

My View: Coaching with Cones

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Near my house, there's a wonderful park with two playgrounds and a pond with geese whom you shouldn't feed, because they get aggressive and chase toddlers in hopes of a handout. There's a meadow large enough to handle three soccer practices for young children.

Here come the coaches and the cones. Not a few cones for goalposts, but orange funnels everywhere. What will they do with them?

The 6-year-olds arrive and provide an answer. Megaphones. Put your mouth at the narrow end and howl. And hats. See the little coneheads scamper. But that's not what they're really for. Let the overcoaching begin.

The coaches start directing the kids to line up behind that cone, run to that one, slalom between those, and so on.

One coach has a whistle around his neck and a clipboard. What could be on that clipboard? A practice plan in case he forgets what he's doing this afternoon? Notes on the 6-year-olds' progress?

The children, as they wait in line to navigate the cones, fiddle with their shinguards, wrestle or gaze at the pond. When they take their turn, most are befuddled by the drill.

Perhaps novice American coaches embrace intricate training schemes because traditional American sports often require coaches to choreograph much of what players do. Or do coaches believe that if it's not complicated, it can't be effective?

At last year's NSCAA convention, a couple of coaches told me they were disappointed in a "clinic" given by Aime Jacquet. They said it was "so basic" and he didn't do "anything special."

Jacquet coached France to the 1998 World Cup title and oversees France's amazingly successful youth player development program.

Bruce Arena, at the height of his success with entertaining, dominating Virginia, was asked about his practice sessions. The secret he revealed: "We spend a lot of time practicing playing soccer."

What a relief when the coaches at my park finally let the kids play. But they had reduced the game into a reward for putting up with all the cone nonsense.

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