

How Expectations Affect Performance

By Eric Steege

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Whether you know it or not, the expectations you form as a coach about players on your team affects not only your own behavior toward them but also the feelings and performance of those players.

Having such an influence on your players' athletic experience and development is a huge responsibility and a process every coach should understand.

Here's how the process works.

Step 1: Coaches Form Expectations of Players

All coaches form expectations of players on their team. For example, often coaches have higher expectations for players that they feel are more athletic.

When sources of information allow accurate evaluation of athletic potential and ability, there is no problem. However, inaccurate expectations (either too high or too low) especially when the expectations are too rigid and inflexible, often lead to unsuitable behaviors by the coach. This leads us to the second step — coaches' expectations influence their behaviors.

Step 2: Coaches' Expectations Influence Their Coaching Behaviors

Most coaches behave differently if they have high or low expectations of a specific player and these behaviors normally fit into one of three categories:

1) Quality and amount of interactions with an athlete

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Coaches spend more time talking and working with "high-expectation" players because they expect more of them.

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Coaches show more caring and positive emotions toward high-expectation athletes.

2) Quality and amount of instruction toward an athlete

- Coaches lower their expectations of what skills a "low-expectation" athlete can learn/execute and thus establish a lower standard of performance.
- Coaches provide a "low-expectation" athlete correspondingly less time in practice drills.
- Coaches are less patient in teaching challenging skills to low-expectation players.

3) Type and amount of feedback toward an athlete

- Coaches give high-expectation athletes more instructional and informational feedback.
- Coaches provide more positive reinforcement and praise for high-expectation athletes after a successful performance.

Step 3: Coaches' Behaviors Affect Athletes' Performances

It is easy to see why athletes who consistently receive more positive and instructional feedback from a coach will show more effort, improvement, and enjoyment in soccer. As a coach, it is also easy to take credit for how your positive coaching behaviors directed toward high-expectation players positively affect performance. However, it is more difficult to see how coaching behaviors directed toward low-expectation players might be negatively affecting performance. Read the following and see if you can think of times when your expectations/behaviors as a coach might have unknowingly affected a player's performance in a negative way:

- Low-expectation players often receive less playing time and less effective reinforcement and as a result have poorer performances.
- Low-expectation athletes attribute their failures to a lack of ability reinforcing the notion that they aren't good and may never have future success.
- Low-expectation players demonstrate lower levels of self-confidence and perceived ability.

Step 4: Athlete's Performances Confirm the Coaches' Expectations

Often an athlete's performance adds confirmation to a coach's initial evaluation of the athlete's ability and potential. However, few coaches are actually aware that their own expectations and behaviors helped produce this self-fulfilling performance result in their athletes. Thus, it is absolutely critical that all coaches understand the cyclical relationship between their expectations and players' performance - players' athletic development and enjoyment are dependent on this knowledge.

Please check back in for my next article that will detail how coaches can better keep their expectations in check to ensure all players have a fair chance to reach their potential and enjoy their soccer experience.

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