

Your first session – 6 priorities

Getting the first practice right with a new team is critical, you have no relationship with them you do not know who or what they so on that basis here are the top 5 things I prioritize in my first practice.

#1 Learn Names

Don't coach a player up until you *at least* know their name. **People love hearing their own name they immediately pay attention**

And from a coaching standpoint, **it's hard to get someone's attention and coach them if you don't know their name!**

I aim to learn every player's name by the end of the first practice or sooner. (depending on squad size of course)

I have in the past done several of things:

1. Try and watch a session prior to my first session and in start working out who is who
2. Read the squad list and try and get their faces on teamo
3. Use a name game for me (and for them)
4. When working in the practice, **I use players names for feedback** and/or I ask them to remind me of their name.

#2 Establish Non-Negotiables

After the name game, I established my non-negotiables with the team.

Non-negotiables are critically important to your seasons success, they communicate clearly to the players what you need

from them at all times in order for them (and you) to be successful.

BUT it is much better if you get their answers to the following question:

"What do you need from me as your coach to be successful?"

I generally ask them to get into groups of 3/4 and come up with 3 items:

Their answers generally boil down to three things:

1. Tell us the truth
2. Challenge us
3. Support us

After they shared their answers with me, I shared my 3 non-negotiables with them:

1. **Attitude** – how you come to the practice, pay attention, listen
2. **Commitment** – do what you say you are going to do, be on time
3. **Effort** – try try and keep trying – be the best you can be

Each of the above (words) are then discussed in their groups to identify what they really mean.

The answers are then discussed and made clear to the team what non-negotiables look like in behaviors.

Consequences – the above are then translated into what will happen if they are not present and committed with the right amount of effort.

Establishing the non-negotiables is critical in the first practice **it sets the tone for the entire season and can help with session management and the elimination of negative**

behaviors.

#3: Explain the Practice Routines

Routines are essential for running efficient practices and creating a positive learning environment.

I emphasise that **these routines are important because it allows us to spend less time talking and more time playing**, which they all agreed they wanted to do.

In our first huddle I explain a few routines that the players need to be aware of:

There are several that I have:

1. **Water bottles** – take them with you
2. **On pitch pace** – move from exercise to exercise fast
3. **Bib up** – this is in situations where we have large groups and need to teamup the children quickly
4. **Half Circles** – when standing be in a semi circle around your coaches
5. **Stoppages** – the way we stop and talk (see below)
6. **Questioning** – types and ways we question (see below)

4: Explain Stoppages:

I also explain how they are given feedback which is in several different ways

1. **FREEZE** – stop *immediately* so that we can study something
2. **Individual** – they will get sideline so I can ask them questions and do a “hot-review”
3. **Group questioning** – which consists of **3 ways that I would like them to answer questions during our practices...**
 1. Cold Calling (calling on players randomly) this is not a “gotcha” but it’s important that they are all attentive and they all have things to

contribute.

2. Turn and Talk (talking to a peer)
3. Raising Hands (taking volunteers)

It is important **when I ask a question that they *do not shout out answers*.**

I also expect and it is perfectly **acceptable to answer a question incorrectly the intention is for US to figure out the answers together.**

Immediately after we re-start the session I look for opportunities to practice the routines and often stop practice for the primary purpose of establishing those routines, to be routines we must practice them frequently!

#5: Introduce Platform Games

Platform games are games or drills that I frequently modify easily by loading or unloading constraints.

Having a handful of core platform games is **important because it saves us time** (*we don't have to spend a lot of time explaining a new game or drill*) **and it reduces the load on your player's working memory** (*they don't have to spend mental energy trying to understand the new game or drill*).

In our first practice together, I introduced 3 core platform games that we will use throughout our season.

Once the squad has mastered the structure of your platform games, then you can begin to load in constraints to elicit the learning you want to happen, without needing to teach a whole new game

#6: Catch them Being Good

The final, and most important, thing to prioritize in your first practice is to *catch them being good*.

Praise the behaviors you told them at the beginning of practice you needed from them—your non-negotiables, as well as anything else you see a player do that is a strong behavior for the type of culture you want to build!

It's well documented in research that positive reinforcement can be a behavior change tool when used correctly and at the right ratio (most studies suggest a minimum of 4:1 positive to negative).

The most important thing to remember when we “catch them being good” is to make sure we are using **behavior-specific praise**.

It's exactly what it sounds like—**praising the specific behavior you want to see more of**.

For example, one of my non-negotiables is “effort,” and we defined what that looked like “trying in every moment and running everywhere”.

As soon as practice begins I look for players that are trying and displaying effort.

When someone does it I give them a “shoutout,” or an impromptu behavior-specific praise, **in front of the whole team**.

The benefit of this is when you start catching them being good, you have to do less correcting of unwanted behavior because when you praise player X for a specific behavior, players Y & Z take note and become more likely to exhibit that same behavior.

It's critical to give behavior-specific praise to the players for upholding our non-negotiables right from the very beginning.

Finally, at the end of practice we huddle up again, and we do 2 minutes of *celebrations*.

Celebrations are quick behavior-specific shoutouts to

athletes at the end of practice.

It's a powerful way to **ensure that we as coaches are praising our athletes *and* to give our athletes and opportunity to praise and celebrate one another.**

These celebrations **should reinforce your non-negotiables and core values**, and they should be **focused more on process**, than outcomes.

Usually I do the first practice and then I start rolling it out to be team wide – I open it up for the players to celebrate each other.

The more intentional we are about catching our athletes being good, the more likely it is that we'll be to create a special culture and positive experience.

Catch them being good as much as possible in the first practice!