

## Mike Cullina Coaching Philosophy

The first practice I can remember was in Libertyville, IL. I was seven. I remember running laps in blue sweat pants in which the elastic had broken and had to hold up with my hands. I hated it! I didn't attend practice to run- I attended practice to play. It is this memory that shapes the basic foundation for my philosophy- **Players play soccer to play!** It sounds simple, but it isn't.

I want **activities that are dynamic and demand player thought** and- while it sometimes necessary- I stay away from the overly organized activities that dictate player movement instead of allowing players to react and/or make decisions on their own. Sometimes to a fault, I allow activities to flow with limited coach intervention.

**Identifying and correcting the "coachable moment"** is one of the most integral components of being a successful coach. But so is the restraint to allow players to learn through trial and error. Failure is key to learning and players often know when they make mistakes and what techniques or decisions will limit future failure.

The coachable moment does not always have to be negative. Sometimes, **recognizing and praising the positive can have a greater impact on players than simply pointing out what they do wrong.**

Son of a military man, I have a great appreciating for the freedoms and opportunities provided to me as an American. My experiences in soccer and in life include being born on a military base in West Germany, living in seven states in the U.S. and returning to Germany during the height of the "Cold War" in my high school years. I was there when the Berlin Wall fell and have video of my father in full US Army uniform literally helping to knock it down.

I attended an American high school, but played in a German club- AYA Union Heidelberg. It was during this time that my **passion for soccer and America** grew exponentially. **Our team was ambassadors** for my country through soccer. We represented club and country in seven European countries and often played in front of massive crowds of several thousand people. (Most were there to see our demise, not our success.)

The German leagues allowed for five substitutions and no re-entry. At U14, the games became result orientated, which now helps me shape two more important aspects of my philosophy.

First, I have a greater understanding for the need to **teach players the Game with a heavy emphasis on skill development and encouraging risk taking at the younger ages and put no emphasis on winning during these formative years.** About the time players enter high school, they become psychologically prepared for result-oriented play.

Second, while we should all be afforded equal opportunity in all aspects of life, we are not all created equals in our abilities on the soccer field. **Developing "appropriate competition" for players at all levels aids in their development and leads to a greater enjoyment of the Game.** Providing opportunities for all players to participate is paramount, but affording the most highly skilled players an avenue for even further development is critical.

Out of high school, I attended St. Mary of Plains College in Dodge City, KS. The school closed following my sophomore year and a majority of the team transferred to Bethany College in Lindsborg, KS. I wasn't very big, strong or fast, but was an accomplished player at the small school level, because I quickly learned that my **leadership and decision making skills** made it impossible for the coach to keep me on the bench.

Soccer is built upon the four pillars: **technique, tactics, physical, and psychological.** Because of my own experiences, I learned that all four are critical and **the psychological component is**

**terribly overlooked.** I also learned that **speed of thought can often make up for a lack of physical speed.**

Since college, I have made soccer my profession. I've learned that mistakes are an integral part of coaching development. I also learned that **success is fleeting, but excellence lasts forever.** I gained a greater appreciation for **creating an environment that demands excellence** from players, coaches, parents, referees and administrators.

As a player and coach, I understand that each of us will have an "off-day". Training will improve a player's ability to accomplish all four pillars with greater competence and consistency. However, outside influences- often largely out of our control- can negatively affect a player's touch, fitness, etc. On the other hand, **EFFORT should remain constant and at the highest level.** Player's can always work hard, especially in defending which has fewer rewards than scoring goals.

As a coach, I understand that I have a tremendous responsibility to my players and to the Game, and the training environment can produce amazing results in player development. Accepting these two points requires that I spend the time to **develop a training session prior to the practice and evaluate its effectiveness afterward.** Choosing a topic has intended results. In order to meet them, I must take the time to write them out, including the coaching points I want to make.

The training session should come from a seasonal or yearly curriculum or from positives and/or negatives identified from the previous match. A **curriculum is the road map to player development and is unique to the needs of my team.**

Finally, I am a strong proponent of **formalized and continuing coaching education.** I have learned a tremendous amount in the Coaching Schools, but even more by attending symposiums and workshops, and by teaching coaching clinics and courses, myself.

**It would be hypocritical to ask players to improve without investing the time and money to improve myself as a coach!**