



The Need for a Mistake Ritual

by Tina Syer

When one of your players takes a shot and kicks the ball wide or over the crossbar, where does he or she look first? Depending on the age of the player, the first glance is often to the coach or parents. What does the player see from these adults? In a humbling experience, I had the chance to see my own coaching behavior caught on tape. My players would make a bad pass, or miss a tackle, and my hand would immediately go to my forehead, with my thumb massaging my cheekbone. It looked like I was in pain!

When I started working for Positive Coaching Alliance, a nonprofit based at Stanford University, I thought I was doing pretty well on the sidelines. I did not yell at my players, and I certainly never threw my clipboard. What the video made me realize was that I was sending powerful nonverbal messages to my players, and I had not even known it. (Note: If you're brave enough, videotape yourself while you coach a game. It will give you great insights into your coaching.)

Every practice I told my players that mistakes were OK, and it was how we reacted to them that really mattered. So, what was my body language telling my players during games? My players and I needed a tool to help us bounce back from mistakes, so we adopted "The Flush." The flush involves making a fist with one hand, putting your fist in the air, and bending your elbow to bring your fist down. With this flushing motion, the mistake is flushed away, and players can now focus on moving forward. Players can use the flush themselves; they can signal the flush to a teammate; and coaches can use it when they might feel like rubbing their forehead or slamming their clipboard against their leg.

Think about a player who has just missed an open shot. If she doesn't have a mistake ritual and lets the miss play over and over in her head, what will happen the next time she has a shot? She will likely be tight and miss again, or she may be so afraid of failing again that she doesn't take the shot and opts to pass. Coaches need to give players a tool to process mistakes, which allows them to push themselves to the next level. Introduce the flush to your players at your next practice!

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