

A STRAIGHT FORWARD, EFFECTIVE GUIDE  
TO GETTING THE BEST OUT OF YOUR PLAYERS

# YOUTH SOCCER COACH



written by ***Paul Spacey***

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## INTRODUCTION

*"Soccer is simple. But it is difficult to play simple." – Johan Cruyff (Dutch Soccer Legend)*

**I agree with the first part of Cruyff's statement but I don't agree with the second part; I believe it is EASY to play 'simple soccer'. Perhaps more importantly, playing 'simple' actually turns out to be the most effective way of playing the game in my opinion, certainly for youth teams.**

In this book, you will learn how to coach your players in a simple, easy to understand but extremely effective way. The ideas and advice contained in the following chapters are straight forward, to the point and will ensure you become a much better soccer coach.

You might be just starting out as a new soccer coach or you may already have been involved in the game for some time; either way, you will be able to take a lot away from this book and implement it immediately to improve your team. More importantly, you will be able to improve your individual players which has to be the number one goal for all youth soccer coaches.

I have intentionally kept the book relatively brief (20 pages) and not included pointless content to fill space. All of the advice and information is directly targeted at improving your coaching skills which will consequently improve your players and your team.

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*This book is dedicated to my parents, Peter & Sandra Spacey. My dad is the reason I grew up to be a soccer player, coach and referee. His input was vital in my soccer development (he was actually my coach for many years as a kid) and his conduct off the field as a parent has always been just inspirational. Many of the methods and ideas in this book are the result of advice and coaching from my dad throughout my life. My mum remains a constant source of love and guidance, everything you could ask for and more. Their enduring relationship is something to be proud of and I am certainly very proud to have them as my parents.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Paul Spacey and I come from a family of soccer players.

My grandfather was a professional and my father was a semi-professional so I began playing the game at a young age (as soon as I could walk actually).

I played for Stoke City (now in the English Premier League) as a teenager but had a couple of injuries and ended up missing out on becoming a pro. However, I did still enjoy a successful 15 year semi-professional career at a very good level of soccer.

I stopped playing competitively in January 2013 (although I still play recreationally) before moving from England to California where I now divide my time between coaching and refereeing.

I have been a qualified US Soccer and English FA Referee for 4 years so I have a fairly unique perspective on the game having been involved as a **player, coach and referee** (not too many people can say that!)

My goal is simple; to give you the advice and tools you need to be the best youth coach possible.

Let's get started!

Paul

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# CONTENTS

(click the links to go straight to each page)

<b>PRACTICE / TRAINING</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<a href="#">Small sided games</a> .....	6
<a href="#">Shrink the space</a> .....	7
<b>TEAM STYLE</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<a href="#">Pass, pass, pass</a> .....	8
<b>APPROACH TO GAMES</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<a href="#">High pressure</a> .....	9
<b>THROW INS TO FEET</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<a href="#">Why they are so important</a> .....	10
<b>IN-GAME TALKING</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<a href="#">Encouragement only</a> .....	11
<b>MATCH OFFICIALS</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<a href="#">Get them on your side</a> .....	13
<b>PLAYING POSITIONS</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<a href="#">Rotate often</a> .....	15
<b>WIN AT ALL COSTS</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<a href="#">Do not adopt this approach</a> .....	16
<b>PLAYER ADVICE</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<a href="#">Nuggets of advice for your players</a> .....	18
<a href="#">Movement for teammates</a> .....	19
<b>NEVER STOP LEARNING</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<a href="#">Contact me</a> .....	20

## **PRACTICE / TRAINING – Small sided games**

There are plenty of ideas on the website I co-designed with Rowan Wikohika. Visit [www.parentsoccercoach.info](http://www.parentsoccercoach.info) for ideas on specific skills to use in practice/training.

The following practice layout/method is something you should follow for most practices with small-sided games/scrimmage forming the majority of your practice/training session time.

After a short warm up, split your players into groups of 3 (try to split them evenly so that all groups have a similar mix of stronger and weaker players). Put the teams in different coloured bibs.

### **Goalkeeper**

If you have a dedicated goalkeeper, your assistant coach can work with them or you can include them in the 3v3 to improve their outfield skills.

### **3v3 setup**

- Setup areas of approx. 20x25 yards with marker cones and have 2 teams in each area playing against each other for 10 minutes.
- Every 10 minutes (you can adjust this time to 5 minutes if necessary), rotate teams so that they play against different opponents.
- There are no 'goals' but teams receive a point when they make 5 passes in a row without the ball being intercepted by their opponents.

### **Touch limitations**

Periodically rotate between unlimited touches and 3-touch limitation. The touch limitation is difficult, especially for younger kids, but the benefit is that it forces them to think quickly and prevents them from keeping the ball for more than a few seconds. I played 3-touch and even 2-touch in practice from age 8 onwards and it played a big part in my development as a player; I have no doubt about that so I advocate it as part of almost every practice and so should you.

### **Coaching points to focus on**

*Movement* - Continually press home the importance of moving into space when your players don't have the ball to give options to team mates.

*Relaxing* - Players do tend to panic in situations where they are in small areas with lots of players or have touch limitations. Encourage your players not to worry about messing up or losing the ball; they need to get used to being relaxed and comfortable when they receive a pass and not rushing to kick the ball away. Making mistakes is ok and you should make a point of saying this to your players. They learn from making mistakes; therefore 'mistakes' should almost be encouraged!

It should be a **simple process** that you coach to help your players relax on the ball:

take a touch (or two) to control;

look up to see a team mate;

make a pass.

*Communication* - Getting your players to talk to each other can be difficult. However, you need to press home the point and encourage them to talk as much as possible, letting team mates know when they are "open". Encourage your players to use indications like "behind you", "pass left" and "time" if they have space with no opponents around them.

### **30-40 minutes of 3v3**

Allow your players to play 3v3 for around 30-40 minutes (include water breaks of course) and stop after each 10 minute game to offer advice and points to focus on for the next game.

### **Scrimmage / game – 40 minutes approx**

After the 3v3 games, split the group into two teams, evenly matched again with stronger and weaker players. Setup a full scrimmage/game on a larger area of approx 40x50 yards, depending how many players you have. It is likely that you will end up with a 6v6, 7v7 or 8v8. Make sure you keep the space relatively tight so that your players do not have too much room and have to pass and move quickly to keep possession.

If you have two goalkeepers, use goals & keepers for the scrimmage. If not, use marker cones for goals at each end. Play for 10 minutes at a time, stopping to offer advice and specific coaching points after each 10 minute spell. Change players around on different teams if necessary to keep the game close and the teams evenly matched.

Play for around 40 minutes in total then sit down and point out POSITIVES your players did well and also a couple of specifics they can work on improving (communication for example).

## **PRACTICE / TRAINING – Shrink the space**

Not too many grass roots teams are afforded huge spaces to practice/train but that can actually be a good thing. Shrinking your soccer practice space will help improve your players, no question about that.

### **Increases number of touches on the ball (repetitions)**

Most coaches know that developing players' skill and technique is closely related to the number of touches/repetitions they get in practice. Make your practice space small and the players will get more touches on the ball. It is a simple concept but often ignored in favour of larger spaces or even full-size games during practice.

### **Quick thinking for your players**

If the space is small and tight, your players will have to react urgently to deal with what Daniel Coyle calls 'struggle-filled crises' in *The Little Book Of Talent*, a great read for coaches. Have your team play 'keepaway' with 1 or 2 defenders and everyone else passing to keep the ball, or split them into two groups and do the same thing if you have more than 10 players at practice. Increase the number of defenders to make it more difficult and force your players to think and react even quicker.

I did most of my practice/playing in a small indoor 5-a-side hall growing up (I actually played with adults and more than 5 on each team, sometimes up to 8) and you literally had about half a second to react every single time you got the ball. I soon learned the art of quick passing and good movement. I believe small-sided games, futsal and 5-a-side soccer are some of the best ways to improve your players' technique, skill and quick-thinking.

### **Focused practice**

Sometimes, in larger spaces, it is easier for players to 'hide' in practice (and games) or lose focus. When the space is small it gives you chance to keep a close eye on everything that is going on. Players will be focused on the goal (whether that is an actual goal to score in or just a goal of keeping possession for example) and are more likely to work harder and smarter with you overseeing them from close-quarters.

## **TEAM STYLE – Pass, pass pass!**

I know, you want to win games and you want your players to kick the ball as far into the opponents' half as possible, away from your own goal. Why pass the ball short when your players can kick it long?

Playing long balls is unattractive and definitely not entertaining but more importantly, your players will not 'enjoy' playing this way because it limits their touches on the ball and involvement in the game. It also stifles their development which should be your primary focus; yes, their development is more important than you winning games as a coach!

### **Long balls don't work anyway**

You may have a really strong player in defence who can kick the ball long to the other end of the field; however is this helping his/her development by simply smashing the ball as far as they can every time they get it? No, of course not.

This method might work short term against teams of lesser ability but when you come up against better teams, the long ball game just doesn't work. They will quickly work out your strategy and intercept long balls comfortably; then all you are doing is basically giving back possession to the other team almost every time your players kick it long.

### **Passing is the way forward**

By encouraging your players to pass the ball, you are simultaneously speeding their development (by getting them more touches on the ball) and improving your team overall which actually gives you a better chance of winning games.

Long passing might create the odd chance and win you a few games; teaching your players to pass the ball short and quickly move into space, focusing on possession, will give them the chance to win games against **any** team they face.

Ask any young player what they enjoy more; smashing the ball long and chasing it or passing between teammates and getting lots of touches on the ball. It's an easy answer.

Encourage your players to pass, pass, pass and move, move, move. Those two words should form the basis of most of your practices and games. *Pass and move!*

## **APPROACH TO GAMES – High pressure**

There are so many different approaches and tactics/strategies you can use that it becomes confusing for many beginner coaches (and sometimes experienced ones too). Soccer is a simple game and youth tactics should reflect this; a simple but extremely effective approach to games is to use the 'high pressure' method. This, quite simply, involves pressuring the opposition high up the field in their half with your players aiming to win back possession as quickly as possible.

### **Scoring opportunities**

Let's face it; every coach wants to see their team scoring more goals. The high pressure approach will automatically get you more scoring opportunities because when your players win back possession, they will invariably already be in your opponents' half of the field.

### **Collective team pressure**

Putting pressure on the opposing team high up the field cannot be done by just one or two of your players, it needs to be the whole team who move upfield as a unit and pressure the opposition players in small groups.

### **Why it works**

The reason this method (which is something Bayern Munich used to great effect when crushing Barcelona 7-0 over two Champions League games last season) works so well is that it prevents the opposition from building any meaningful attacking moves and forces them to pass under great pressure, often resulting in your team winning the ball back. Because your team pressure the opposition high up the field, when you win the ball back you are already close to the opponents' goal, giving your players a better chance of quickly creating chances.

### **Most players cannot keep the ball under pressure**

Even professionals struggle to keep the ball when put under pressure so for young players it is extremely difficult. If your players go and put pressure on the opposition by not giving any time and space to pass the ball, invariably the opposition will give the ball back to you.

It is something you have to work on in practice and playing small-sided games in tight areas of space is the perfect way to get your players used to this method.

## **THROW INS TO FEET – Why they are so important**

One of the things I find most frustrating when watching youth soccer is coaches screaming at players to “throw it as far as you can” or “throw it long” as opposed to throwing it to a teammates’ feet.

Here are the reasons why throw-ins to feet are important and why you should encourage your players to throw to feet at all times, unless on the odd occasion there is a quick breakaway available by throwing into space.

### **Your players will find it easier to control**

If your players throw the ball to their teammates’ feet, it is easier for them to control as most young players have better ball control with their feet than their thighs, chest or head. Explain this to your players and encourage them to make it as easy as possible for teammates to control the ball and get an attack going.

### **Your team are much more likely to retain possession**

A throw-in to feet gives the receiving player chance to control the ball and turn, control it and pass back to the thrower or simply pass it straight back first time. All of those outcomes result in your team ultimately keeping possession of the ball and quickly moving onto the attack.

### **Throwing it as far as possible is the easy, hopeful way out**

Throwing the ball long is often just a ‘sling’ in the hope that the ball finds a teammate. I’m not saying the long throw can’t be effective in the right areas of the field; a long throw near to the opponents’ penalty area can cause problems for the defence. However, you should be encouraging your players to think about a quick throw-in to feet as often as possible; this is the easiest and most effective way to get the ball back into play and keep possession.

### **Coaching throw-ins**

Encourage your players to move away from the thrower, then dart back into space and receive the throw-in to feet. Your players can work on this in practice. The idea of initially moving away from the thrower is pretty straight forward; take away the marker/defender before going back into the empty space to receive a throw in without too much pressure.

## **IN-GAME TALKING – Encouragement only**

It is tempting to shout instructions to your players constantly during the game but this is something that actually does more harm than good. Your focus should be on observing your players, taking notes of things they can improve on and offering simple words of encouragement periodically.

### **Don't scream and shout at your players during the game**

In case you didn't already know; players generally don't hear what you are saying as they are focused on the game. When they do hear you, most of the time they will ignore you anyway.

Your shouting and screaming will actually put them off. Just let them play and make notes on anything you need to discuss with them during half time or at the end of each quarter.

### **Your players will never respond well to criticism**

I don't think I have ever seen a young player respond positively to being criticised by his coach from the sideline. The opposite usually happens; the player sulks or gets even more agitated/nervous and simply doesn't do his/her job to help the team.

DO NOT, under any circumstances, criticise any of your players from the sideline. If there is something you want them to improve, make a note of it and speak to the whole team during half time. Be positive and encouraging to your players; "Great first half boys, you worked really hard. We just need to work a bit more on not giving possession away so easily, look for the simple pass whenever you can."

### **Let your players have an input**

Encourage your players to have an input during half-time team talks. Ask them if there is anything they think they can improve on. Players usually respond positively when they are given chance to have their say and feel as though they have an input on the way the team plays.

Forget the fact that they are young players; quite often you will find one of them comes up with something simple but important that you haven't even thought about.

## **MATCH OFFICIALS – Get them on your side**

Ok, referees are impartial (or at least they should be) so you can't exactly get them on 'your side', however there are a few things you can do to make it more likely that your team get more of the 50/50 decisions.

### **Never directly abuse the referee, no matter how bad their decisions are**

It is completely pointless. Not only is there zero chance of the referee changing their mind but they are very likely to hold this against you when the next 50/50 decision is made. Yes, referees should remain completely impartial and base their decisions on the action on the field, however the reality is that they are only human and if you have screamed in their face 5 minutes earlier and are now calling for a 50/50 decision, chances are it will go to the other team as the referee makes a split second decision with your abuse still fresh in their mind.

If the referee makes a call which you know is clearly incorrect, tell your players to get on with the game and forget it. At half time or an interval, you can mention it to the referee. Something simple along the lines of, "Sir, that was a clear handball when they scored the goal, I know you couldn't see it though from your angle so I understand why you didn't make the call, no hard feelings. Give us the next handball decision please!"

The referee will likely realise he made the mistake and your credibility will be increased the next time you call for a decision.

### **Thank the referee when they make a good call**

This is very simple but very effective. Don't be sarcastic or shout "thanks sir" after every single decision but when the referee makes a close call on a 50/50 or what you might consider a big decision, a sincere "good call sir" or "thanks ref, good decision" goes a long way.

Everyone has a desire to receive praise, even referees, so massage their ego (yes, referees also have an ego) without being over the top or condescending. Even if it doesn't directly benefit you during the game (although it is likely that it will), chances are when the referee officiates one of your games later in the season they will remember your praise and you will benefit then.

**Do not assume you know the rules (laws) better than the referee; chances are you really don't so just let the referee get on with their job.**

All referees have to go through training and reach a required level of competency to qualify as an official. You may have played or coached the game for many years and believe you know better than the referee; however this is invariably not the case in my experience.

Unless you have studied the laws of the game then it is extremely likely that you don't fully understand many of the common fouls and infringements that you regularly scream at the referee for! I played semi-professionally for 15 years and thought I knew the rules perfectly; how wrong I was when I took my referee exam (I ended up getting 99/100 on the test paper but only after literally hours of study made me realise I didn't fully understand around half of the rules!)

**Your players will be negatively influenced if they hear you abusing the referee**

Trust me; you look foolish in front of your players every time you scream at the referee. Young players are easily influenced and don't need to hear you telling the referee he is a "jerk" or "clueless", otherwise they will think it is ok (and it really isn't).

Don't shout at or abuse the opposing coach either; nobody wants to see a red-faced coach screaming at the top of his voice across the field at his opposite number. Have some respect and be a bigger man (or woman).

Do your job as a coach; look after your players, encourage them and ensure they also respect the referee. Then let the referee do his job and apply the laws of the game.

## **PLAYING POSITIONS – Rotate often**

Young players should play in different positions as they are growing up. Some are happy to do so while others offer resistance along with their parents; “My boy only plays striker so please don’t put him into midfield”.

As a coach, you should consider the following benefits and use them to explain to parents if they are offering resistance to their child playing in different positions:

### **Better understanding of teammates’ roles**

If a striker is moved into defence for example, he or she can better understand the problems and difficulties that defenders face every time they play. The striker may feel that defenders are not getting the ball forward quickly enough to them; by playing in the position they will likely realise it is not that easy to make long, accurate passes from defence to the forwards.

### **Improvement in their own skills**

Your defenders concentrate mainly on marking the opposing forwards and clearing the ball away from danger. Move your defenders into the strikers’ position for a game and they suddenly have new aspects to focus on; movement off the ball, finding space, beating other players and shooting on goal.

This can only benefit your young players as it will help to improve their overall game; further, if they are playing defence during the next match and find themselves surging forward with a chance on goal, they are more likely to be calmer and not panic if they have played as a striker and experienced shooting under pressure.

### **More playing time on the field**

If a player is able to play in different positions, they are likely to get more time on the field, particularly in the younger age groups. A player might play the first two quarters of the game as a striker and then sit on the bench for the next two quarters to give the other strikers chance to play. However, if they are able to play in midfield or even defence, as a coach you can give them more playing time. Let’s face it, most parents want their kid to have as much playing time as possible so they will likely be receptive to playing in another position if it means more time on the field.

As the coach, it is ultimately your responsibility to decide who plays where. You should encourage players to be enthusiastic about playing in different positions and explain the benefits to them so they realise that it is actually a good thing to try out new positions.

If players (or parents) are absolutely dead-set against playing different positions, don't force them to do so. Any kid who is **forced** to play in a certain position that they desperately don't want to play, will end up being a hindrance to themselves and to your team. You would be better off either leaving them in their desired position or dropping them to the bench.

Encourage your players to enjoy the responsibilities that different positions demand; there is no question that they will improve their overall game by experiencing various positions on the field.

## **WIN AT ALL COSTS – Do not adopt this approach**

As the coach, you have to win at all costs, right?

Well, no, not really. Not if you put your players first. Unfortunately we are all sometimes guilty of putting ourselves first and wanting to 'look good' as a coach by winning games. However, this is ignorant of the fact that our number one priority should be helping our players to develop, without the worry of winning at all costs hanging over them.

### **Player Development**

Grass roots youth soccer should be primarily about player development. You should be coaching your players to enjoy the game and fall in love with it; then they will actually want to practice more and improve. Do not focus solely on trying to win matches and ignoring the fact that your individual players may not benefit and develop even when winning, if they are not being taught the fundamentals like passing, ball control, movement, communication and working together as a team.

### **It's ok to dislike losing but make sure your players don't worry about it**

If your team lose, who really cares as long as your players work hard and improve? Who is going to care in a years' time that you lost a few games? Nobody. You can bet your house that if you focus on improving and allowing your players to enjoy/express themselves; they won't continue to lose anyway so the problem will rectify itself without having to place the focus solely on winning. Their enjoyment of the game and inevitable improvement (if you are coaching them the correct way) means they will start to win games; that's almost a guarantee.

I absolutely hated losing (and still do) but looking back I probably did myself more harm than good at times as I festered over what I did wrong and why my team didn't win a particular game. I have come to appreciate that you can dislike losing without letting it bother you once the game is over. You've lost. That's it. Big deal. Get over it and focus on your next practice or match and make sure your players do exactly the same. Spend your time encouraging your players to give everything, work together as a team and learn from their mistakes.

Good luck in your next match. Win, lose or tie...who really cares. Just make sure your players work hard and enjoy it. The rest will take care of itself.

## **PLAYER ADVICE – Nuggets of advice for your players**

### **Attack the ball**

It is common for young players to be hesitant instead of going towards the ball. Don't shout and scream at them; incorporate some work during practice that focuses on your players directly going to attack a bouncing ball or a ball coming towards them at speed.

If given the necessary encouragement, your players will quickly realise that there is nothing to be scared of and if they attack the ball, 90% of the time they will end up winning it as the opposing player (particularly at younger age groups) will be hesitant if they see your player committed to attacking the ball.

### **Don't panic, relax and be comfortable on the ball**

Players are not always taught to relax and take a touch to control the ball when it comes to them (not every single time but the majority of the time they will have enough space to control the ball without being pressured). Often, your players will simply kick the ball away as soon as it comes to them, usually resulting in a loss of possession. This is a common problem in youth soccer.

Encourage your players to take their time, relax and control the ball before making a pass or clearing it up field if they are under pressure. If they make mistakes and lose the ball, don't get frustrated as the coach; encourage them to keep taking their time on the ball and not panic. Your players **will** eventually grasp this concept and it will benefit your team and the players as individuals over time.

### **Give your all every time you play or practice**

You should encourage your players to give everything they've got whenever they step onto the field for matches or practice. If you feel that one of your players is not pulling their weight, don't go accusing them of not trying as that will very likely upset them and result in even less effort.

Speak to your player during the next interval, saying something like, "I know you're trying hard but I need you to give it everything you've got in this quarter/half. If you give everything you've got and you're tired, we can switch you out and bring on a fresh player. Do it for your teammates, show everyone how much effort you've got."

When the game restarts, make sure you encourage and praise your players whenever they make a run or show effort.

You can manage the situation by making substitutions at intervals in the game. If one of your players is really not giving much in terms of effort, sub them out, encourage the sub to go in and work hard and tell the player coming off that you are giving them a rest, ready to go back into the game refreshed.

David Beckham is the ultimate example of giving 100% effort every time he played. He was never the fastest player, or the most skilful in terms of beating opponents; however, he was one of the hardest working players in the game and much of his success was down to sheer effort and hard work.

### **Concentrate at ALL times during games**

You probably find that your players can be easily distracted and sometimes during games are not even concentrating on your field, let alone the ball! Again, don't shout and scream at them, wait until the next interval and speak to them calmly about it.

Explain that soccer is a team game and requires every player to concentrate all of the time; even if the ball is at the other end of the field and they are a defender. Explain that the ball can come to them at any time so they need to be always ready and concentrating on the play. The next time they make an interception, tackle or win the ball, make a point of verbally praising them for their concentration and being alert.

### **Play as part of the team, not individuals**

Some players on your team will be better than others and there may be one or two individuals who want to try and win the game on their own. You need to use your coaching skills to encourage the players to express themselves whilst bearing in mind that it is a team game and realising that they cannot possibly win it on their own.

Praise them for their individual skill but explain that they need to ultimately work as part of the team, passing to teammates when they are open and helping out in defence when necessary.

Here is a good example of how to approach the issue if a player is holding the ball too much. Make this point to all players at the same time, do not single anyone out. “Girls, you know Olivia is fast and likes to dribble with the ball so make sure when she is in possession, you go and support her and get into space so she can make a pass.”

Make sure you incorporate passing (particularly one-two or wall pass) work into your practice, getting players used to working together rather than just dribbling on their own.

### **Movement to help teammates**

Movement is massively important in soccer. I probably don't need to tell you that but it's worth mentioning because you should always be talking to your players about movement, both on and off the ball.

Ask your players to consider this question whenever one of their teammates has the ball:

*Where can I move to make it as easy as possible for my teammate to find me with a pass?*

Ask your players to consider this question whenever they have the ball at their feet:

*What is the easiest pass I can make to keep possession of the ball and not give the other team chance to intercept it?*

You should encourage your players to ask themselves those questions every time they practice or play a match. Like the rest of this book; they are simple questions and simple concepts to understand but have a huge impact on individual players and your team.

### **Focus on first touch**

This should be one of the most important things you coach; encourage your players to always control the ball FIRST, then look up and see if they can pass to a teammate. It is such a simple concept which is often ignored by players because they have not been taught the importance of the first touch/control. As coach, you are responsible for encouraging your players to focus on controlling the ball before thinking about anything else.

*Control the ball well with your first touch and the whole game of soccer becomes so much easier to play.*

Ensure you say those exact words often to remind your players of their importance.

## NEVER STOP LEARNING

**Well done, you've reached the end (well, the start actually) of this 'Youth Soccer Coach' eBook. This is just the beginning of your journey to improve as a coach and ultimately help your players to improve as individuals and as a team.**

Try to implement as much of the content of this book as possible over the coming weeks. It will take time for your players to understand what you are asking; however the concepts in this book are essentially very simple ones and are extremely effective.

You can be the judge as to whether implementation of the concepts makes things easier for you or not. Of course, I am convinced that if you implement the concepts correctly and with enthusiasm, your job as a coach will not only get easier but will also become much more enjoyable. *More importantly, your players will benefit from your coaching and that should always be your number one focus.*

**Talk to your fellow coaches and encourage them to consider reading this eBook. It would be great to know that it has helped just one person but if it can help many then I will be very satisfied.**

### **Donations**

This eBook is completely free to download, as you already know. There is an option for a 'donation' if you feel that the information and advice has really helped you to improve your coaching skills and therefore improve your individual players and team. If you would like to make a donation, no matter how small, please visit my website [www.paulspacey.com](http://www.paulspacey.com) or [click here to donate.](#)

Keep up the good work and remember you can contact me anytime for help or advice.

Your fellow coach

Paul

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