

THE TRANSITION GAME

Playing in an Academic Environment

By Frank Pace

As important as the transition from offense to defense, and defense to offense is to the outcome of a game, the most important transition any players will make is the transition to playing in an academic environment.

The first day that freshmen arrive on the campus of our all-girls private high school, they hear something they have never heard in all their years of AYSO, Club or ODP: "Soccer is a privilege earned in the classroom." We tell them they'd better get used to hearing it, because to play in high school or college, they have to succeed with the books. We also inform our players that despite whatever they have accomplished in the past and despite whatever thoughts Mom and Dad have filled their heads with about how good they are, there are no entitlements. They are starting over. The slate has been wiped clean. They need to prove they can handle a rigorous academic load and at the same time prove they can compete against older, stronger and often quicker players. They will get that chance, first on the practice field, then on the playing field, if they can be both good students and good citizens in our community.

AIDING THE TRANSITION

Clearly communicate your philosophy and expectations: Whether the goal is for your student-athletes to maintain a 3.5 grade point average or simply to stay in good academic standing, let them know what you expect in clear and measurable terms.

Playing time is not included in tuition (or a college scholarship). Our teams are playing competitive soccer. We don't have an everyone-plays philosophy. It is the best players who play, regardless of which class they are in. In high school, because we don't recruit, talent is often cyclical. This is good; it fosters competition. In an academic environment, we graduate kids. Every season is a new year. Every team is a new team with its own personality and challenges. Just because you started last year doesn't mean you will start this year. Just because we won last year doesn't mean we will win this year. Three seasons ago we had one freshman on our varsity team. This season there are eight. The best players play. Just like in college. You may be in the national team pool, but if the kid playing in front of you is a better player, you either beat her out or wait your turn.

We also explain to our kids that there are only two positions on our team, on the field or off. If you don't like where we are playing you on the field, we will gladly change your position.

Assign mentors/Ask a senior: We've observed that teams in an academic environment seem to take on the personality of the senior

class. That's why from Day 1, regardless of the playing reputation an incoming freshman brings to our school, we establish a culture of respect for the traditions and players who have preceded them. Teaching the students about Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy soccer history makes our Alumni Games all the more meaningful and the FSHA jersey more special. Our players learn that respect is to be earned, not given, but we will give them every chance to earn respect.

because Mom and Dad are making them, but because they understand that anything less is a one-way ticket home. At Sacred Heart, if a girl has a detention for any reason on game day, she goes to detention. If she misses the game, that's too bad. Explaining to her teammates why she let them down is harder for a player than missing a game.

We also expect our girls to communicate for themselves. We do not accept phone calls or e-mails from parents explaining why their

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Kids today live more complicated lives than older generations. However, the challenges facing any one of our incoming freshmen are usually not unlike those experienced by their upper class teammates a few years earlier.

If there is trouble with a teacher, a class, a parent, friend or the coach, we have our girls talk to an upperclassman. We encourage our upperclassmen to become mentors to the younger players. We ask them to teach the expectations and traditions of our programs as the generation before taught them. If a kid is frustrated by not starting or playing less in high school or college than in club, chances are that the senior all-conference defender once occupied that same spot on the bench. We want the upperclassman to explain how she dealt with it. In fact, this year we matched a senior player with a freshman player for that very purpose. Gaining the respect and trust of upperclassmen is important in making the transition to playing in an academic environment. It also invests the older players in the well-being of the newcomers. This investment process is critical, especially for girls.

As the coach, you also know which upperclassmen will best reinforce your coaching philosophy and explain your coaching personality, so when assigning mentors, choose wisely.

Create accountability: We expect the girls to take responsibility for their own actions.

We expect homework to be turned in on time. We expect classes to be attended daily, and we expect our girls to be good citizens. The accountability factor is doubly important in college, because players have to get up on their own, feed themselves and get to class, not

daughter "won't be at practice today." There are acceptable reasons for missing or being late to practice (rehab, for one). There is no reason the player can't make the call or send the e-mail herself. Anything less is considered an unexcused absence and carries consequences previously communicated to them. Legendary basketball coach John Wooden says the worst thing you can do for anyone is something they can and should do for themselves. Amen.

The great thing about an academic environment is that everything is objective. A 3.2 GPA is a 3.2 GPA. A 2-1 loss is a 2-1 loss. GPA and scoreboard are a player's ultimate measure of accountability as long as the results are achieved within the boundaries of the rules.

Compete, compete, compete: Young players are losing their competitive edge. A kid buries a ball in the side netting trying to score near post from an impossible angle and hears "unlucky." There is nothing unlucky about poor discipline and bad execution. Players need to prepare for every game as if it is the most important game of the year. No game is disposable. We want our kids to feel good after a game and bad after a loss. At the club level you often don't know whom you are playing within the structure of endless tournament games. Lose in the morning, win in the afternoon and the kids go home happy. We need to teach our kids to compete.

Our kids know, often months in advance, when they are playing traditional rivals. Teach your players what to do the day before to prepare for a game. Teach them what, how and when to eat. Teach them to make sure that their equipment is all packed the night before

and that they get enough sleep. In short, teach them how to mentally prepare to play a soccer game. Those skills are sorely lacking.

Competitive soccer is supposed to be fun, but not everyone gets a trophy. One of our freshman players said it better than I ever could have in a pre-game meeting recently when she defined competitive soccer as “Warrior Fun.” North Carolina v. Notre Dame, USC v. UCLA, Williams v. Amherst. Your best against their best. That’s fun all right, “Warrior Fun.”

For the last word on building competitors, read Jay Martin’s Center Circle editorial in the Nov.-Dec. 2008 issue of Soccer Journal. It may be the most photocopied, faxed or e-mailed article SJ ever published.

Be consistent: Abe Lemons, the Hall of Fame basketball coach, used to say that he didn’t have any rules because he didn’t want to have to punish his best players. Whether you have few rules like coach Lemons or a lot of rules as coach Wooden did, be consistent in how you enforce them. Your players have long memories. Several years ago we let a minor transgression slide without consequence. Three years later when we went to discipline a player for that very same violation of our rules, that player reminded us that we “hadn’t punished Courtney” during her freshman year for doing the same thing. We were accountable. We admitted to having made a mistake three years earlier, but disciplined the player anyway as a lesson to both the current freshmen and the coaches. We also have a zero-tolerance policy for academic fraud, drugs or alcohol.

Control the hype: It’s important to build team chemistry. You may have the best player in the history of your school, but let those players prove themselves on the field before all the hype begins. Make sure to give your upperclassmen all the preseason accolades in both the school and local papers. Let the newcomers play their way into the headlines.

There is not a lot of coverage for club games, so your kids won’t have a lot of experience with media exposure, but local media often does take an interest in high school and college teams. Take a moment during one of your preseason practices to instruct your players on what and how to speak to the media. Teach them not to get caught up in the excitement of the interview process, not to say anything they wouldn’t want to read in the paper and never to say anything that would reflect poorly on the team or an opponent. Remind them, too, that publicity is like poison. It’s okay as long as you don’t swallow it.

TRANSITIONING PARENTS

More and more, I hear from college coaches that the parents are trying to insert themselves into the college game in a manner similar to the way they control club teams. In fact, I know a successful Division I coach who lost her job, in part, because of parental complaints about her coaching style. Don’t bury your head in the sand on this one. If it hasn’t happened yet at your school, it’s coming. Too many parents have taken to “agenting” for

their kids. Helicopter parents, they’re called: They are always hovering. They’ve been doing it up to and through high school. It’s not going to change unless you change it.

John Wooden says, “Coaches are teachers.” We tell our parents not to ask a coach any question you wouldn’t ask your daughter’s chemistry or math teacher. “How is Sally doing, and what can she do to get better?” is an appropriate question. “How can you possibly play Joanne instead of Sally?” is not. Any time one player is compared with another player, both players lose.

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Regarding e-mails, I have found e-mailing to be a passive-aggressive form of communication. They make people brave. Our parents are discouraged from sending e-mails to coaches regarding on-field decisions. We tell our parents, if you wouldn’t e-mail the chemistry teachers, don’t e-mail us. However, if you do feel the need to e-mail the coaches, our administration has endorsed a policy that states you also must send it to your daughter, our athletic director and our vice principal of student affairs. A parent is informed that should they send an e-mail without the aforementioned people copied, the coaches will forward it on. You would be amazed at how few e-mails we now receive. A complete list of communication procedures is presented to the parents prior to the beginning of every season.

FITNESS: THE FIRST MILESTONE

One of the biggest failings incoming freshmen (and their parents) make transitioning into the academic environment is not understanding the level of fitness that will be required. We tell our graduating seniors when they go to college that if you want to impress your coaches, come in fit. Your first goal should be to finish in the top three or four of your measured fitness runs on the week you report to camp. The same goes at the high school level. We do a version of the Cooper Test called “The Wall.” We have been running it for years, so the level of measurement has remained constant. It’s become an FSHA tradition. As we have gotten better athletes over the years, team times have fallen, but individual bests remain pretty constant.

Yet one thing is sure: our fittest players tend to be our best-skilled and most committed, players who have gone on to excel at the college level. We run “The Wall” periodically throughout both the preseason and the regular

season, documenting every player’s result, down to splits. We then make the results available to parents who wish to see them. “Susie’s not playing because she hasn’t passed her fitness requirement” saves a lot of explaining. It also gets the message across to Susie loud and clear – get in shape. I often joke to our cross-country coach how easy he has it picking his “starting lineup” – all he has to do is look at his stopwatch. Make sure your incoming players have plenty of advance notice of your fitness expectations. The rest is up to them.

A FINAL NOTE TO COACHES

Coaching in an academic environment (especially at the college level) is more difficult now than ever before. We need to be teachers, role models, mentors and psychologists as well as coaches. Most important, we need to be patient while our players are transitioning. We need to be patient as they learn to prioritize their time between classes, homework and soccer five, sometimes six, days a week – with maybe a little social time mixed in. Plus sleep. It’s a big difference from two nights a week of club practice.

Be patient in adjusting kids to your style of play. Many kids come to high school or college having played for only one club coach for the majority of their careers. They will be confused and conflicted. Most of them don’t watch soccer on TV, so they know only one style of play. Some have played only in a flat four zonal defending scheme. Others have never played with three forwards. Unfortunately, kids don’t just play soccer these days. They can only play the way they have been programmed to play. Still they are good kids, and you are a good coach. They will figure out what you are selling and they will buy into it.

As you transition kids into a high school or college program scholarship, keep reminding your players the key word in scholarship – be it athletic or academic – is “scholar,” and that soccer is a privilege earned in the classroom. ⚽

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