

THREE P's IN THE COACHING ALPHABET WITH OLYMPIC SHARKS' HEAD COACH GARY PHILLIPS

What can you do to help lift your coaching above the ordinary?

This month *The Coaches' Edge* talks to one of Australia's leading soccer coaches, Gary Phillips, about what he believes can really make a difference.

After a long and successful career as a National Soccer League player, with 379 games including the 1989/90 Championship to his credit, Gary has become one of the sport's most respected coaches, taking his beloved Olympic Sharks to the Championship in May this year.

Gary and his men claimed the Australian Championship title by beating the hot-favourites, the Perth Glory 1-0 in Perth - in what was a major upset.

Planning

"Most of the manuals tell you about the four things coaches need to focus on to do their job properly - the *technical*, skills and rules, the *tactical*, how you play the game, the *physiological*, fitness and training and the *psychological*, mental attitude - but there's more to it than that," Gary said.

"It might sound funny but even when you take into account all the training and the games, along with the media and sponsorship commitments, most of my time is taken up with planning... planning in as much detail as possible."

No matter how you measure success - by improving your win-loss ratio, finishing higher on the table, or holding the trophy aloft - teams don't progress and improve by accident. Planning plays an integral role.

The more serious the team being coached, the greater the need for extensive planning simply because there's more riding on the result. However, Gary firmly believes planning pays at every level.

"I have a plan for my coaching sessions for this week, for this month and the next three months. I've got plans for bringing new players through the system in two or three years' time. I've got individual performance plans for the players. I have to rate performances after matches and factor that into the planning. I have to set goals for the team and different players, and plan for when we revisit them. I have to make game plans for all the teams we play against. I have to plan my time commitments every day. There's no end to it," he said.

Good planning gives you as much control as possible, but you still have to stay flexible and continually update those plans, because in sport there are simply too many unknowns and too many factors which simply can't be controlled.

But, ironically, you should still have plans in place for those things you can do virtually nothing about.

What happens when your star player is injured? How do you replace them? What happens to the team balance? How does it affect team tactics? How do you present it to the players?

Good coaches also have to be good organisers. They have to be on top of the small but vital details regarding equipment, hydration and nutrition, schedules and transport - all the little things that ensure the whole operation runs smoothly.

Personalities

For Gary, part of being a good coach is always remembering that it's all about the players.

"Players only play because they want to, because they enjoy playing the game. A happy player is a good player and the coach has to understand what makes each individual player tick."

When he took over the reigns at Olympic, the season was only a week away and Gary had to get to know his men fast by sitting down and talking to them.

"Some players play for the sheer joy of it, others for the camaraderie, others because they want to be the best they can be. You need to take the time to understand what motivates each player and set up training and performance goals to match that motivation."

For Gary, making sure the players are enjoying themselves and achieving their own goals is a major part of his overall strategy.

"People play better when they are happy and if every individual in the team does well, then the whole team does well," Gary said.

"You also need to know a bit about what is going on in their life outside sport - do they have problems at home, are their jobs working out? It can have a big impact on how they perform."

Knowing the player as an individual helps a coach put their training and playing performance in perspective. Poor performances can be explained and better understood.

Knowing the non-players - assistant coaches, trainers, sports dietitians and physiotherapists - is also important.

"You have to trust them to do their job, so you can concentrate on yours."

Personal Pursuits

Coaches can be so wrapped up trying to improve their players, they can forget they need to improve themselves as well.

Great coaches will continue to pursue additional insights into what they do - no matter what level they are coaching at.

"I asked for a Professional Development clause in my contract because it's very important that coaches keep their skills as sharp as they keep their players'," Gary said.

While most coaches don't have contracts to negotiate, there are still plenty of ways to keep improving their skills. Access courses or information provided by your own league or coaching body, investigate external coaching schools, read books, look into other sports to see if any coaching techniques could be adapted to your needs, or simply speak to other coaches.

"If you don't have the time or money for anything else, then you can scour the Internet for information and there are a huge range of books available, which can help with virtually any aspect of your sport," Gary said.

You have to be honest with yourself and look for your strengths and weaknesses.

"This is something which tends to be done in the off season when you have the time and you might have to put your hand in your own pocket, but if you don't keep learning and thinking you are going to be left behind."

Summary

For all coaches the 3Ps of the coaching alphabet: planning, personalities and personal pursuits are a must. Detailed planning needs to be a daily reality if a team's goals are going to be achieved. The planning should encompass virtually every aspect of a coach's role, covering the individual, the team, the season and beyond. Good coaches also need to realise that their players are individual, with different needs and goals. Take time to get to know your players so you can build this information into your plans. Players only play because they enjoy it. Coaches also need to pursue their own goals to achieve success.

Practical Tips for Coaches

- Identify all the tasks you perform as a coach and consider ways in which detailed planning would be able to assist you to carry out those tasks better.
- Enquire if your league or association has resources to improve your planning skills.
- Sit down with players one-on-one, or in small groups, and identify why they are playing the game and what they want out of it.
- Build this information into their personal training programs to ensure you get the maximum out of the player, without turning them away from the game.
- Regularly remind yourself that coaches need to improve as well.
- Analyse your weaknesses as a coach. Plan to improve these during the off-season by attending appropriate courses, studying the relevant literature or interacting with other people.