Fair Play for Kids* (Gibbons, Ebbeck, & Weiss, 1995), *First Tee* (Petlichkoff, 2004), *Personal-Social Responsibility Model* (Hellison & Walsh, 2002), *Play It Smart* (Petitpas, et al., 2005), and *Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation* (SUPER) (Danish, et al., 2002).

## Developing Life Skills in the Youth Sport Environment

There is an expanding body of work that aims to substantiate the "lessons" learned in sport which may transfer to other areas of life. "Life skills" enable the individual to succeed in his/her environment (Danish, 2002). Life skills can be physical (e.g., taking correct posture), behavioral (e.g., using effective communication), and cognitive (e.g., solving problems). The environment can be the home, school, workplace, neighborhood, or community.

The sport environment is an appropriate place to learn life skills because sport skills and life skills are similar (Danish, Fazio, Nellen, & Owens, 2002). Both sport skills and life skills are learned through demonstration, modeling, and practice (Danish & Hale, 1981), and there is a degree of overlap in the type of skills needed for success. For instance, goal setting, problem-solving, and performing under pressure are skills needed in the sport, classroom, and workplace environments. These skills may be developed in one environment and then transferred to other areas (Danish & Nellen, 1997).

In the youth sport setting, athletes are alleged to learn to cooperate, display courage, play fair, be loyal, develop self-discipline, practice self control, respect rules, express compassion, foster peace, exhibit sportsmanship, maintain integrity, be honest and civil, be aggressive, become competitive, persevere, subordinate self to group, show leadership, feel empathy, understand ethics, respect the environment, experience the team as a moral community, develop perspective-taking, reason at a more mature level morally, become caring and compassionate, exercise critical thinking, and feel self-esteem (Fullinwider, 2006). Other purported benefits of participation include the reduction or prevention of health problems (e.g., obesity, diabetes, other chronic disease), development of peer networks, lower school drop-out rate, higher academic achievement, and enhanced occupational outcomes (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006; Weiss, 2006). However, lessons learned and improvements in health and well-being are not the natural byproduct of sport involvement. Rather, life skills must be purposefully taught so that the athlete understands the skills are transferable and how to transfer these skills from one setting (e.g., soccer field) to another setting (e.g., home, etc.) (Danish, 2002). The responsibility to teach life skills is naturally placed on the coach.

## The Coach's Responsibility to Teach Life Skills

Boys and girls participate in sport activities for similar reasons such as to develop and demonstrate skill(s), make friends, belong to a team, gain recognition from family and peers, experience challenge and excitement, and have fun (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988; Quain, 1989). Parents want their children to learn life skills through sport participation. According to the *National Standards for Sport Coaches* (NSSC) (NASPE, 2006), "Parents across the country send their children to practices and events with the expectation that adult supervision will bring about positive sport outcomes and maximal learning and development" (p. 6). In essence, what athletes and parents seek from the sport experience is consistent with the developmental model of sport. While the

professional model of sport is product oriented (e.g., winning, entertainment, profit), the developmental model emphasizes the nature and quality of the learning experience. Winning is important, but it is not the sole focus. Success is measured in terms of the individual skills that are acquired and enhanced.

Coaching is a profession of teaching (Josephson Institute, 1999). All professions require members to perform in certain ways. The NSSC (NASPE, 2006) indicates, "The coach must structure opportunities for development of values that can be applied inside and outside of sport" (p. 7) and "The coach has a responsibility to facilitate the development of positive behaviors in and through sport" (p. 8). Coaches have a duty to behave in ways consistent with professional standards. In addition to teaching the physical and psychological skills necessary for a specific sport, coaches must also teach life skills that transcend the sport setting.

Interestingly, McAllister, Blinde, and Kolenbrander (2000) asked coaches to identify the life skills they deemed important and the manner in which they achieved learning outcomes. Coaches were generally unable to express how they taught life skills in sport activities. Lesyk and Kornspan (2000) found coaches expected athletes to learn life skills in the sport environment. Yet, when asked to rate what they perceived athletes actually experienced, learning life skills was listed ninth (of 15) highest. Coaches have expressed the need for more training on how to communicate and teach children at an appropriate developmental level (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005).  
*Preparing Coaches to Teach Life Skills*

The high level of participation requires many youth sport organizations to rely on volunteers, without whom there can be no programs. Despite good intentions, these untrained practitioners often lack the basic knowledge and skills required to deal with the emotional, psychological, and physical needs of youth (Quain, 1989). Large scale programs have been developed to increase volunteer coaches' level of coaching competence. The American Sport Education Program (ASEP) and National Youth Sports Coaches Association's Volunteer Coach Training Program (NYSCA) are frequently adopted by agency and community sponsored sport organizations to educate volunteers. Widespread internet access has made online programs available "anywhere, anytime" for willing youth sport coaches.

Bodey, Schaumleffel, and Joseph (2008) reported ASEP and NYSCA's online learning modules prepared coaches to teach sport skills and physically train athletes; manage athletes, parents, and the sport environment; and reconcile diverse roles. However, the online learning modules did not include strategies for how to teach diverse life skills in the youth sport setting. Critics should keep in mind the program producers' may not have intended to prepare coaches to teach life skills. However, this is a significant oversight if we persist in our expectation that the youth sport environment will provide opportunities to learn life lessons and volunteer coaches have a responsibility to structure these opportunities to develop positive behavior in and through sport. A strategy, based on an experiential learning model, is suggested as a means for volunteer coaches to incorporate life skills lessons into youth sport practice.

### **Incorporating Life Skill Lessons into Practice**

Adventure education, a sub-discipline within the larger field of outdoor education, utilizes adventure experiences to achieve educational outcomes. Adventure based learning programs are grounded in experiential learning. Perhaps the most widely cited experiential learning model in the adventure education literature is Kolb's (1984) model. The model portrays four stage of the learning cycle: experience, reflect, generalize, and apply. Kolb's model can be operationalized in a variety of settings including the youth sport setting. A brief description of the model and the coaching applications are as follows.

#### *Kolb's (1984) Model*

Kolb's model has four stages. Stage 1, the facilitator designs and implements an experience to achieve specific learning objectives. Stage 2, the learner reflects<sup>2</sup> on the experience by recalling and analyzing what was observed, thought, and felt during the experience. Stage 3, the facilitator helps the learner to form generalizations; that is, to extend ideas about specific actions and behaviors in the experience to general ways of acting and behaving. Stage 4, the learner applies these generalizations to other settings. The cycle continues as what was learned is incorporated into the next new experience. The facilitator plays an essential role in the process by designing and prompting the discovery experience as well as encouraging the learner to develop and apply new knowledge in other settings.

In the youth sport setting, the coach is the facilitator and the athlete is the learner. To be effective, the coach must prepare seasonal and specific practice plans. Many coaches do not prepare practice plans because planning is time consuming, hard work, and not always fun (Thompson, 2003), but successful coaches know practice plans provide the framework necessary to progress toward identified goals. Moreover, the practice plans evolve over time to correspond to changing needs in order to achieve desired outcomes in a timely manner.

#### *Incorporating Life Skills into the Seasonal Practice Plan*

Before the season begins, the coach will know the sport and age of players to be assigned to the team. The coach will have a general idea of the fundamental sport skills he/she wishes to develop during the course of the season. Designing a system to teach these skills becomes the foundation for the seasonal practice plan. The plan is revised once the season begins and athletes' skills are assessed. Concurrently, the coach will identify one or two priority life skills to be addressed during the season. Designing a system to teach life skills is similarly incorporated into the seasonal practice plan. The coach must keep in mind the choice of life skill(s) should match the developmental readiness of the athlete and be aligned with the league or sponsoring agency's mission statement. At the pre-season meeting, the coach will review

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert and Trudel (2001) introduce the use of reflective pedagogical strategies as part of coaching education to develop coaches. We advocate for preparing coaches to use these strategies to develop athletes.

the choice of life skill(s) with parents and make changes as necessary.

For example, suppose a volunteer coach was selected to oversee a youth soccer team consisting of 9-10 year old boys. It is a competitive, recreational league managed by the community parks and recreation department whose mission is to develop healthy and productive citizens. The coach and parents, with support of league administrators, agree that in addition to improving fundamental soccer skills, athletes would develop an understanding of "fair play" during the course of the eight week season.

#### *Incorporating a Life Skill Lesson into a Specific Practice*

In preparation for a routine practice, the coach should review the seasonal practice plan to determine how best to incorporate the life skill lesson with the sport specific drills. The life skill lesson should be matched to a sport drill or activity already in the practice plan. The rule of thumb is to keep it simple, and to incorporate only one life skill lesson per practice. While life skill lessons should be a consistent part of practice during the course of the season, not every practice must have a life skill lesson. This is also an opportunity for the coach to show his/her creativity in both designing the life skill lessons and linking the lessons to a variety of sport drills and activities as the season progresses.

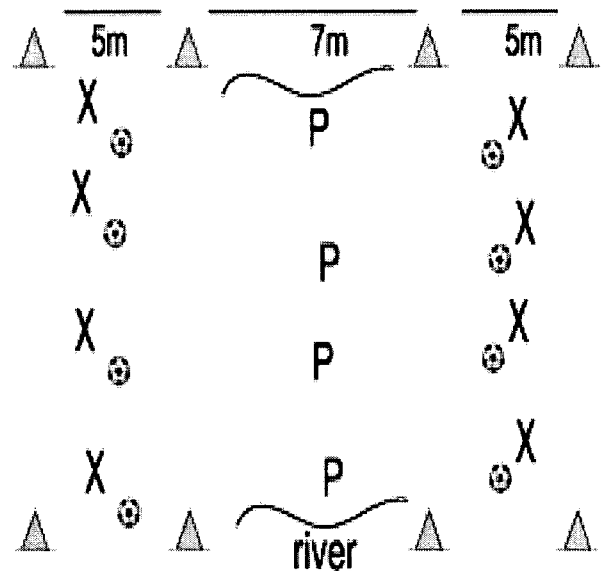
Planning to incorporate the life skill lesson into a specific practice involves three steps: (a) define the life skill, (b) select the sport drill, and (c) connect the life skill and sport drill. For example, fair play may be defined as conforming to established rules or equitable and impartial treatment. This definition is likely beyond the developmental level of the athletes so it must be translated into simpler concepts. For 9-10 year old players, fair play may be defined as taking turns, sharing equipment, and treating others as they would want to be treated.

Next, the fair play lesson should be overlaid on a specific sport drill already in the practice plan. Consider a basic ball control drill called Dribble through Pirates<sup>3</sup>. The players are divided into two groups: dribblers and pirates. The dribblers aim to move the ball over the river from one end zone, called a shore, to the other end zone. The pirates aim to steal the ball and kick it back to the starting shore. If the ball is stolen by a pirate, the dribbler must retrieve the ball from the shore and start again. Dribblers who successfully reach the destination shore turn around and return to the starting shore. After a designated amount of time, usually 2 minutes, the groups switch with the dribblers becoming pirates and vice versa.

Once the life skill is defined and the sport drill selected, the coach must decide how to connect the life skill with the sport drill. Essentially, this involves determining the practical definition of fair play as it applies to dribbling through pirates. For instance, players will take turns being dribblers and pirates and everyone is going to share the same soccer balls. Treating others as they would want to be treated may be reflected in players attacking the ball rather than the person and pirates kicking the stolen ball to the designated shore rather than

kicking the ball out of bounds which would require the dribbler to give chase. Once the coach has defined the life skill at an appropriate level, selected the sport drill already in the practice plan, and connected the life skill to the sport drill he/she is done planning and is ready to implement the lesson.

### **Kids Motivational Drill : Dribble through Pirates**



**X's dribble through river to other shore.**

**Pirates (P) try to steal ball from X's.**

**Pirate winning ball kicks it to shore and X must get it**

**X's count crossings in 2 minutes.**

**All groups get turn as pirates**

Figure 1. Sport Specific Skill.

Source:<http://www.weplay.com/youth-soccer/drills>

#### *Implementing the Life Skill Lesson during a Specific Practice*

Typically at the start of practice, the coach will make announcements and give an overview of the planned activities. It would be appropriate for the coach to mention that as part of one of the drills, Dribbling through Pirates, the team was going to talk about the notion of fair play. Practice then proceeds as planned until it is time to implement the life skill lesson. Implementing the life skill lesson involves three phases: (a) message, (b) reinforce, and (c) transfer.

*Message (4-5 minutes).* The coach begins the life skill lesson by engaging the players in a short discussion of the meaning of fair play. This may involve asking questions or otherwise prompting the athletes to give examples of fair play in the sport environment. The conversation proceeds with the coach and players collectively conceptualizing fair play. This is, fair play means taking turns, sharing equipment, and treating

<sup>3</sup> There are many sites on the internet which provide free information to coaches.

others as they would want to be treated. Next, the coach explains the Dribbling through Pirates drill. An essential aspect of the message is the connection between the notion of fair play and the specific actions involved in the dribbling drill. Again, the coach engages athletes in a short discussion of the practical application of fair play in the Dribbling through Pirates drill. The coach facilitates the conversation by asking questions or providing prompts until the appropriate responses (i.e., taking turns as dribblers and pirates, sharing balls, attacking the ball not the person, and kicking the ball to the appropriate shore) are realized.

*Reinforce (length of drill + 3-5 minutes).* As the drill is underway, the coach is free to instruct athletes on correct soccer technique. During and immediately after the drill the coach should offer positive feedback for performing fair play behavior as well proper skill technique as a reward to increase repeatability of the behavior. When offering feedback, it is important to go beyond a general statement (e.g., "good job") to clearly acknowledge what the athlete did correctly. For example, the coach may say, "Billy, good job attacking the ball to gain possession".

At the conclusion of the drill, the coach should persuade athletes to reflect on the recent experience. For instance, the coach may ask, "What are some examples of how we played fair in when dribbling through pirates?" The objective is for the athletes to recall and analyze the experience. Specifically, the coach waits for the athletes to provide good (and perhaps poor) examples of fair play in the drill. The discussion about the good and poor examples helps to reinforce the conceptualization of fair play and contributes to the athletes' ability to remember the life skill. It is okay for the coach to provide hints to help athletes remember and analyze the experience, but the coach should refrain from telling athletes what happened as it is important for athletes to be active participants in the conversation.

*Transfer (3-5 minutes).* Once the good and poor examples of fair play are discussed, the coach assists the participants to generalize from the specific actions and behaviors in the drill to general ways of acting and behaving in alternative settings. For instance, the coach may ask, "How do we practice fair play at home?" The coach encourages the players to consider the similarity between fair play on the soccer field and fair play at home and elicits examples such as taking turns picking television programs, sharing toys, and being fair in dealings with siblings.

The lesson concludes with the coach encouraging athletes to apply concepts of fair play in alternative settings and reporting the experience at the next team gathering. Follow-up discussions can take place during the pre-practice period when waiting for team members to arrive or during the warm-up period. Similarly, discussions can occur during the cool down period or after practice when waiting for parents to arrive to pick up athletes. These conversations can occur between the coach and individual athlete as well as the coach and larger group of athletes.

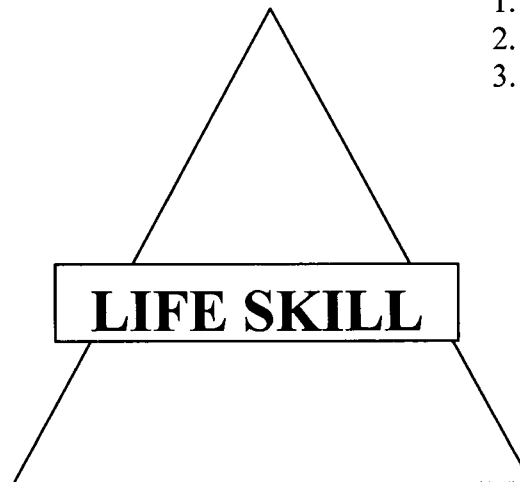
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Before the start of season:

- Select 1-2 "priority" life skills to work on during entire season.
- Select life skill based on developmental level of the athlete.
- Consult with parents.

**MESSAGE**



1. Define the life skill.
2. Explain sport drill.
3. Connect life skill to the sport drill.

**TRANSFER**

7. Relate life skill to other setting.
8. Encourage use of life skill in alternate settings.
9. Follow-up at next practice.

**REINFORCE**

4. Instruct to promote correct actions.
5. Reward to increase repeatability of behaviors.
6. Question to engage athlete in reflection.

Figure 2. Three Phasesto Implementing Life Skill in Practice.

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