

Nuggets and Bright Lines

- “Footballers are not created by coaches. They are created by God and mothers.”



Mothers

Sometimes as coaches, or indeed in whatever niche of life we find ourselves, particularly if we gain a modicum of success we can be prone to a dose of something we will call ego. Imagine the scene. You are stood or sat watching a football match and from behind you there comes a voice that comments along the lines of; “Oh yes I coached him from when he was twelve. I knew he would make it. He was actually my best player. We practised those runs all all the time back then.”

Now you may or may not have ever been in that particular situation but I am sure you get the picture.

I think it was Arsene Wenger who said something along the lines that if you can make a two or three percent improvement in a team over a long period of time then you are doing well. I think if anyone would know, he would.

The great Bill Shankly went a step further when he said: “Footballers are not created by coaches. They are created by God and mothers.” I think that is a beautiful statement that should be framed in every coaches office in the land. it may seem to negate the effect of lifetimes of work but it actually puts things into perspective. Let’s face it without the two major facets, mentioned by the great man, there would be no player. Let’s start from there. I think it gives us the right mindset to work from.

The simple fact is that we don’t actually know exactly how much influence we have on a player. I will come back to Willie Donachie later in the article but in his interview on The Leader Manger Coach Podcast (<http://www.robryles.co.uk/podcasts>) he spoke of a coach of his who he said actually did not like the word coach. He thought the best we ever achieve is to coax rather than coach. A humble and valid opinion to have maybe. Whatever term we use to describe or label what we do I think we can do great disservice by taking the underestimation or the overestimation path.

If we take the former then we may fall prey to sloppy habits, words and deeds. If nothing else we serve as examples in terms of the old adage of: ‘what you are speaks so loudly I can’t hear what you say.’ Better not then underestimate how our behaviour influences the culture and the actions of those around us. Acting in a certain way gives the green light for others to do the same.

If we take the latter view and overestimate our influence, we may slip into believing in our own infallibility and power. This can lead to dominance and over bearing direction that results in inadequate followers who fail when the 'influencer' is absent and particularly importantly when the players step over that white line.

it's not that different to parenting really when you think about it, in some ways. All coaches are different like parents, with different personalities and strengths. Some are super organised with military precision planning of all aspects of the ship and others are not. Whatever you do and allow is likely to be taken up by the people around you to one degree or another. It seems that we do have an influence in terms of how we carry ourselves as people. All we need to do is live to our chosen values and it seems the influence will occur naturally. Beware though if those values are not what you want in your players or team.

Influencing the technical, tactical aspects of a player and a team seems more complex. If the information is available to the player how will it be taken up, digested and implemented? Does it need a giver or supplier or someone to light the way? Does it need someone to reformulate it, so it is more easily understood, as the protagonists of VAK schools of thought believe? These are the unanswered conundrums of coaching. The realities that, once you are in it, tie you up with challenge and frustration and are one of the ultimate attractions of the work.

Returning to the original focus and as promised we revisit Willie Donachie's interview when he talked eloquently and in detail about his childhood. The picture he painted was a beautiful one of a young boy cocooned in a ball of sustaining love, emanating from his mother and sisters. It is this he believes that was responsible for so much of the joy and success that his life has seen. I doubt if there are any more profound yet practical concepts than this. Before anyone has any ideas about Willie growing up with a silver spoon, let it be known he lived in Glasgow's Gorbals.

Craig Simmonds who worked for many decades with the English Football Association was a prominent figure in The National School at Lilleshall, the project that before the evolution of the academy system, saw the country's best young footballers of the time, living and training together. A part of Craig's research revolved around players' journeys into the professional game. What he found was that the majority of professional players he interviewed, many of them elite internationals said categorically that the person that had the most influence on their career was their mother. When asked why, they responded almost to a man that it was because of the unconditional love and consistency. The mums were always there, always ready to provide the tea, the next meal, to launder the kit, help pack the bag, scold and remind. to give a cuddle to an uncertain adolescent player lost in a man's world and always recognised that they were first and foremost sons and boys and not players.

Let us remember: "Footballers are not created by coaches. They are created by God and mothers."

The Author

Rob is a UEFA qualified coach with a League Managers Association qualification and a science and medicine background. He has worked in the football industry in Europe, USA, Asia and Africa; at International, Premiership, League, Non-League and grass roots levels with both World Cup and European Championship experience.



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