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PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL BENCHMARKS IN THE SELECTION AND TRAINING OF 6-8-YEARS-OLD CHILDREN IN FOOTBALL

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Abstract

Aim: The present paper aims to highlight the main psycho-pedagogical landmarks that should be considered when choosing the selection coach for the groups of 6-8-year-old children in soccer and who will be in charge of their training. It is based on the premise that former footballers who intend to train groups of children must have solid training with real skills of communication, relationship, pedagogical tact, understanding, and knowledge of the age particularities and the needs of the children they are going to train. His training style must be adapted to these aspects specific to young children so that future footballers will love the training methods, even when the degree of difficulty of the exercises increases. The basis of rigorous training must be the children's enjoyment of playing soccer and their motivation to participate in training. The trainer must know how to maximize their enthusiasm and offer an attractive and varied training program that is well targeted toward the training objectives. The paper also presents some psychomotricity tests recommended in the selection process of children and some psychological coordinates for the coach to follow during the selection.

Keywords: psycho-pedagogical benchmarks, selection, training.

From the perspective of primary selection, it cannot be stated with certainty that the scientific selection of a child aged 6–8 years provides the guarantee that the child will become a high-class footballer, since a series of extrasportive factors may influence his future. What is certain, however, is that a child who adapts from an early age to a rigorously respected training program, with the notion of "collective play", with that of "team spirit", can successfully lead to performance sports.

Games with reduced headcount require a high level of technical and tactical training. Mastering them, showing their efficiency in one-on-one situations, when the density of passes, the number of touches in small spaces in conditions of adversity become necessary.

Therefore, we believe that for the coaches of children and juniors should be very clear that the value of each individual player will also depend on how they will succeed in building a team by highlighting collective values at the expense of individual ones.

The preconceived idea that a footballer who ends his career can immediately take over one or more groups of children and juniors is increasingly challenged by reality. The complexity of human nature is also in a continuous transformation, so that, without specialized training that includes, in addition to the details related to the organization of the soccer game, modern methods of psycho-pedagogy, you cannot understand the mentality of a child who has come to learn soccer. Therefore, a club that respects itself chooses its head coach who is assigned to small groups with great care. His employment depends neither on his name nor on his performances as a footballer, but on his ability to interfere with children, to understand them, and to be close to them.

Participation in a selection trial will always be numerous. Children will come with the hope that they will be able to enter an organized training system and step on the path of performance, their goal being, at that moment, to become a new Hagi, or Messi, or Ronaldo.

Whether they attend a soccer school trial or come directly to a club that organizes selection, the children will have the same passion, dedication, and ambition to demonstrate their skills and talent for the game of soccer.

However, a legitimate question is increasingly being asked: is the coach in charge of selecting the children prepared, in turn, to take responsibility for such an action?

The experienced American coach Rainer Martens groups coaches, from the viewpoint of communication skills, into 8 major categories. He proposes for self-evaluation a test of sincerity on a scale from 1 to 5 for each of the 8 categories.

The 8 types of coaches identified by Rainer Martens are as follows:

Successful Coaching, Third Edition, (Martens, 2004), p. 102 – 104

1. The unreliable coach never admits any error. He is often disrespected because he does not respect the athletes. He considers that he knows everything, does not complete the actions he starts, and is extremely self-centered.

Self-evaluation □ between "very low credibility" (1 - minimum) and "very credible" (5 - maximum).

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2. The negativist coach - most of his actions and expressions are negative. He frequently criticizes most athletes' actions, thus destroying their confidence. He considers praise inappropriate and, in most cases, makes a negative comment.

Self-evaluation between "negative message" (1 - minimum) and "positive message" (5 - maximum).

3. The "judging" coach - is more concerned with the evaluation of the athletes rather than with their training. Frequent expressions are "we lost the match because of your mistake" or "why can't you get it right", but he is unable to correct those mistakes.

Self-evaluation between "I judge to the maximum" (1 - minimum) and "I correct constructively" (5 - maximum).

4. The changeable coach – you never know what to expect. Today, he says one thing, tomorrow another. Worse, he applies different restrictive methods to players who make the same mistake. He contradicts his own recommendations: "do not comment with the referee, the decision has been made" and at the same time he argues with the officials.

Self-evaluation between "unclear message" (1 - minimum) and "very clear message" (5 - maximum).

5. The coach "long talk" - does not stay silent for a moment. He gives nonstop instructions to the players on the field, and when he is not doing it, he talks to himself. He has no time to listen to the opinions of his players.

Self-evaluation between "I do not listen to anything from anyone" (1 - minimum) and "I accept the opinions of others" (5 - maximum).

6. The stone coach never shows his emotions. He doesn't smile, he doesn't pat his players on the back in a friendly way, he doesn't jokes. He creates icy atmosphere around the team.

Self-evaluation between "completely insensitive" (1 - minimum) and "full expressiveness" (5 - maximum).

7. The "teacher" coach - the coach unable to make himself understood by his players. He uses a language either too elevated for his athletes or too entangled, leaving them always confused.

Self-evaluation between "poor communicator" (1 - minimum) and "excellent communicator" (5 - maximum).

8. The inconsistent coach - he either treats certain offenses superficially or applies very harsh penalties to the same kind of offenses.

Self-evaluation between "poor educator-motivator" (1 - minimum) and "excellent educator-motivator" (5 - maximum).

Complete objectivity determines the accuracy of the self-assessment. At the same time, the perception that those around you have of you is of utmost importance.

This type of test, with a double address - to the coach and to those who surround him - is very useful in the act of deciding on the opportunity to appoint the best coach to train a team. Evaluation differences can be accepted within reasonable limits, being influenced by the coach's subjectivity regarding self-evaluation.

It is unanimously recognized that the work at the level of children and young juniors is completely different from that done with footballers with more years of experience. The coach must have specific qualities and show considerable power of adaptation, considering the young age of the children and all the particularities that derive from this.

Today's reality in soccer shows us that the old method by which a coach took over a group of 6-8-year-old children and took them to the end of elementary school is definitely outdated. Coaches must specialize in a specific work regime depending on the age of the footballers because the difference between the training of groups of 6-8-year-old children and the training of 12-14-16-year-old juniors is huge.

When it was decided to follow the career of coaching children, the former soccer player had to self-analyze his ability to adapt to the conditions imposed by such an activity.

In addition to the knowledge related to the game of soccer itself, the coach must have tact, patience, and understanding in relation to the fragility of the young soccer players. Whoever wants to work with such young children must also demonstrate real knowledge of psycho-pedagogy so that the child is relaxed during training and loves the training methods, even when increases the degree of difficulty of the exercises. The basis of rigorous training must be the children's enjoyment of playing soccer. The coach must know how to maximize their enthusiasm and impose himself through an attractive and varied training program that is well targeted toward the training objectives. A series of tests, the so-called psychomotricity tests, come to the aid of the coach of children at a prepubertal age, which it is advisable to apply to the children chosen for additional evaluations after the anthropometric, motor, and medical-sports ones.

In the work "Soccer-from 6 to 18 years" by Prof. Dr. Viorel Cojocaru, some examples of psychomotricity tests are given to which children in the age group of 6-8 years can be subjected.

The author suggests as useful the following indicative tests:

- the dynamic hand coordination – touching the tip of the nose with eyes closed, alternatively with both hands
- simultaneity of movements –describing circles in space, with both hands simultaneously, in opposite directions
- standing on tiptoes and bending the legs
- linear walk, at a distance of 2 m, alternately bringing the heel of one foot to the top of the other
- speed of movements – placing 20 pieces of different shapes in a box as quickly as possible (puzzle)
- crouching, with arms crossed and eyes closed (balance)
- moving on one leg (the other flexed at 90 degrees) and following an object over a distance of 4-5 m

- with the thumb, quickly touching the tips of the other fingers.

Psychological criteria

Although the children are at a very young age, establishing minimum psychological criteria is necessary.

The coach must observe and determine

- Does the athlete have ambition and motivation for the organized practice of the soccer game?
- Does he live in a family environment that develops and maintains at a high level the capacity for mental resistance and unreserved alignment to the effort required by performance sports?
- Does he shows personality and has civic behavior appropriate to the performance?

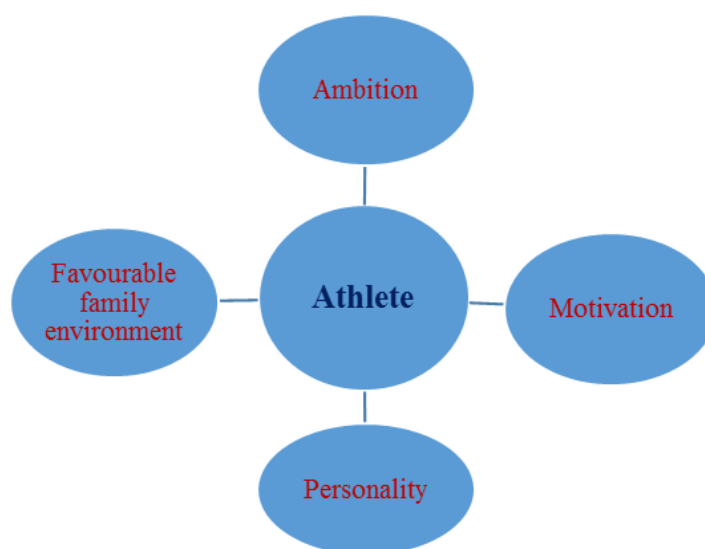


Figure 1. Psychological criteria to observe at the time of primary selection

Characteristics of the age of 6-8 years

A series of peculiarities specific to the age of 6-8 years support the primary selection and help the coach to filter and keep those children with real performance qualities. The child who presents himself for selection at this age is in full physical growth, with continuously developing muscles and an increased and accelerated growth of the internal organs.

Among the functional characteristics of this age, mentioned by Prof. Dr. Viorel Cojocaru in the work Football - from 6 to 18 years. The methodology of training, which the coach must take into account, includes:

Football - from 6 to 18 years old. Methodology of training, Axis Mundi Publishing House, Bucharest 2002)

- the ability to adapt to effort is reduced
- respiratory amplitude is small because of narrow airways
- the intercostal muscles are insufficiently developed
- The heart rate is low

Virgil Tudor (1999), in his work Conditional, Coordinative, and Intermediate Capacity: Components of Motor Capacity, estimates that at the age of 6–8 years, the muscle fibers are relatively longer than in adults and the tendinous portions are shorter. This makes the muscle tone lower, which leads to wider movements in the joints, but makes precision movements difficult.

Children's lungs at this age are similar in structure to adult's lungs, but the volume is small. As the anatomical capacity of the lung increases, so does the vital capacity, with the age period 5-9 years marking a considerable leap.

The experienced coach must extract from the multitude of feelings of the child who comes to the selection those expressions, direct or tangential to the sports activity, which make him theoretically eligible for performance sports.

- In the same work mentioned above, the age-specific psychological characteristics are:
- thinking has a pronounced intuitive character
- The relative lack of balance between the cortex and subcortical centers
- differentiation processes are not sufficiently developed
- attention is low and spontaneous, involuntary
- imagination is uncritical and insufficiently organized

- it develops the ability to observe

In the game of football, children make a significant cognitive effort and they must develop their ability to assimilate a perspective expressed by another person. M. Giacomini (2009) says that "the ability to understand another person's perspective crystallizes between 8 and 10 years".

After completing these evaluations, the coach has the final picture of the child motivated to enter the specialized training program. From this moment, you can move on to observing and examining the specific qualities of the soccer game.

Conditional, coordinative and Intermediate Capacity: Components of Motor Capacity, Publishing House R.A.I., Bucharest, (Tudor, 2000)

Children aged 6–8 years who come to a soccer club have the belief that they are the best. They will not be concerned about the "team", but they will want to show off their own skills to impress the coach. The child's selfishness is strongly manifested, and the coach, knowing these aspects, will have to tolerate and control these manifestations from the very first training session. Along the way, the child begins to discover the "team", to understand that he cannot play alone, that he needs the help of his teammates to win, and that he must show "team spirit", a completely new concept for him.

Each training session must materialize practically through selection. The coach applies methods and exercises that will help him understand the children's potential.

In the 6-8 age group, the coach should limit the groups of children to a maximum of 12 each and provide isolated playing conditions.

A training session for this age group should last no more than 50 minutes, half of which should be assigned to warm-up, physical training, and running school, and the other half should be dedicated to exercises to improve technical skills.

It is recommended to organize 3 training sessions per week.

The coach will insist on the accuracy of the executions and will organize themed games on limited spaces and numerically equal: 1:1; 2:2; 3:3; 4:4.

In addition, the coach will personally demonstrate different individual techniques, such as passing the ball (pass) sideways to a teammate

- retrieving the ball
 - with the foot
 - with the chest
- hitting the ball correctly
 - with the right foot
 - with the left foot
 - with the head
- dispossession
- goal kick
- the ability to keep the ball in the air by successive shots with the left, right, and head.

The requirement to learn these procedures must be gradual and materialize through tests (individual and through games), which will ultimately lead to the stoppage in training of those children with real technical potential. Long-term power of concentration is a big problem in this age group; thus, the coach must find ways to alternate periods of maximum strictness with periods of relaxation and even fun.

Games not strictly related to soccer can be inserted during training to encourage the children to relax. The coach notices even in a common game (let's say ducks and hunters) the child's readiness for effort, ambition, and physical potential. It is known that a strong character does not accept losing any kind of game (sports, society) and will do everything to win.

The level of exigency of the coach in this age group will screen many children. From the total number of children present at the selection trials, only a relatively small number will meet the requirements for football performance. The age group of 6-8 years is the one in which the child acquires the first concepts of the soccer game. It is premature to move on to the tactical details. However, children must learn elementary concepts such

- rules of the football game
- positions (roles) within the team:
 - goalkeeper
 - defender
 - midfielder
 - striker
- collective play and team spirit
- significance and importance of the referee

The finality of each training session must be realized by the fact that each child must understand the usefulness of the training, its purpose, and the objective pursued. Even if at this age the child is less receptive to theoretical aspects, subconsciously he will assimilate the concepts taught and apply them after a while in the routine.

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The coach must establish a training-testing-selection program in such a way that, at the end, he can determine which of the newly arrived children have the physical, mental, and emotional capacity to be included in the team.

The training sessions established should initially have a purely theoretical component, in which details of the game of soccer will be presented. Simultaneously, the coach will act psychologically on the children, arousing their interest in organized soccer and developing their enjoyment of playing soccer. Beware though, at this age, children's concentration is of short duration. Everything must be presented concisely, in terms they understand, and in a short time.

In his work "Football - The professional coach's handbook" Constantin Cernăianu considers the following objectives to be reached at the end of the training of the 6-8 age group (primary selection):

Table 1. Establishing target objectives for children aged 6-8

Objective to achieve	6-8 year old age group
The joy of playing	Adapting in the ball game, without fear, with personality
General coordination	The ability to anticipate the movement of the ball, correct executions
Ability	Ball control; kicking the ball correctly
Special coordination	Running, jumping, endurance and agility during the game
Tactical coordination	Goal avoidance; understanding offense and defense
Knowledge of the regulation	Mistakes and misconducts; basic rules; offside; the role of the referee.

Themed games

Of great importance regarding selection are the themed games. The coach has the possibility of seeing common affinities and qualities for some players, and thus he will be able to make them play together. Already at this age, the problem of game relations can be raised, obviously at a low level. We would rather call them "friendly relations" and they will eventually lead to each player getting to know the others.

As is known, the hardest thing to train in soccer is the player's mindset. The coach must insist on making correct decisions according to the respective phases.

I have seen in Italy that the coach stops the game extremely often, precisely to correct the DECISIONS and less the executions of the little footballers. Through these observations, the coach shows why the respective decision was not the most appropriate, so the players are oriented to stay in the place where they were caught by the phase, so that the one who took the less appropriate decision has an overview of the playing surface and the place of each playing partner. This will result in the footballer's habit of playing with his head up to identify the optimal solution to continue the phase in question.

It is of great importance for children that each training session be completed with a game with two goals. Long exercises, no matter how exciting, lead to a decrease in concentration and, finally, boredom. Therefore children look forward to the game.

Initiation exercises in the secrets of soccer for 6-8 years olds should be of progressive difficulty. An essential condition is to everything WITH THE BALL. Whether the players will use their hands to pass the ball (contests) or use kicks with the foot or head, the young footballer must use the ball. The coach has the opportunity under the guise of competitive games, to improve the children's physical training and to perfect and test their technical skills. Last but not least, funny competitions strengthen friendships between children and create affinities that can later be exploited in the game.

Movement conditioning, such:

- pass only with the flat;

- stopping the ball with the sole;
- driving the ball with a change of direction by bypassing the stake;
- linear action followed by sudden stoppage of the ball with the sole;
- changing direction by 180 degrees after stopping the ball;
- driving the ball between the stakes, alternately with the left and right.

Aims to familiarize the player with the respective movement, permanent control of the ball, and correct transmission of the ball to a teammate. As they get older, toward the second part of the 6–8-year training cycle, the little footballers must move on to more complicated exercises. Their correct assimilation of these will lead to them being retained in the squad for the next training period. Unfortunately, frequent mistakes are made in training children to correctly learn technical executions. The most common errors are the overuse of static exercises without a high tempo and the lack of supporting materials.

During this period, the children should be able to:

- keep the ball in the air by hitting with the foot, knee and head
- lead the ball with changes in direction and tempo
- hit the ball with the head and direct it correctly toward the goal or teammate
- take the ball in motion while protecting it from the opponent
- perform correct crosses with the base foot

In this age group, the training exercises should be very attractive for children. The degree of difficulty should be low, gradually increasing along the way toward the end of the training cycle. The classic 1:1, 2:2, and 3:3 games, with various themes to solve, from overcoming the direct opponent to combinations aimed to lead to completion, can be supplemented with football-tennis games, which are highly appreciated by children. In the training of the little ones from Hellas Verona, there is even a mini championship between teams of 3 players, teams formed by friends and refereed by the coaches. Football tennis, which is very widespread, is used in training for developing children's technical skills. In addition, the restriction to play the ball over the net only after at least one pass between teammates improves the accuracy of the usable pass. A decisive role in children's correct learning of technical execution is its demonstration by the coach. He must perform and at the same time theoretically explain the respective movement, and then he must insist on it until the students have mastered it correctly. Of great importance in training groups of children is bringing them to a level of training that allows them to correctly understand the importance of collective play. At this age, children cannot understand concepts such as "possession" or "possession-progression", but they can assimilate the idea that the "pass" is what leads to the construction of a team's game. I attended a moment of "theory" held by the coach of the children from Hellas Verona, Alessandro Salvoro, which I applied as soon as I understood its meaning.

After dividing the group into two teams of 5, he asked each player the same question: what is the base leg of each teammate? The children demonstrated that they knew this and thus could pass the ball correctly to a teammate for retrieval and play more easily. The theory moment was actually a test to make left-footed players aware of their participation in the game. Many times, the coach stopped the game to show that the left-footed player was not playing correctly, and he received, in a clear shooting position, the ball on the right foot.

In addition, the coach with the goalkeepers, before each shot at the goal from a static position (free kicks), asked the goalkeeper with which foot the shot will be executed and what trajectory the ball should have, depending on the position in which the opposing player was placed in relation to the ball and goal. Toward the end of the training cycle of the 6-8-year-old group, the children's power of concentration had already increased. At the same time, the functions of the body improve: the circulation, respiratory system, and locomotor system is in full development.

Conclusions

The creativity of the coach is of great importance in the theme of the games imposed on the children. The multitude of possible movements contribute to the increase of technical skills and will improve the thinking of the players to reach the conditions imposed by the coach.

The coach will take full advantage of the enthusiasm of the children who come to football, their joy in playing this game, and their will to give everything to be chosen for the team they love.

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