

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Conducting the first practice of the season, whether you're a first-time coach or have been on the sidelines for many seasons, poses many challenges. Use these 10 tips – courtesy of former National Youth Sports Coaches Association Coach of the Year award winners – to ensure your first practice is a big hit with players, impresses parents and is the springboard to a special season for everyone involved.

By Greg Bach



Coaching youth sports overflows with challenges, but none arguably has a bigger impact – or can be more nerve-wracking – than conducting the first practice of the season. It can have first-time coaches reaching for antacid tablets and even some of the most experienced of coaches can feel a few jitters prior to opening the door on a brand new season.

After all, the first practice is a tone setter for the season: Parents will be watching, judging and forming opinions while youngsters will do their own evaluating and deciding for themselves whether the season looks like it is going to be filled with fun or be as miserable as weekend homework assignments.

“The first practice of the season is most important and the most impressionable for kids and parents alike,” says Kurt Albers, who is in his 12th year of coaching youth football in Victor, N.Y.

Yes, there is a lot riding on the season’s first practice and whether it flourishes or flops is up to you.

It can be a daunting task for sure, but if you come armed with the right attitude, philosophy and plan you can quickly be a hit with the kids, admired by the parents and recognized throughout the program as a coach who truly gets what youth sports are all about.

Consider this your survival guide for the season’s first practice. Use the insights and adopt the following 10 tips provided by Albers, the National Youth Sports Coaches Association’s Coach of the Year in 2008, as well as three other past recipients of the prestigious award, to make your first practice a resounding success and the springboard to a special season.

TALK TO OTHERS IN THE PROGRAM

Your own program is a great resource of information. You just have to make the effort to tap into it and you can strike it rich.

“Talk to your league administrator or experienced coaches about the upcoming season,” recommends

He is proof of that. Albers is well-known in his program for going out of his way to help coaches on other teams, enthusiastically sharing everything from his philosophy and training schedule to drills and conditioning exercises.

Filipkowski also points out that the wide variety of Coaching For

“The first practice of the season is most important and the most impressionable for kids and parents alike.”

– Kurt Albers, 2008 NYSCA Coach of the Year

Bob Filipkowski, the '04 recipient of the Coach of the Year award from North Brookfield, Mass. “Ask them what has been successful for them in the past. Everyone realizes it is about the kids and typically are very helpful and glad to give assistance.”

Albers agrees, saying: “I highly recommend a first-time coach seek out the experience and advice of an established coaching staff for their particular sport. Experienced staffs have a wealth of knowledge that most are willing to share.”

Dummies youth sports books, written by the National Alliance for Youth Sports, are extremely useful for coaches navigating their way through those early season practices. NAYS has written coaching books for football, baseball, basketball, soccer, volleyball and lacrosse.

NO EXCUSES, IT MUST BE FUN

“The biggest thing you can do as a coach is have fun,” says Donald Wendland, who coaches mostly soccer with kids ages 10 to 14. “When

the coach is having fun the players see it and have fun also.”

Instead of simply dictating drills insert yourself into them on occasion, too.

“I try and be part of the activities as much as possible,” explains Wendland of Robins Air Force Base Youth Sports in Georgia, who earned the Coach of the Year award two years ago. “When they see me mess up and not get upset, but instead see me having fun, that carries over to them.”

ENLIGHTEN THEM ON EXPECTATIONS

You should take a moment during the first practice to share with the team your expectations so the kids know what is in store for them.

“The first practice is a great time to set the expectations,” says Filipkowski, who has overseen plenty of season-opening practices: he once coached 11 basketball teams in one year ranging from the first through 10th grade. “Let them know what you expect from them. I typically

he introduces more balls into the mix, so with a team of a dozen players there eventually are four or five balls being dribbled – so everyone is having fun and learning their teammates’ names in the process.

SIMPLIFY FOR STARTERS

“Use the KISS approach,” recommends Filipkowski. “Keep It Simple and Silly. Do very basic drills that get the kids comfortable.”

During this initial practice you can also collect all sorts of valuable information.

“At the same time you can evaluate their skills and it will help you to form future practices to work on those skills,” Filipkowski says.

RUN DOWN RULES

At the start of practice Wendland shares with his team a handful of key rules. Here’s a peek at his Top Three:

1. Have fun
2. No horsing around – that’s when someone can get hurt
3. Be respectful to teammates, team parents, opposing players, coaches and referees

HAVE A GOOD PLAN

If you don’t come armed with a carefully crafted practice plan, you’re going to have big problems when you arrive at the field for the first time and you find 15 sets of eyes suddenly staring up at you for guidance, instruction and motivation – and you can’t hide behind your clipboard.

“Kids love competitive events and drills so our first practice drills involve some type of group head to head competition or individual competition against a clock,” Albers says. “Players are anxious to showcase their skill and ability to the coaching staff and these type of drills help facilitate that.”

“Make sure to change the drills often enough to keep their interest,” adds Jeff Wootten, the 2003 Coach of the Year from Berlin, Md. “Coming prepared to practice will make a big

NYSKA COACHING FORUM:

A gold mine of information at your fingertips

Putting together a quality first practice is just one of many challenges coaches are likely to encounter during the course of the season. There are also drills to devise, positions to determine, parents to deal with and game day strategies to formulate, among so many other areas.

Where do you turn for help?

The NYSKA Coaching Forum, available to NYSKA members, is a huge library of easy-to-access information on all sorts of topics.

Simply log in at www.nays.org with your Member ID and password and click on Coaching Forum on the left-hand menu bar.

Once in the Forum you can post a question to get great advice from other coaches who have encountered similar situations and who know what works; you can enhance your knowledge by reviewing the current posts on a variety of topics; and you can help out other coaches by sharing your insights and responding to questions that they have recently posted in need of help.

KEEP 'EM MOVING

Of course, this should be one of your focal points at every practice, not just the first time you get together with your team.

If you force kids to stand around at the start of the season chances are you’ll lose their interest and drain their enthusiasm – and that will have long-term effects throughout the year.

“A key is to keep players moving from one drill station to the next,” Albers says. “You have to avoid down time or standing around time. The younger the player, the shorter the attention span they have, so it is essential to keep players involved in some type of kinetic activity.”

just ask them to do their best and hold them to it.”

HELLO, MY NAME IS...

Not only is it important to introduce yourself, and any assistants, but it’s helpful to take a moment to allow the kids to introduce themselves and hear everyone else’s name.

During Wendland’s first soccer practice of the season he forms a circle with all his players and they go around and announce their name and tell what position they like to play. Then they make the circle bigger and players dribble the ball through the circle to another player, saying that player’s name as they approach them. Gradually,

Connecting with young athletes

First impressions are oh-so-important in all areas of life, and your first youth sports practice is no exception. Pulling off a good first impression will make it much easier to start forging special bonds with your players as well as getting the season headed in the right direction.

Keep the following suggestions in mind to help make sure your first impression with your players is a positive one:

▶ **Beat the kids to the field:** You want to be the first person at the field so you can greet the incoming youngsters and their parents. This sends the message that you're committed to coaching this season. Showing up after some players gives the unwanted impression that you're disorganized and uninterested.

▶ **Immediately greet players:** Don't allow youngsters and their parents to stand around uncomfortably with no contact or greeting. Instead, as soon as the kids arrive, welcome them with a friendly smile and hello.

▶ **Start conversations:** You can greet older players with a friendly handshake and younger players with a high five. While you wait for the entire team to arrive, strike up conversations with the youngsters who are already there. Ask them why they decided to play this season, who their favorite players are, how long they've been involved in the sport, how their teams did last season, who they played for, and so on.

difference. Have a predetermined time for conditioning, skill drills and scrimmages set in your mind before practice."

Wootten also recommends paying close attention to how the drills are received since that will influence your future practice planning.

"Some drills will work and the kids will want to do them again and again, and others just don't cut it," he points out. "The ones that work can be used as part of the routine at the beginning of every practice or warm up for a game."

USE ASSISTANTS – IF THEY MESH WITH YOUR PHILOSOPHY

Assistants can play instrumental roles in helping you orchestrate a smooth-running practice, as long as they are onboard with your philosophy. Plus, you want to meet with your assistants prior to the first practice to go over what drills you will be doing and your plan for the entire practice.

The time to convene with your assistants isn't two minutes before practice, either.

"A new head coach should ensure that he or she has the proper number of coaching assistants," Albers says. "The smaller the coach to player ratio the better for training the players and also, the head coach should be able to articulate his or



her vision and philosophy so assistants know what is expected. Hopefully at the top of the list is the goal to teach the kids how to play the sport and to have fun over a win-at-all-costs mentality."

END ON A HIGH NOTE

Most children, particularly the younger ones, are going to remember the last drill or activity they perform during practice, so you want to conclude on a fun, action-packed note so they'll look forward to the next practice.

So get creative and don't limit your options. The activity doesn't even have to be related to the sport you are coaching to be a success and have a positive impact on your players.

"Our staff always ends practice with a huge tug-of-war competition with tug-of-war ropes we've purchased," Albers says. "No matter the sport, tug-of-war promotes team building and a spirit of competition. Practice always ends on a high note and we usually hear how much the players enjoyed the first day of practice from their parents." 