

Soccer Playing Philosophy: Ultimate Guide



Every Director of Coaching (DOC) wants to mould the club in their image. The most visible - and some would say valuable - way to do this is through developing a new playing philosophy.

Do you want your teams to build from the back and play through the thirds? Press the ball and hit fast on the counter attack? Baffle the opposition by encouraging creative freedom, or develop a rigid system in which everyone knows their role? These questions will be answered through the playing philosophy that you develop and implement, with the help of your coaching staff.

But there are plenty of potential speedbumps to consider along the way. Your coaches might be entrenched in a radically different system; your players may lack the fundamental skills required to deliver your vision on the pitch; environmental factors may make it difficult to play in a certain way.

Give your playing philosophy the best chance of long-term success by reading our ultimate guide.

Questions this eBook will answer:

What is a playing philosophy?

What factors should be considered when creating a playing philosophy?

What challenges are you likely to face along the way?

What happens when a playing philosophy doesn't achieve the desired results?

How can you ensure that your coaches are teaching the right philosophy?

What is the best way to communicate your philosophy to your coaches?

How do you assign coaches to the best age group for their skill set?



What is a coaching philosophy and why is it important to have one?

Without a central philosophy binding each age group of players together, you're left with a number of individual, siloed teams, with little in the way of shared skill sets or common knowledge. In short, your coaches will be starting afresh every time they take on a new player group, rather than continuing to build on the fundamentals they've already acquired.

But what is a coaching philosophy? Consider the following definition from Mark Guthrie, author of *Coaching Track & Field Successfully*:

“The coaching philosophy is the foundation of your programme; it not only guides you and your staff, but it also sets the stage for the athletes on your team. It leads them to assume responsibility for their own actions and decisions, and it encourages them to meet the expectations that affect them as individual athletes and as an entire team.”

In other words, your coaching philosophy is the glue that binds together all other sporting decisions, from matchday formation to coaching recruitment. It's a template for your coaching staff, and a set of expectations and behaviours for your players.

Important factors when implementing and developing a playing philosophy

As with many elements of the DOC role, a highly effective and deeply ingrained playing philosophy can't come solely from the top down. You'll need to account for a wide range of variables that will naturally differ from club to club. Read on for a breakdown of six crucial factors to consider when developing your club's playing philosophy.

Your club's reputation and heritage

From the elite level to the amateur game, a unique heritage and reputation develops around every club over time. Your playing philosophy stands a much better chance of succeeding if you take those traditions into account. Famous examples include:

Barcelona: "More than a club"

Coined by Narcís de Carreras before he assumed the club presidency in 1978, the term "more than a club" is now represented everywhere from the terraces of Camp Nou to the players' shirts. It speaks to Barça's reputation as a global symbol of Catalan culture. Today, it continues to reflect Barcelona's many non-sporting projects; the club donates €2 million a year to the charity UNICEF, while 85% of its Foundation's income is spent on social causes.

Manchester United: "The United Way"

The failure (perceived or otherwise) to play in "The United Way" has had a hand in the dismissal of several Manchester United managers, from Dave Sexton to David Moyes and even Jose Mourinho. Tellingly, when former players Ryan Giggs and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer were appointed as managers, both spoke of their desire to emphasise "The United Way". But what actually is it?

Sean Bones, vice-chairman of the Manchester United Supporters Trust, told the BBC: "We try to win games with style and flair. If you want to pigeon-hole it, it is two wingers, overlapping fullbacks and attacking midfielders - but, really, there is far more to it than that. It is almost a state of mind. We don't 'aspire' to be like anyone. We should be setting the example for everyone else in terms of how football should be played."



Your own barometers for success

As DOC, you're ultimately responsible for defining how success looks at your club or organisation. These barometers might look something like this:

- **Striving to give each and every player a fair amount of time on the pitch**
- **Implementing a game-plan that emphasises playing through the thirds of the pitch**
- **Providing wide-ranging experiences for players through different positions and formations**
- **Instilling a mentality of aiming to win, but not at all costs**

Outside of official objectives and metrics, you may also have your own “soft” means of measuring success, such as helping youngsters develop a lifelong passion for the game.

Whether official or unofficial, these barometers of success must be used to inform your playing philosophy; there's little point in emphasising creative expression if your own performance metrics are geared toward discipline and defensive stability, for instance.

Associated environmental factors

It might sound obvious, but it's easily forgotten when developing a playing philosophy: environmental conditions, both human and natural, have a huge impact on the way you learn and play the game. These factors inevitably mean that not every club can play in the same way. Ask yourself the following when working on your playing philosophy:

What facilities and resources are available?

Every DOC wants a bigger budget, with better training and playing facilities, but most are shrewd enough to know whether they're actually likely to get them. If there's little chance of significant improvements being made, you'll have to work with what you've got. The following examples will naturally place limitations on your playing philosophy:

The playing surface: A game-plan built around moving your opponents out of position through rapid, short passes is heavily reliant on a smooth playing surface.

The size of your pitches: A small playing area suits a more defensive approach, with less space for attacking players to exploit.

Lack of all-weather training facilities: If you're unable to train under certain conditions, you may need to adopt a simpler, more consistent game-plan.



Does the climate affect playing and training conditions?

The phrase “they can’t do it on a cold night in Stoke” has become a cliché in English football, used to suggest that a more glamorous team would struggle in harsh playing conditions against a physical opponent. As with many clichés, it has a grounding in truth - it’s undeniably harder to play an expansive attacking game in a howling gale or heavy downpour.

Likewise, the weather might impact your ability to train at certain times, or in certain ways:

- **Training facilities might become heavily waterlogged after a prolonged downpour**
- **The temperature might be too hot for pre-season training to take place outdoors**
- **Pitches could freeze up in winter, making playing or training impossible**

If you know that you’ll be faced with one or more of these challenges at certain times of the season (or all year round), you should account for this when developing your playing philosophy.

The skill set of your coaching staff

While the job of developing a playing philosophy largely falls on the DOC, the implementation of that philosophy is very much down to your individual coaches. Not all clubs have the resources to appoint an entire staff of highly skilled full-time coaches; you may find yourself working with a group of part-timers and enthusiastic amateurs. Do they have the time, skills and knowledge to take your philosophy and translate it into relevant training sessions?

If not, a more actionable philosophy - such as developing adaptable players by getting them used to different playing positions - may be preferable to something more abstract.

Whatever the skill set of your coaches, you can support them in bringing your philosophy to the training field by helping them develop season plans to inform their future sessions.



Challenges to consider when defining a club's playing philosophy

It's not always easy to create a new playing philosophy. Coaches and players may be used to a radically different game-plan, or may not have worked with a defined playing philosophy in the past. Read on to learn about the hazards of failing to properly implement a new playing philosophy, and some of the common challenges you should consider when defining it.

What happens when a playing philosophy fails?

From the Total Football approach that defined the great Dutch team of 1974 to the Gegenpress style made famous by Jürgen Klopp at Borussia Dortmund and Liverpool, clearly defined playing philosophies have underpinned the success of some of the world's best teams.

However, for every success comes a high-profile failure. Some of the most notable examples include:

Louis van Gaal at Manchester United

“We never stand still, we give youth a chance as we try and play attractive football,” then-interim manager and club legend Ryan Giggs told fans at Old Trafford on the final day of a disappointing 2013-14 season.

His permanent successor, former Barcelona and Bayern Munich boss Louis van Gaal, adopted an approach based not on attack-minded aggression, but instead on discipline, defence and controlling possession through measured build-up play.

With the Dutch manager at the helm, the club mustered just 49 league goals in 2015-16, their lowest total of the Premier League era. Van Gaal was sacked at the end of the season, just two days after winning the FA Cup.

Andre Villas-Boas at Chelsea

Arriving in London with a big reputation built on a stellar, undefeated debut season at Porto, Andre Villas-Boas moved swiftly to implement his progressive playing philosophy.

The Portuguese wanted an adaptable midfield to fit his preferred 4-1-2-3 system, in which either of the two non-holding midfielders could break forward at any minute, leaving the opposition unclear on who to mark and quickly outnumbered in defence.

Coupled with that, Villas-Boas cast off Salomon Kalou, Florent Malouda and Nicolas Anelka - all slow movers of the ball - in favour of faster, more direct players like Eduardo Vargas.

While it brought success in Portugal, this aggressive philosophy fell short in the more physical Premier League. In particular, Villas-Boas was unable to counter his team's frequent defensive lapses. He was sacked midway through his first season in charge.

Rémi Garde at Aston Villa

During his three seasons in charge at Lyon, Rémi Garde forged a reputation as a smart tactician with a penchant for developing young players and operating on a shoestring budget. He also succeeded in implementing a more creative, attacking style of play at the French club.

However, Garde's philosophy failed to translate to the English game - albeit with an Aston Villa side that was already languishing at the foot of the Premier League table when he took charge. He left the club by mutual consent just 147 days into his reign, with the Villans still in last place.

Challenges to overcome when defining a new playing philosophy

The above examples demonstrate what can happen when a new playing philosophy goes wrong. In each case, there were clear failures to overcome one or more of the following common challenges while the philosophy was being defined:

Are your coaches motivated and bought in?

While the DOC is responsible for defining a playing philosophy, the job of translating that philosophy to the training field is down to your coaches. Without their buy-in, your philosophy is doomed to failure before it even had a chance.

In the professional game, managers can pick and choose their coaching team, often bringing a whole backroom team with them. A DOC doesn't have that luxury. While you can recruit new talent (dependent on staffing budgets), you also need to work with what you've got. That means you need to motivate your existing coaches and get them onboard with your approach.

Do your coaches have suitable skill sets?

In a similar vein, it's important to consider whether your coaches have the ability to understand and implement a new playing philosophy. Are they sufficiently adaptable? After all, a coach may have operated with the same approach for their whole career.

Drawing on another example from the English game, generations of coaches cut their teeth on the classic 4-4-2 formation, famed for its rigid structure and simplicity. Many of those coaches were unable to modify their methods as overseas players and managers brought increasingly sophisticated tactical systems to the Premier League. Today, the basic 4-4-2 seems as outdated as Alf Ramsey's Wingless Wonders.

Do your coaches have the necessary resources?

Without the necessary tools, it can be all-but impossible to successfully implement some playing philosophies. Consider, for instance, the impracticality of coaching a tiki taka-style gameplan without a high-quality, smooth training pitch.

Similarly, your coaches need the resources to communicate a new philosophy to their players. They may also need support and inspiration in devising training sessions to teach the key tactical points of that philosophy. The Coaching Manual provides a full toolkit for your coaching staff, from cutting-edge software to full training sessions devised by professional coaches.

Are the players capable of adapting to a new approach?

Just as your coaches need to be up to the task, the players within your club must be intelligent and skilled enough to adapt to your new philosophy.

Tiki taka worked for a Barcelona side containing Lionel Messi, Andrés Iniesta and Xavi, but without their unparalleled ability to play accurate one-touch passes at a high tempo, the system would inevitably have failed.

Can you communicate the philosophy effectively?

For your playing philosophy to succeed, it needs to be adapted across each of your age-level teams. That way, when a player advances to the next age group, they're already well-versed in your playing system and ready to take the next step in their development.

Naturally, this means that the philosophy must be communicated throughout the club. Can you adapt it to meet the needs of everyone from senior coaches to young players?

People take in information in different ways and have different interests. An experienced coach wants to know the tactical intricacies of your new approach; a 15-year-old player needs to understand how it impacts their specific role in the team.



How to ensure your coaches are teaching the right playing philosophy

It's up to you to dictate how you want the players at your club, organisation or association to be coached, but you can't do this without communicating your playing philosophy to key stakeholders throughout the club.

Who needs to understand your philosophy?

Defining your coaching philosophy is one thing; ensuring it is implemented effectively is another. It's important to clearly communicate your philosophy to the following groups:

Your coaching team

If your coaches don't understand - or support - your playing philosophy, it's highly unlikely they'll give it the importance it deserves. In the worst-case scenario, they may ignore it completely.

Parents

Parents and guardians have a key role to play in providing emotional and moral support to your players, so it's important they understand the philosophy that underlies the decisions made by you and your coaching team. Consider holding a pre-season session to communicate your philosophy and set out your goals for the coming campaign. Take the time to field questions and address concerns. By getting buy-in up front, you're less likely to face pushback about granular details like playing time and tactics for individual matches down the line.

Examples of coaching philosophies

Plenty of coaches have fallen down by attempting to copy their heroes, mentors or role models. Adopting Sir Alex Ferguson's approach to man-management or Pep Guardiola's emphasis on a possession-based game might seem attractive, but your coaching philosophy must reflect your own values and beliefs about the game. If you don't truly, 100% believe your own philosophy, neither will your coach and players - and it'll fall apart under pressure.

That said, when formulating a philosophy, it can be useful to understand what's worked for other successful coaches in all sporting fields. Athlete Assessments has compiled a detailed list of examples; here are some of our favourites:

Mark Cole, Head Coach of Pakistan Women's Cricket

"My coaching philosophy is pretty basic: to have an environment that encourages athletes to learn and develop on and off the playing field, to create a positive learning environment in good and bad times."

Christine Davis, Varsity Tennis Coach at Smith College

"I believe in a coaching philosophy that is interlaced with 'grace' (unmerited favour). If team members embrace this concept, they end up coming alongside their teammates, being encouragers, offering forgiveness when necessary, helping teammates to succeed, and ultimately creating team success."

Grant Jones, Recruitment Manager at South Sydney Rabbitohs Rugby League

"The athlete needs to be given the opportunity to develop his/her skill level in a structured learning environment that constantly challenges the athlete whilst providing both encouragement and support. Each athlete needs to develop their core skills constantly to provide them with a solid base as they progress in their sport. The athlete will benefit when exposed to challenging drills that require effective decision making and precise execution under pressure. The repetitiveness of these varied drills during practice helps develop competency and confidence in the athlete."

Common challenges of implementing a coaching philosophy

Implementing your coaching philosophy can be difficult. Individual coaches have their own beliefs and ways of working; you may have to persuade them to change an approach that has brought them success over several years. Here are some common challenges, along with tips on how to overcome them:

Poor communication

If the DOC and their team fail to communicate effectively, implementing a coaching philosophy becomes all but impossible. It is likely to result in a lack of understanding and clarity around expectations.

When explaining your philosophy, remember that people take in information in different ways - some prefer to learn visually, while others favour hands-on experience. Consider utilising a combination of methods and tools to disperse your message, from detailed presentations to video explanations and practical workshops.

Focusing on short-term results

Individual coaches may be used to being judged on results. This system of evaluation favours short-term thinking and knee-jerk decisions, often at the expense of improving player performance for the long term.

Ensure your coaches understand that results are not the core metric by which you evaluate their performance. Any philosophy can take time to bed in, and it's important that your coaches know they won't be penalised for a run of poor results.

Lack of coaching buy-in

Some coaches won't have coached to a philosophy before. They might not see the need. It's relatively common for coaches to ask: "How will a philosophy help me tell people how to play the game?"

Encourage them to remember the reasons they took up coaching. Perhaps they have a son or daughter who loves to play soccer; perhaps they're simply keen to pass on their years of knowledge and enthusiasm. Whether they know it or not, these reasons will form the basis of their own coaching philosophies.

Make sure they understand that a philosophy, no matter how simple or complex, is ultimately designed to provide clarity when difficult decisions need to be made. It's not something to be scared or sceptical about.



Assigning coaches to the right age group

Some coaches are natural all-rounders; others thrive when teaching certain skills or working with specific age groups. As a DOC, it's up to you to retain and recruit the best coaches, and to ensure that those coaches are assigned to the best age group for their skill set, experience and coaching style.

What are the age groups in US soccer?

Age is used for segmenting players in the US. Ahead of the 2017-18 season, US Soccer amended its rules on age group registration to align with the start of the calendar year, rather than the academic year. For instance, in 2019, an under-15 (U15) player - i.e. players aged 15 or under - would be born from January 1st to December 31st 2004. These registration calendars apply to all age groups.

How does player development vary by age group?

Just as in the academic world, children develop at different speeds within the sporting arena. That's why we prefer to use broader age ranges - namely five to eight, nine to 12 and over-13 - for our session plans. It's possible to identify some common development characteristics within these wider groups:

Ages 5-8

At the younger end of the spectrum, there's a good chance that the kids won't have played soccer before (and even if they have, they most likely won't have been coached). They tend to have little interest in comparing their own soccer skills to those of their teammates - although don't be surprised to see a more competitive edge creep in among the older players in this group.

Ages 9-12

Players typically acquire a growing interest in competition - both with their teammates and opposing players - at this age level. Sport often becomes more important at these ages, fuelling the player's desire to master the basics of soccer, attract positive feedback from coaches, and have a positive outcome on matches.

Age 13+

By this point, players have mastered the basics, have developed a genuine passion for the game, and are eager to improve. They'll be increasingly aware of the tactical side of soccer - in fact, don't be surprised if their knowledge starts to challenge that of their coaches. At older ages, they may start to attend soccer camps and even adopt their own pre-season fitness drills.

How to identify the best coaches for different age groups

In some instances, the DOC may simply have a gut feeling that a coach would be best suited to working with a specific age group. However, it's more likely that assigning your coaches to different age levels will be a matter of assessing their qualifications, personality, experience and skills.

These are some of the key traits to look out for when it comes to coaching different age levels. A wide range of qualifications are available to age-level coaches, so for clarity, we've based the following guidance on the US Soccer Coaching Licence Pathway.

Coaching ages 5-8

Qualifications

The National F licence is a two-hour online course geared toward creating a fun, age-appropriate environment for five to eight-year-old players. Coaches learn best practice for working with younger players, including the importance of focusing on activity-centred sessions and playing in smaller groups (typically four-a-side).

Personality

Perhaps the biggest beneficial personality trait here is the ability to understand player limitations. This should ideally be accompanied by plenty of patience and good humour!

Experience and skill set

Players at this level are generally most interested in being with their friends and enjoying themselves. Coaches should, therefore, have a skill set geared toward making soccer training fun, while also teaching the basics of the game. The aim here is to instil a love of soccer that encourages kids to continue playing as they advance through the age levels.

Coaching ages 9-12

Qualifications

Combining field sessions and in-person lectures, the National E course is primarily geared toward teaching coaches how to work effectively with players aged between nine and 12. Coaches can register immediately after completing the F course.

Personality

Coaching in this age range requires bags of energy and enthusiasm to stimulate ideas in players. Coaches should also be adept at encouraging players and giving out praise when it's due (although not so much that it loses relevance or impact).

Experience and skill set

As players become increasingly competitive, the coach must be skilled in challenging them to improve while still ensuring that training remains a fun and positive environment. It's important that this competitive streak is leveraged in the right way. This requires a coach who is able to instil the principles of teamwork, rather than driving individual players to outshine their teammates.



Coaching ages 13+

Qualifications

Given the size of this player demographic, a range of relevant coaching qualifications apply. The National D licence is aimed at coaching 13 to 14-year-olds and can be registered for after a coach has held an E licence for six months. At National C level - designed for those leading training sessions in a competitive youth soccer environment - coaches can register once they have held the D licence for a year.

The minimum standard for US Soccer Development Academy coaches is National B, for which applicants must have worked with an 11-a-side youth team and held a C licence for at least 12 months. Finally, the National A Youth course focuses on the development of potential professionals. Coaches must have access to a team of elite youth players, and must have held a B licence for at least six months.

Personality

Players at this level start to develop their own methods and ideas about the game; they need a coach who can encourage and develop this independence. At the same time, the ability to play within a defined tactical system becomes increasingly important in older age levels, so the coach should also be able to instil a sense of discipline.

Experience and skill set

One-on-one communication skills take on greater importance when coaching early-teenagers. Not only are these players striving to improve their soccer skills, but they're also often struggling to identify who they are as people. The best coaches at this level are able to balance the time required for forming personal bonds with the need to continue challenging and developing their players.

As these players start to develop their own ideas about soccer, they'll need a coach with significant awareness and understanding of the game, as well as the ability to communicate their depth of experience in an articulate, unpatronising manner.

If you weren't before, then having read this eBook you should now be in no doubt as to the complexities of defining and implementing a new playing philosophy. Even by following the advice detailed throughout, there are no guarantees. The best-laid plans can unravel when confronted by the pressures of a sporting environment.

The important thing to remember is that a new playing philosophy takes time to yield success. As a DOC, you need to possess the belief in your vision to persevere when you inevitably hit problems, from poor results to disagreements among your coaching staff.

Trust your approach to the game. Give it the best chance of success by recruiting the right coaches, investing in the right areas, and communicating effectively with your staff and players.



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