



Correcting an “I” Attitude

This resource stems from a question submitted to the Ask PCA blog. Responses come from our experts including PCA Trainers, who lead live group workshops for coaches, parents, administrators and student-athletes.

“As a parent and coach of girls ages 10-14, I have a question regarding ‘I’ attitude. All of a sudden this year, the more competitive the girls get, the ‘I’ attitude comes out. The majority of these girls are very good friends off the field. Some of us parents have spoken about this issue and agree it needs to be addressed, before they lose the concept of team. They are all very skilled, and instead of encouraging each other they are competing with each other. How can I transform this situation?”

PCA Response by Joe Scally, PCA Trainer-Chicago

The “I” attitude you are observing may be traced to a lot of potential sources: parents’ attitudes, pressure to excel, previous coaches’ methods, a girl’s personality, situations at school or home, and so on. For some of the girls in the age group you are coaching, an “I” attitude is developmentally predictable and appropriate in many settings. The point is that you may never be able to identify the source of the “I” attitude, nor is it necessary to address every variable that might contribute to it. Additionally, you won’t eradicate an “I” attitude in certain players nor would that necessarily be desirable. For some players it is developmentally appropriate for them to explore an “I” attitude on or off the field to find the right balance for themselves. In addition, teams need players who have found this balance and are willing to assert themselves.

Rather, it is important that you work to instill a team-oriented approach that all of the players are expected to work toward. This will help reduce the negative impact of an “I” attitude on the team’s play. More importantly, you will teach your players life lessons about the importance of contributing to a team and ways to do that. Some will learn these lessons more quickly than others. Keep in mind that it is a process that will continue for all of them for many years. Take satisfaction when your players put team first and anticipate that there will be ups and downs

The “I” attitude may be expressed through “selfish” play, e.g. hogging the ball or not contributing to team defense. As the coach, you must assess whether any of a seeming “I” attitude is due instead to lack of skill, knowledge, or conditioning and help the player make appropriate corrections. For instance, a player may hog the ball because she lacks confidence in her passing, has poor field vision, or misunderstands her role. She may fail to get back on defense because she is out of shape.

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Girls at the older end of the age bracket you mention may exhibit “selfish” play because they are feeling pressure to make the high school team, move to the “next level” of a club team, or get in line for a college scholarship. They mistakenly believe that being the “star” may help them. You can let these players know that coaches prize players who are what we call Triple-Impact Competitors. Triple-Impact Competitors work to make themselves, their teammates, and the game better. They are not always the goal scorers, but they are the leaders who consistently do the hard work required for a team to be successful. Bring in a high school or college coach to give the girls this message.

An “I” attitude may also be expressed, among other ways, through put-downs, failure to encourage teammates or acknowledge their effort, harsh criticism of mistakes, or entitled expectations about playing time or position. On the other hand, Triple-Impact Competitors build up their teammates. Help your players learn how to do this by teaching and modeling a positive approach. They will experience how truthful and specific praise, encouragement, trust, and confidence in teammates lift the level of everyone’s play. Recognize and reward the players who demonstrate a team attitude when they pass the ball, hustle for 50/50 balls, high-five a teammate, switch positions, or encourage a teammate to bounce back from a mistake.

Identify an important role for each player on the team and help her succeed at it. For instance, teach the player who is always launching the ball from 30 yards, with infrequent success, to carry the ball to the end line so she can pass back to a teammate in the box or win a corner kick. Encourage another player to shoot more often. Yet another player will contribute to the team by being able to sub at several positions. Acknowledge the effort and sacrifice the players are making to help the team. Distribute playing time and assign positions, within the rules of your league, based on fair, open competition and an assessment of how each player can best help the team.

Try some team-building exercises. One that works well is the buddy system. Pair up players and make them responsible for encouraging, praising, and recognizing the effort and achievement of each other during a drill or scrimmage. They can choose their own partner or you can pair them in some way: older with younger, skilled with less skilled, by position, etc. Change the pairings so each girl works with a variety of others. Check frequently to make sure the players are building each other up. Emphasize that it is a team expectation that players do this.

PCA Trainer Joe Scally is a longtime soccer coach based in the Chicago area. Joe spent several years as PCA’s national director of training.

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