

COACHING GENERATION Y AND MILLENNIAL PLAYERS

By Dr. Rick Underwood

For the last three years at the NSCAA Convention, the largest crowd of coaches has packed in to hear Bill Beswick tell his wonderful stories and discuss psychological strategies for building a winning team. In fact, during the past few years some of the best-attended sessions at the convention have been addressing the psychological aspects of the game.

Most coaches come to the game having been an outstanding player and possessing great technical knowledge of the game, but some struggle with leadership skills in the areas of team building and psychological management of players. This is especially true when coaching players from a younger generation.

Recently, a very successful high school girls' coach framed the challenge "These girls seem more selfish than any team I have coached over the last 20 years." My response was "Are they selfish, suffering from entitlement issues or are they just different?"

This article will briefly discuss: 1) the unique challenges of coaching younger Generation Y and Millennial players; 2) leadership skills needed for coaching this group of players; and 3) some practical suggestions for creating a winning environment.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF COACHING YOUNGER GENERATION Y AND MILLENNIAL PLAYERS

While it is dangerous to stereotype any group, research has confirmed there are traits each generation has in common. Generalizations are helpful as a way to begin understanding someone else. They give us insights, awareness and empathy that can lead to new coaching approaches. There is not room here for a full discussion of the different traits between Veterans (Radio Babies), born between 1930-45; Baby Boomers, born between 1946-64; Generation X, born between 1965-76; Generation Y, born

between 1977-90, and Millennials, born after 1991. This article will focus on the similar traits between the Generation Y and Millennial (ages 30 and under) because they are the youth, high school and college players of today.

A generation is a group of people who are programmed at about the same time. During any given generation, the media bombards children with compelling messages. Educational systems, parenting

tions on these players:

- Positive team environment
- Future oriented teams
- Collaboration
- Challenges
- Fun
- Flexibility

All of this translates into a generation of players with a different work ethic than any other generation. Raised by parents who

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patterns and other unique circumstances in life all shape and mold the children of that era. Each generation has its own mood or tone that pervades the developing perspectives of its children. Certainly there are many other diverse issues that effect the development of attitudes, values and behaviors such as race, socio-economic status, ethnic background, family configuration, regional differences, etc. But research has shown that similarities pervade, even into the soccer lives.

Here are some generalizations about the younger Generation Y and Millennial players.

1. Compelling messages that affect these players:
 - Be smart – you are special.
 - Leave no one behind.
 - Connect with each other 24/7.
 - Achieve now.
 - Serve your community
2. Parenting styles that influenced these players:
 - Parent advocacy
 - Put children first
 - Soccer moms
 - Supervision
3. Resulting values, attitudes and expecta-

valued the importance of self-esteem, they tend to be very confident. Optimistic about the future, they expect their coaches to create a challenging, collaborative, creative and fun training and playing environment. Goal- and achievement-oriented, these players expect immediate feedback on how they are doing. They are used to being organized into teams and making sure no one is left behind. Therefore, they want teams where everyone is treated fairly. They expect their coaches to be positive and respectful. They are open to learn new skills and knowledge but need to be encouraged. Coach turn-offs for this generation of players are cynicism, sarcasm, unfairness and condescension.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS NEEDED TO COACH GENERATION Y PLAYERS

If you are a Generation Y coach, you probably are very effective. However if you are from one of the other groups, doing what comes naturally may not work with these players. When was the last time you thought, "these kids are spoiled and don't know how to work hard" or "these players are self-centered and don't know how to work as a team" or "I wish these kids

would grow up and separate from their parents"? Obviously, coaches influenced by other generational values and attitudes may struggle to lead these Generation Y players. In fact, it is common for Veteran, Baby Boomer and Generation X coaches to experience clash points with players over training, recruiting, motivating, communicating and retaining.

So what is the older coach to do? Some coaches move into administrative positions or get out of athletics completely. Other coaches choose to work with players who will adapt to their style. There are three basic levels of response to working with these young players.

Acknowledge it and let it go. In other words, when you realize there are generational values and attitude differences, you can acknowledge them and let go of your frustration. If you can't change your situation, then change your attitude toward it. "This player is a younger player and I am a Baby Boomer coach – we are acting typical for our generation." Obviously, this strategy isn't going to work over the long haul.

Change your behavior. You change something you do, such as what you say or how you say it. There has been a resurgence of interest in research on emotional intelligence and its implication for leadership, especially with younger players. Emotional intelligence refers to the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions well in us and in our relationships.

In his latest book "Primal Leadership," Daniel Goleman differentiates between resonant and dissonant leadership. Dissonant leadership sways players feelings negatively, undermining the emotional system that helps players be their best. Under this leadership style, players feel dispirited, unmotivated, burned out and discouraged or they leave. Resonant leadership, on the other hand, influences the emotions of the players positively, connecting authentically with players, helps the players to be their best and builds passion for the team goals.

This is not a "soft" approach – increasing your coaching EQ allows you to connect and create positive relationships with your players that will more likely lead to outstanding results. The EQ skills that work best with Generation Y players are emotional self-awareness (recognize how your and their feelings influence perfor-

mance), assertiveness (deal with difficult issues directly and welcome feedback), empathy, social responsibility (want to develop players and give praise generously), interpersonal relationships, flexibility and optimism. Studies have shown a positive correlation between coaches who possess these leadership skills with results as measured by win/loss records.

Use an understanding of the generational differences to talk and listen. Out of this dialogue you can reach some new understanding about how to work together. In his book "Focused for Soccer," Beswick summarizes the challenge of the modern coach: "Coaches must develop the philosophy and skill to change the culture of their teams, to gain access to the power of positive attitudes and to influence change from negative to positive, hope to belief and fear to confidence."

Some practical suggestions for creating a winning environment for the younger generation players

- **Read everything you can about the Generation Y and Millennial players.** Challenge your own assumptions about what motivates this generation of players. A high school girls coach asked players to answer questions about events, places, music and people who had influenced them. The coach used these answers to have a discussion with the players about resulting values and attitudes. This process not only helped the coach build a relationship with the players, but also provided some valuable insight about what motivated these players.
- **Look at your emotional EQ and decide if you want to improve in the areas discussed above.** A motivated Baby Boomer coach actually took the ECI (a 360 EQ evaluation) and had a cross-section of his players take the instrument, which provided surprising information about the gaps in how he saw his strengths and weaknesses and how the players viewed them. As a result the coach discovered how de-motivating his sarcastic comments were and how his players really needed immediate feedback (communication) on how they were doing.
- **Don't fight parental involvement, embrace it.** Find creative ways to involve them. A coach who was struggling with "negative attitudes" with players realized some of the parents constantly were voicing negative opinions about what the coach was and wasn't do-

ing with the team. The coach called a meeting of the parents and invited them to be a part of the solution. The coach clarified her goals and values, listened to the parents' concerns and then adopted a communication process through which concerns could be addressed. The coach then worked with the parents to schedule a series of parent-only social gatherings for team/parent building. Out of this process a number of parents stepped up and volunteered for supportive jobs. The team chemistry gradually improved, leading to greater on-field success.

- **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Share information with players and ask for a lot of feedback. Listen and adapt. When possible, decisions are made by consensus. A college coach provided a weekly email newsletter for parents and players to share pertinent information. Through this medium questions, concerns and suggestions were invited. Parents who had been feeling out of control of their players' lives were able to relax and the energy was transferred to players. When themes emerged that seemed important, the coach would address them proactively with the team, asking for their input and when possible reaching a consensus about what to do. This same coach instituted a team council representing each class, which would meet weekly and discuss issues and provide suggestions and feedback to the coaching staff.
- **Involve your players in creating the vision, team values and team goals.** A high school coach took the team on a pre-season retreat where they discussed their hopes and dreams for the season. Through a variety of team-building activities the players crafted specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and tangible goals for the season. Each individual player's goal was included in the team goals, distributed and discussed often throughout the season.
- **Use a web-based feedback system to weekly evaluate progress toward team goals.** Be sure this process is confidential and allows for immediate feedback with suggestions for improvement. You may want to use a blog. The same coach described above contracted with a peak performance coach to create a web-based

feedback system. The team's values and goals were stated in behavioral terms and put into questionnaires on the web site. The team picked three categories: motivation, focus and positive. Each week the players would go on the web site and confidentially evaluate the team's progress on each of the behavioral categories (for example: "we had focused warm-ups before games" and "we pushed each other in conditioning"). The players could log on any time and see how the entire team was rating each behavioral category and the comments. After three or four weeks, the team and coach could evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and discuss possible behavioral solutions to address the weaknesses. The process kept the players focused on the process goals and values as well the end result goals.

- **Create a challenging training environment.** Balance positive and constructive feedback. Be open to suggestions from players for improvement. Older coaches always should be upgrading soccer skills through continuing coach-


ing education, thus ensuring variety and challenging training. At the end of the season, one high school coach had the team's seniors design and conduct a couple of training sessions focusing on what they thought mattered most to the team. The players responded extremely well. Another high school coach invited several of his returning seniors to participate with him in an NSCAA State Diploma coaching course, then used them throughout the year as training assistants.

- **Reward and reinforce good practice and play.** Celebrate successes.
- **Always be fair and respectful and deal with problems in a proactive, straightforward manner.** A tendency for some coaches is to ignore problems between players. A successful college coach is great at noticing issues brewing. In consultation with a peak performance coach she has developed a workable conflict resolution process. A reduction in drama and increased resonance has been the result of using this process.
- **Make a connection with every player at every practice.** Many coaches have assistants touch base with every player dur-

ing a training session and game to make sure personal and soccer-related issues are being addressed. Some coaches institute a weekly session with each player to discuss anything but soccer.

- **Use a sense of humor often.** Do fun things with the team such as a community service project. Rafting trips, challenge courses, team trips, soccer clinics and camps are a few ways coaches and teams have done team-building and community service.
- **Stress that soccer is a learning ground for future life.** Coaches need to debrief what was learned from both wins and losses. Help players apply these connections to everyday life.

Conclusion

By taking an honest look at the values that have influenced your players and your coaching philosophy, you can break the unproductive self-fulfilling prophecy that often leads to team dissonance and disappointing results. Find creative means for closing the generation gaps and empower your young players to realize their potential. 

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