

FOOTBALL



HELP DESK

'Helping Coaches Helping Kids'

## DEVELOPING A COACHING STRATEGY

### **Coach your own personality**

Don't try to mimic your favorite coach. It will only set you up for failure. You can use parts of what he does or drills he uses but you can't copy him 100%. You'll be a phony and the kids will sense that. They can see right through a phony. You can emulate parts of him that fit your personality. I once coached under a very good head coach and when I became a head coach, I asked myself "What is it about him that makes him such a good coach?" I decided that his passion for the game and his level of practice intensity is what made him special. I was able to incorporate that into what I do because it also fits me. No, I don't run the same offense or defense he ran but I coach my kids with the same level of passion and attention to detail that he did.

If you are a yeller and a screamer, be that. If you are quiet and introverted, be that. Don't try to be something that you're not. Both styles win games. If you are yelling, make sure that you are yelling instructive stuff because yelling for the sake of yelling accomplishes nothing. First and foremost, be a teacher. A coach is a teacher. These kids come to you to learn something that they can't learn on their own. Don't disappoint them. Just teach them with your own style and they will respect you.

Pick an offense and defense that fits your personal philosophy on football. If you're a riverboat gambler and want an attacking defense, start studying the 46, the 10-1, or stunting a lot out of a 4-4 or something like that. If you're more conservative and want a bend but don't break style, look at 5-2, 4-3, 6-2 style of defenses. After you decide what offense and defense you want, get info on them and coach your kids up in them.

Kids will play hard if they buy into what you're selling and believe as much in it as you do. Know your O and D inside out. If a kid asks who he's supposed to block on a certain play, you'd better know or he'll lose confidence in what you're doing.

### **Adapting your style to fit your kids**

After you've chosen the offense and defense you want to run, you need to evaluate the age, size and talent of your kids and how they are going to fit into it. You might have to change your offense or defense to fit the kids you have available. If after evaluating your kids and you find that you have no kids that can throw over 10 yards and only one kid that can catch, you're reasonably sure that you're not going to go 5 wide and run a spread passing offense. Now is

the time to bunch them back in and run the ball. It has been my experience that running the ball in youth football is the way to go. Pass a little to keep the defense honest but be prepared to run the ball. I won't say that I've never seen a youth team that could excel by passing but they are few and far between.

If you have speed, run plays to get that speed in the open field, i.e. sweeps, swing passes, etc. If you have size, power it down their throats running between the tackles. If you have a thrower and great receivers, air it out a bit.

Understand that each child is different and they require different levels of coaching. Some kids "get it" right away, others don't. Try not to get frustrated by the slow learners and keep trying. By the same token don't bore the fast learners with the same thing. Try to give them something else to challenge them. You can yell at some kids to motivate them but others are turned off by that tactic. Learn how to motivate each individual child. Develop your younger players. Do NOT leave them sitting on the sideline while the rest of the team scrimmages. Keep them busy. Assign a coach to work with them. These are your players next year. Try not to lose them. Also line up mid-week JV games with other teams for them. They absolutely love this.

Also have a backup plan if your superstar player gets hurt. Trust me, he will. If you have no backup offense that you've practiced, the kids will be disoriented and have no confidence in what you're scrambling to do right now. I actually have practice time for "if Johnny gets hurt here's what we're going to do". Then we rep plays without Johnny in the lineup. This has saved my bacon more than once.

### **Offensive Strategies**

Now that you've adapted your schemes to fit your kids, be smart in your choice of plays. Pick 4-5 that you're going to run very well and rep them to death. Pick what play you think will be your strongest and let the kids know that we are hanging our hat on that one. If it's 3<sup>rd</sup> and 3, you'll be running this play. It might be an off-tackle power, it might be a fullback dive, it might be a tailback sweep. Whatever it is, get it perfected to where the kids have great faith in it. I would also say try to sequence it with some other plays to give them a similar look. Either pick a formation that you can run a lot of plays from or pick 3 or 4 formations and run the same 4-5 plays from them. First example, let's say you pick a power I offense. Run TB isolation, TB power, TB sweep, Fullback dive and FB power. Now to counter that, run HB crossbuck, Power pass and a bootleg pass/run option. Now mirror that to both sides and you have a very good youth offense. The defense isn't sure who's getting the ball because the backfield actions are similar on every play.

Now, the most important part. Have blocking rules for your linemen. It is more important for your line to know whom to block than how to block them. You can work their butts off on the boards or whatever blocking drills you want to but if they block the wrong guy, your play won't work. It's better to have someone get in the way of the right guy than to perfectly block the wrong guy. If he's in the way, that defender has to at least run around or over him. Your backs also need to know whom to block. There is nothing more frustrating than to watch lead backs go through a hole and block no one.

A common youth coaching error is to not put an emphasis on teaching the O-line. They work hours with the backs and just tell the linemen "Block the guy in front of you". Then these same coaches scream and yell at the line when the defense gets penetration and blows up a play. The coach will yell, "Why didn't you block that guy?" The lineman's response should be "Because **YOU** never taught me to". But they usually just put their head down and say, "I don't know". Don't be guilty of this. It's not the child's fault; it's yours for not teaching him. Don't ever yell at a kid for not accomplishing something that you never taught him. Coach these kids up. Believe it or not, your line is the heart and soul of your team.

### **Team Strategy**

From day one, get your kids to buy into the team concept. Preach that it is more important to get playing time than to worry about what position they're playing. You need to play your 11 best at one time. I do not want a backup RB sitting on the sidelines if he's a better guard than the one I have in there. Have a talk with these kids and let them know that if they're willing to play line, they'll get more playing time. Playing time is the reward for hard work, hustle and talent. I do not let kids "try out" for a certain position. I tell them where we need them. If they're not willing to go along with it, then they can hand in their pads. I have only ever lost 1 child over this policy. He (his parent actually) felt that he had "paid his dues" as a younger player and now it was his turn to run the ball. I didn't agree.

I hear people complain that the boys just didn't come to play today or our kids are up one game and down another. I really feel that my boys play at one level all of the time. The way to achieve this is with practice intensity simulating game intensity. We never let a kid go uncoached. If he does it wrong, we tell him. If he does it right, we praise him. We don't let poor form go uncorrected just because we don't feel like doing it right then. No matter the drill, we work it hard to get it right. Practice does **not** make perfect. **Perfect practice makes perfect.** I also will always practice the day before a game. If you do not, the kids will many times take until the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter to wake up and start playing. By then it may be too late.

## Defensive Strategies

You've developed your own ideas about defense and now you're adapting them to fit your talent. If you have a lot of speed and athletic ability, you might want to choose either a D that uses a lot of LBs and have them fly to the ball such as a 4-3 or you might choose a 4-6 and pressure everything the offense does and play man-to-man in the pass. If you have much fewer LB/DB types, you might go to a 6-2 and teach your kids to fill a specific gap and play a 3 deep zone behind it.

I personally am a bend but don't break kind of guy. I set my defense to stop big plays. My base defense is a 5-2 gap control rover. My philosophy is that most youth offenses don't have the patience or discipline to drive the length of the field running between the tackles. They will usually fumble the ball or get a penalty called on them to stop their own drive. If they do have the patience and discipline, I'll mix in a few blitzes to screw up their blocking and stop them short. Most youth teams will try to hit a big play with a sweep or a pass. Following this mentality, I put some of my best players at CB and DE to stop the sweeps. The sweeps are obviously the biggest plays in youth football. We drill our guys with a sweep specific drill so that they know their assignments inside out. They know what shoulder to take the blocks on with and where their buddies are to help them out. I'll also use talent at rover and ILB. If I had talent left after that, it would be nice to have a good nose and some down tackles but usually we sub at those positions to get our minimum plays in.

Just like offense, teach your kids their responsibilities and how it relates to their buddies' responsibilities on the defense. Besides the sweep drill, I highly recommend a pursuit angle drill because I see a lot of youth defenses with terrible pursuit angles.

## Special Teams

Know your league specific rules pertaining to special teams. That needs to be part of how you teach them. I have some personal observations and philosophies about special teams in youth ball. I'll relate them to you and you decide if you want to use them.

Punts: If I can't gain at least 15 yards on a punt, then I never will punt. Last year we punted twice the whole year. We practiced it every week but almost never used it. Also, I **won't** punt to your deep man. I'm not an idiot. You put him back there because he's your best open field runner. You're going to give him the ball 20+ times on offense. I am **not** going to add to his number of carries for the day. We will always kick to the sidelines to avoid him. Next, when I try out punters, I won't choose the kid who has a nice high punt with lots of hang time. I choose the one who has a line drive kick and the ball rolls 15 yards after it hits.

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Punt returns: I am going to try to block every punt you attempt. Most youth teams don't spend enough time getting good at blocking for the punt and we're going to exploit that. My deep guy knows that he will have no blocking set up for him if the ball comes to him and I have taught him how to handle the different situations.

Kickoffs: I have learned that in youth ball if you kick deep down the middle, the ball will almost always get returned to about the 40-50 yard line. Now this is not true if you have an exceptional kicker that can kick it high and put it inside their 20 but I rarely have that guy. So we kick on sides most of the time. We have about 4 different onside schemes. If we do kick deep, we put the ball on the left hash and kick it to the sidelines on that side to about the 35 yd. line. If it goes out of bounds there, great. That's where most teams will accept the ball anyway. If they pick it up and run with it, most kids are right handed and want to run that way. They have almost nowhere to go in that direction. If they cut to their left, it's unnatural for them and they won't be as good at it.

Kick returns: Drill your front line how to handle onside kicks. I teach my front line that there is an invisible glass window at the 50 that they're not allowed to break through. They are not allowed to cross the 50 to recover the ball. Lots of onside kick attempts don't go 10 yds. And your kids need to know that we will get that ball anyway. If the ball is kicked deep, my return team knows what number man they're supposed to block. We rarely get a ball kicked deep enough to worry about setting up a return.

### **Other Youth Specific Philosophies of Mine**

Don't challenge these young kids by building up your opponent. These youngsters don't have testosterone running through their veins like high schoolers and you'll just scare the piss out of them by doing this. If you tell them that the Hawks are big and bad and are going to hit them so hard, they'll teeth will hurt, they'll believe you and they are now scared to death of them. Build your own kids up. They already lack confidence. Why pile on top of that. Don't lie to them about the opponent. Tell them how what we are going to do is going to be better than what they are going to do. If they are going against a bigger kid, tell them, but also teach them how to handle him so that they have confidence in their abilities to handle the situation.

Also understand that these kids do not have an adult vocabulary. You have to talk to them in simple language. Many words that we consider as everyday stuff are over their heads.

I don't like to scrimmage very much amongst our own team. We spend most of our time learning the basics in teaching drills. We spend maybe 30-45 minutes per week scrimmaging, sometimes less. Also when you are scrimmaging 1<sup>st</sup> team vs. 2<sup>nd</sup> team you generally don't get a great idea of how things will work out anyway.

Have a practice plan. You don't have to follow it to the letter but if you at least have one, you have a starting point to accomplish something. Concentrate on the things you're not doing well. Include the others but don't give them as much time.

Teach the basics. Proper tackling form, proper blocking form. Rep these with drills specific to them. Perfect form on shields, bags, etc. before going live. Do not go away from basics late in the season. This is the stuff that made you good, stick with it.

We tackle and block live. I believe that the younger your kids are, the more contact they need. Little kids do not understand how hard they can hit until they've experienced it numerous times. They gain confidence with the reps and at the younger ages, they are less likely to be injured in contact. As they age, they need less contact but I never go completely away from it. Be careful tackling live to the ground as this is when you are most likely to twist somebody to the ground and cause injury. I have a quick whistle in these drills and stop it when I see the potential for injury.

Make your conditioning drills fun. As an example, we may line 4 footballs up spaced 10-15 yards apart. Rep an offensive play and sprint to the next ball and run the play over. You can yell a play change but keep them moving. After the last ball, turn around and come back. You're learning and conditioning. I also use defensive pursuit drills to condition. Deerhunter is a good game for conditioning. I'm not very politically correct, neither is dodgeball and Deerhunter is a version of dodgeball.

Be insatiable about learning. Don't think you know it all already. You don't! No one does. Learn from every source possible. Other coaches, books, internet. The more I learn, the more I realize I don't know.

### **Picking Assistant Coaches**

Don't pick some one just because they "know football". It's my experience that these guys are the most likely to backstab the head coach and undermine his authority. I tell my prospective assistants that if they are not going to get on board with my way of doing things, they can get in the stands and bitch with the rest of them. I would rather have novice coaches that admit to it and are

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willing to learn your way. Also they have to be committed to coaching all of the kids. I do not want you out there just so you can get a better view of your own kid.

Have a pre-season meeting or meetings with your coaches and go over the stuff you'll be teaching. Listen to everybody's input but you don't have to use it all. They shouldn't be trying to learn it "on the job".

Don't put somebody in charge of your offense or defense if they are less qualified than your self. You'll be sorry you did. You can always promote them later if you trust them after learning more about how much they actually know.

If two coaches have a difference of opinion about how to do something, discuss it when the kids are not around. Every kid should get the same story from every coach. Do not argue or confront each other in front of the kids. They will lose confidence in their coaches.

Who is David Cottrill?

Youth coach at South Harrison for 22 years

9 years as an assistant and 13 years as a head coach

Head coaching record 86-40

5 Championship game appearances with 3 Championships

28-4 over the last 3 years

Phone 304-745-5378

Email: [rdcottrill61@verizon.net](mailto:rdcottrill61@verizon.net)

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