

Balmain Junior Football

Philosophy of COACHING and PLAYING

How to coach...

Why have a football philosophy?

A club philosophy gives us direction and a map; it brings consistency and reduces uncertainty for coaches, managers, parents and players. It sets club standards and a style of play.

A player's enjoyment grows with an increase in their skills and technique. In playing the game we must encourage creativity and problem solving – valuable attributes in life and not just in sport.

How do we apply a philosophy?

An obsession with winning in junior football is detrimental to a young player's long-term development. Our society greatly values success but places too much emphasis on short-term success. This comes at the expense of player development and longer-term goals.

Success is more than wins versus losses; it is in developing young footballers' skill levels, creativity and ability to read games. It is in the enjoyment of their game.

Until mid-teens the focus should be on developing skills and an understanding of the game.

What do we want to achieve from this philosophy?

We want to develop players who:

- Control and manipulate the ball with skill,
- Maintain possession individually and collectively,
- Intelligently construct an attack and respond well in defense.

Teaching these principles is more important than winning every match.

So what's wrong with the way we're doing it?

Too much junior football in Australia is direct and speculative and puts excess value on long kicks and hopeful chasing of the ball. It lacks in skill and intelligence for the individual and the team.

Too much emphasis on winning robs the game and its players of an opportunity to develop a wide-range of skills and robs many players of the sheer enjoyment of playing the game. The result is a big drop-out rate in early teens, including some players who might otherwise have gone on to become great players.

So how do we develop skilful, creative players?

"You can have all the tactics and systems but without basic skill, you cannot be successful"
That's the view of Australia's National Technical Director, Han Berger.

Technique and skill improve when a young player spends plenty of time with a football. No child masters a physical or academic pursuit without hours of effort but hopefully they also have plenty of fun. There's no better time for learning and acquiring new skills than when we're young. Skills learnt at an early age usually remain with us forever.

GUIDELINES TO COACHING

Training sessions must be completely with the ball

There's no need for laps or sit-ups! Football fitness comes from match-related activities. The goal should be for every player to touch a football between five hundred and a thousand times a training session. This is achieved with a combination of technique - ball skill and ball manipulation exercises, and in one-on-one challenges. It comes with small-sided games (2 v 2; 3 v 3, 4 v 4, 5 v 5 or "overload practices" like 4 v 2, 4 v 3, 5 v 2 etc.)

Possession is everything

Never kick the ball away, it is precious, and possession of the ball must be valued above all else. By possessing the ball you create and control the game.

Keeping possession requires you to put into practice skills that let you:

- Protect the ball
- Evade challenges from opponents
- Maintain good vision
- Have an astute level of understanding with team-mates

It is better to play a series of short passes that guarantee your team's possession than to play a speculative kick that will most likely give possession to the opposition.

Don't over-coach

Coaches must provide guidance and highlight alternatives in game situations. We must encourage creativity and problem solving. Avoid instructions that are overbearing and avoid telling players what not to do. We want players to "expand their game", not to have it narrowed by overzealous coaching.

A few things not to say:

Never give instructions like:

- "get rid of the ball"
- "don't play at the back"
- "don't take risks"
- "clear it"
- "get it in the box"

Remember, possession is everything, and "getting it out of danger" is only a temporary release. They have just given the ball to the opposition. Never tell a keeper to "kick the ball long", especially to no-one in particular. There is no point telling players to "get it in the box" or even "cross it" if they don't have one of their teammates in the box to pass it to.

The importance of calmness

Players need to learn how to play in conditions of "pressure", i.e. to learn to stay calm and hold onto the ball until a solution is found – be it through their individual skills or collective support play. Recommending the easy option – "clear it" or "kick it out", simply denies a player the opportunity to acclimatise to what is a regular situation in any football game without panic. Parents and supporters who shout such statements are encouraging poor practices and a panic state in the player.

Players should not be afraid of making mistakes, or of trying unconventional things. They require confidence to test their wit and skills against an opponent. Developing individual ball skills and taking the emphasis off "mistakes" will help take the panic away from of a young player's game and you will see:

- Better decision-making.
- Less panic-induced long kicks up the park to no-one in particular.
- Less unnecessary kicking of the ball over the sideline to avoid a perceived "danger".

Mistakes happen and are a part of learning. If a child loses possession or the other team scores a goal, the message should be: "It didn't work that time but keep working at it". With a greater level of skill or awareness, the action may have succeeded. Who knows what that may have lead to?

Certain perceived wisdoms like "don't play the ball across the goal" are conservative "no-risk" moves. In many situations these actions are perfectly valid and when executed well pose very little risk.

Appreciate spatial awareness

What may be spatially obvious to the adult isn't necessarily so for a child. Children do not have the same spatial awareness of adults. It develops at a different rate in different children.

Maximise participation – for everyone

Make sure everyone gets equal game time and equal attention at training.

Every junior player has the same right to play the game.

While playing abilities vary, **young players develop in different ways and at different rates.**

This year's best players may not be your best next year. Change often happens even quicker. A highly motivated player will develop faster than one who isn't. Keep all players happy and interested in improving their game. Football is a team sport in which everyone contributes individual strength and characteristics.

Don't specialise too soon

Every player must make a contribution and experience a variety of positions. Give every player a chance to play the field. Specialising is another way of narrowing experiences. In very young age groups there should be no positions at all! Players will learn to play and read the game better when exposed to a variety of roles. With greater variety and opportunity, those who have shown less interest in the game will discover their enthusiasm and motivation.

It is not about you

Okay! So you think you've got your strongest team possible in their "best" positions and want to play it every week. You need to give everyone a chance to develop and be flexible. Some players won't want to move from their favoured position. Sell it to them! It's in their best interest!

Summary

If our children are encouraged to become skilful and creative players, they'll have more to contribute to the game and will enjoy it more as a result. They'll be set for a lifelong love of the game and will develop a long-term attachment to Balmain Football Club.

Australian football faces a generational change and we are moving toward a stronger and better standard of football. In the quest to develop better players, we've long recognised traditional Australian strengths of sheer athleticism and fighting spirit. To that we must add enjoyment, technique, skill and game intelligence.

Balmain hopes to make a positive contribution to football in Australia. The game is a wonderful social activity with a great sense of community. It encourages friendships and networks across a wide range of players and their parents. It is crucial we recognise the wider meaning of sport and the positive and encouraging involvement of our sons and daughters.

Prepared for the Balmain Football Club by Dario Bicego and Paul Cuscuna

Additional resources – See the Balmain Football Club for Age-Related Training Programs and Ball Mastery videos that complement this document (coming soon).

Acknowledgements – too many to mention in detail but particular mention should go to:

Craig Foster's article [Possess the Ball – a new philosophy](#) from the SBS The World Game site

[Player Development Philosophy Video](#) Created by the Georgia Youth Soccer Association. Goes for about 35 mins but it is fantastic! About the U.S. but still extremely relevant to Australia.

Small Sided Games – Let the game be the teacher, by Paul Cooper & giveusbackourgame – see <http://www.giveusbackourgame.co.uk>

Football Federation Australia – [Small Sided Football handbook](#)

The countless articles, books, blogs and videos that have been ingested over the past number of years, and all the young players and teams we've coached over that period (not always perfectly). They've helped in our observations and views.