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Integrating Conditioning and Coaching Education

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Mike Cullina is entering his third year as director of coaching for the Nebraska State Soccer Association. In addition to his state association duties, he is head girls' coach at Gretna High School and is on the Region II Coaching Staff, U.S. Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program. Among his coaching credentials are USSF "A" License, NSCAA "Premier" Diploma, USSF "National Youth" License and NSCAA Goalkeeper 2 Diploma. He is currently finishing his masters' degree in coaching at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

Within the vast complexities of soccer a simple analogy has allowed coaches to better understand the game. The analogy is that soccer is established on four pillars: tactical, technical, psychological and physical. The physical (conditioning) or as some say fitness, can be argued to be the foundation of the other three. With high levels of conditioning, technical tasks are performed with greater proficiency requiring less energy. Tactics are executed with more crispness and precision. Psychologically, players gain confidence knowing that they can beat an opponent contending for the ball because they are faster, stronger and fitter. Nevertheless, this foundational pillar is inadequately addressed in coaching education programs in this country. Much of it is due to the obvious need to emphasize tactics and techniques of the game based on the culture and educational background of coaches entering into state and national licensing and diploma programs. However, as coaching education evolves and our game becomes more sophisticated, the need to address conditioning in coaching education is apparent. For the last 10 years, this publication has been running in parallel to coaching education by presenting cutting edge information on soccer-specific conditioning with the idea and hope that it will permeate into coaching education. The concept has met limited success. On the plus side, awareness and importance of all aspects of conditioning as an essential part of coaching is in the minds of coaches and coaching education administrators. But the integration of conditioning methods into formal coaching education has been very limited, until now. Mike Cullina has set a course to integrate coaching education and conditioning within the structure of a state soccer association. Following are his views on his innovative approach to making it happen. [Ken Kontor]

PC: Currently, what is the "state" of conditioning education as it relates to your state coaching education model?

MC: On the whole, coaching education fails in the need to educate coaches on what is appropriate and what is not appropriate for a given age group. This is just not within our state but also, it is a national problem. If you look at the four areas of the game—tactical, technical, psychological and physical—I think that in the mental and physical aspects we fail in our ability to educate coaches. This is one of the things that we are looking to do; incorporate these identified deficiencies into our program. It is important and necessary.

PC: Why have the technical and tactical aspects received so much attention in coaching education as opposed to the physical pillar of soccer?

MC: I think it's unique to the sport. The techniques of soccer are unique unto itself in relation to other sports. The decisions that have to be made are different than in other sports. The mental side, willingness to compete, ups and downs and ability to "get into the zone" are not necessarily unique to the game of soccer. They may be unique to a given age group or skill level but for the most part are common to other sports. Having said that, when we look at the physical needs of the game, soccer is somewhat unique compared to other sports—somewhere in-between the specific skills and the generalities of mental aspects. Almost all the emphasis in coaching education is on skills and decision-making abilities to perform those skills; whereas the physical is an area where we are failing in our coaching education curriculums.

PC: Based on your experience, what are some basic competencies in conditioning necessary for coaches at the different levels of coaching education?

MC: In our state-hosted courses we have a U6-U8 module that is geared for the coaches who train five- to eight-year-old players. In this course we introduce small-sided games and other fun activities. It's not really designed to teach soccer but to teach kids basic physical skills. In our current public school system structure we have gotten away from teaching physical education. I think that soccer is one area, especially at this age group, where every kid can participate and learn these skills. But, it just not appropriate to spend a lot of time focused on conditioning for the game. The kids aren't really playing in the game at this level; they are mainly running around chasing the ball.

The next course we have is the "F" license, which is geared toward coaching the 9- to 12-year-old players. This course is a little broader. It uses similar methods from the youth U-6 to U-8 course. It doesn't get into skill making decisions. Here we emphasize that the kids just need to play and enjoy the game. Fitness and conditioning is not an integral part of the enjoyment of the game, but considering the age and skill levels of the players this is an appropriate treatment of conditioning.

When we get into the "E" license, which is geared for U-12 to U-14 coaches, this is a little more advanced. Here we want coaches to identify, break down and teach skills. We also introduce tactics on a beginning level. It is at this level where conditioning needs to be addressed better than we currently do. By this I mean, showing coaches what is appropriate and what might be inappropriate. These kids need a specific level of fitness as it relates to the game. It makes the game more enjoyable because they are able to compete. A problem is getting the concepts and practices of conditioning across. An argument exists between instructors and coaches. Coaches feel it's invaluable but instructors feel there are better ways to address the issue beyond the course. This is the point where we've integrated conditioning into our courses a little more.

The "D" license deals with skills for athletes in the U-14 to U-16 age categories. Skills are addressed but tactics and decision-making are addressed to a greater extent. We deal with teaching how to put together, teach and administer a practice session. It deals with

addressing a traditional technical and tactical method. These methodologies don't necessarily integrate conditioning into training.

They are very specific, meaning that we take a particular skill and a particular decision that uses those skills and teach it from the very fundamental beginning to the end of the session. This is from warm-up to scrimmage at the end of practice, teaching a particular method whether it is technical or tactical. This is where we have difficulty because we have so many methods that can be used in teaching, that when we take two specific methods and pull them out onto themselves, we are developing a basic foundation to teaching. This does not lend itself to integrating conditioning other than to a specific activity. For instance, a 1v1 training session of 45 seconds playing to a small goal is going to teach skills, some tactics, and also address some fitness needs because the activity is so demanding. In addition, it will address the players' psychological need because it's 1v1 success and failure happens with a great deal of regularity.

It addresses the fitness needs only in terms of teaching the coach how to do it under this particular set of circumstances. Because of these limitations, we have to teach creativity when it comes to how to work in conditioning to a training session beyond the traditional technical and tactical methods. This is something we are trying to do on a state level as well as the federation working on it from a national level.

PC: Let's talk about the different types of soccer conditioning and the approach to coaching education. In soccer, you have with and without ball endurance training as well as athleticism development of speed, power, agility, mobility etc., which can be done with and without the ball. What would be an approach to these types of soccer conditioning?

MC: One of the things we need to get across to coaches is not necessarily what is done in practice. Certain levels of competition demand certain levels of conditioning whether it is the athletic side or the endurance side. Our rules of free substitution in soccer gets us away from the endurance side of conditioning. The way it is now is that the coach can expend a kid's energy for 10 to 15 minutes and then substitute with fresh players. So the need for endurance is more in line with sprint endurance. The need is there for development of the athletic skills of agility, speed, power, mobility, etc., but the need for specific endurance training is lost because of the rules.

There is only a very small percentage of players who will ever play at a high level. For these players an Olympic development program would be appropriate. This is where kids play for longer stretches; however, as noted there are only a few players at this level. For example, there is only going to be 10 teams in the state of Nebraska that will ever participate under restricted substitution rules. A third of the players are going to play an entire half and the other two thirds are going to split a half. As a result, for only a small percentage of players and their coaches will endurance be important in winning or losing.

This is an anomaly of the rules and coaches need to take advantage of it. This may not be good soccer but these are the rules. This means to coaches that they don't necessarily have to go out and spend a long time in conditioning for endurance but rather spend the

time in training elements of skills, decision-making and athletic skills.

In terms of high-level players who will need more endurance conditioning, it is the coach's decision to challenge the players but not take them out if they are tired. This is true especially in the beginning of the season, where coaches can give their players the opportunity to learn how to play through fatigue. The coach who immediately replaces a fatigued player, hurts that player in this important learning process of decision-making under fatigue and the player's ability to tactfully measure energy expenditures. Coaches need to learn how to bring their players along in managing fatigue.

A second part of this involves those teams playing at the highest level—it is important to incorporate fitness into their routine. But the type of fitness they need to accomplish isn't necessarily going to be accomplished in the usual two and a half hour practice, twice a week. The players and their coach must ensure that they take responsibility for their fitness development away from the field. This is in the form of assigning particular fitness. It can be in terms of a general broad base aerobically, which is something they don't need a great deal of. We must remember that soccer is NOT a predominately aerobic sport. There is an aerobic baseline that is needed but soccer is much more of an anaerobic sport with short sprint burst activity on a repeated basis. No player is out on the field running at a constant pace 45 minutes straight, it just doesn't happen. It's more of walking, jogging with intermittent sprint, and recovery.

Players can easily develop baseline aerobic activity off the field and coaches can use practice time to work on skills, all with the ball. From time to time, a coach may need to take a step back and work on recovery from repeated all out sprints. An argument I have with some coaches is that they think it's necessary to go out during practice and run two to three miles. Soccer in America just doesn't demand this. The game is at a high level of energy with frequent substitutions. Doing long runs during practice is a waste of valuable practice time.

To summarize, we encourage coaches to play their kids longer to help manage areas of fatigue and to have kids take care of their own baseline aerobic fitness with sprint endurance dealt with on the field. This time and activity is especially important working ACL injury prevention with female athletes.

PC: What plans do you have within the state association to address the area of conditioning within your course work?

MC: We are going to do a couple on things. In our formal courses, the "E" and "D", we are going to integrate more time for fitness and the psychological aspects. This will come from some of the time we spent in other areas. We are going to introduce two new projects, one of which is a coaching lecture series, which will in the future have fitness topics introduced. But the main thing we are doing is incorporating some of the Home Workout Training Card System developed by *Performance Conditioning Soccer* into specific certificate courses allowing coaches another opportunity to get information that they can use on the field for their players. If the players want to do additional things such as speed or jumping programs through our corporate partner, Going Vertical, that is

something they can do beyond what we will teach coaches.

We tested the certificate course this summer with a workshop. The response was very good and it indicated a need for it. We are also getting positive feedback from our coaching leaders in Nebraska, the full time directors of coaching. As a group they feel this certificate course is necessary and they want us to move forward with the project. This, they feel, will help with what they are doing locally. The course will not be formally graded; however, what we are hoping to do in the future is to incorporate it with a formal state association evaluation process. This process would evaluate a club on several aspects of operation specific to coaching.

Based on the membership in a club, the club would be expected to meet a certain standard of coaching. For example, at a specific age group all coaches would perhaps be required to have an “E” license. Based on this and other criteria such as coaches have been through; i.e., the conditioning certificate course, if the club meets a certain standard of excellence it will be recognized as having achieved this standard. How the club uses this status is up to them, but it does indicate that the club has achieved a level of excellence with their coaches in the area of coaching education and continuing education. We feel this will be important to athletes and players who are in the process of evaluating the merits of a particular club. Other coaching education experiences will be included as “points earned,” in achieving a standard of excellence.

This is the vision of where we are going with the courses we offer and are developing. There will be added incentives to clubs for coaches to better their education because it will affect how those clubs are graded in meeting the standards.

But by the same token this program will not be an accreditation program, per se—it will be voluntary. Looking at it from more of a positive approach, if a club goes through the program it will be recognized as having supported their coaches through the education process. In today’s club environment, this is important from the standpoint that many clubs would benefit from players wanting to go to that club. Parents would say, “This is an environment I want my kids to be in.”

The real benefit is getting information to coaches and eventually to their kids thus making the game more enjoyable. Unfortunately, many coaches get their license not because they want it but rather because they need it to get a particular job or for recruiting purposes. We would like for every coach who comes to our educational programs to be pure in motivation, but we realize that’s not always the case. From our perspective it’s not how we get them there but once they are there, to get them hooked on coaching education. Once they do it the first time they soon realize the benefits of more and more education.

Overall, we feel the clubs that are already promoting coaching education will endorse this program. It will give more support to what they are already doing and they will be recognized for it. I think it is important that the state association recognize and support those clubs who are making the effort to educate their coaches; however, we do have to be cautious. We don’t want to overextend our boundaries. We don’t want to be perceived as being a gimmick to entrap coaches into attending our courses.

This is where we are heading with all this and the fitness courses we'll be offering will all part of this program. We have quite a few people who are involved in the planning of this program, including our board of directors. We will involve as many people as we can to gain consensus. This is our goal and the fitness side will play an integral part of the whole program.

PC: How will you launch the first fitness course and what will be involved?

MC: Based on the content material provided in the training cards, we have a great deal of flexibility in the course and I see it evolving based on what we want to try and achieve educationally. The first course we offer will look significantly different than a year from now. The initial course will be two hours long with one of those hours in the classroom covering theory. This will be followed by an hour of practical education on the soccer field. Typically, we use coaches in these environments to help demonstrate. This helps the coaches experience the program for themselves and helps in teaching their athletes. This is an introductory program. We want to see how it works and we don't want it to be too long so that it becomes a deterrent.

PC: When do you plan to start the conditioning course program?

MC: We are looking at late January or early February. We still are looking at the curriculum to finalize it before we get started.

More Information Please!

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