

Anyone Can Fly, but It Takes a Pilot to Land

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One day my son came to me and asked me if he can take flying lessons. Before I invested money into buying him flying lessons, I called a pilot friend to seek some guidance. He told me that “anyone can fly but it takes a pilot to land”. His comment really struck me as one that is so true not only with flying but coaching as well.

Every pilot goes through checklists off the runway, on the runway, while in the air, landing, and finally post landing. This is done for every aircraft as each one is different. Coaches need to do this as well with their players but they have to realize that every child is different just like every aircraft.

Before Takeoff

A pilot has numerous items to check before even stepping on the plane. Some of those include:

- Walking around the airplane
- Drain the fuel to make sure that there are no elements, like water, in the tank.
- Look for anything that looks mechanically unsound.
- Inspect the leading edge.

These are just a few of them.

A good coach, like a pilot, understands the need of being properly educated. A coach, like a pilot, has checkpoints to make sure that you are ready to coach before taking the field:

- Are the players properly equipped?
 - Are they wearing shinguards?
 - Are they using an appropriate size ball?
 - Are they wearing jewelry? They shouldn't unless for medical purposes.
 - Are they wearing clothes appropriate to physically participate in?
- Do you know what is appropriate for your age group?
 - U6's-They don't play soccer, they play AT soccer. They don't play with each other; they play NEXT to each other.
 - U8-s -They are starting to learn play with each other (a friend), but still play NEXT to each other.
 - U10's-They are just learning how to play WITH each other.
 - U12's-They are just learning how to think abstractly.
 - Fitness training (improving aerobic capacity) doesn't really make sense until 12/13 years of age. Fitness training for the U6 to U12 should be done with the ball.
 - Kick-ins are recommended instead of throw-ins up to U8. Visual acuity isn't developed in a child until 9/10 years of age. Their visual tracking system isn't developed.
 - Heading is not recommended until U10. The same applies for receiving balls out of the air. Again, visual acuity, or lack thereof, is one of the reasons.
 - Goalkeepers are not needed up to U8. It is recommended to start with goalkeepers at U9/10.
- Are the field/conditions safe?

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- Are ALL goals are anchored/weighted down?
- Is it too hot?
- Is it too cold?
- Is a storm brewing nearby?
- Check your mindset?
 - Understand that they are not miniature pros. (Be Flexible)
 - U6's technique is right no matter what because it is all they can do. It is not natural for a U6 player to turn their foot sideways to pass a ball. Don't rush them, just point the direction they need to go and let them get there.
 - U8's play next to each other so a wall pass is very much outside their normal thought process.
 - U10's-soccer is still an individual sport. Even though they play on teams, the concept of positioning overrides the one of playing positions.
 - U12's-need to be placed in situations where they have to make decisions instead of manufacturing them.
 - Be patient!
 - Teach, don't talk!
 - Be positive!
 - Your whole self worth is not determined if your players win or lose.
 - Insure your players are enjoying themselves and having FUN!

In the cockpit

Even before turning the key, a pilot must check all of the instruments, check the fuel shut off valve, complete the passenger briefing, make sure the parking break is set, set the compass and check flight plans. These are just a few items that pilots do before turning the key.

Like a coach, a pilot has to prepare a flight plan or begin with the end in mind. A pilot must have an alternate airport just in case a weather or unforeseen issue eliminates their first choice. As coaches we need to have an alternate plan if our practice or game plan is not working. For a pilot, panic or loss of control is not an option. As coaches we need to approach all issues "calmly" and need not overreact. It can get bumpy sometimes on a flight, just like a training session or a match, so be prepared just in case.

A coach needs to check the "engine" of each player. Make sure that he/she has the necessary tools to have a fulfilling and learning experience. Each aircraft's engine is slightly different just like each player. Obviously a coach is not going to worry about checking the "engine" for a U6 because they almost always have a smile on their face. It really takes an effort to turn that smile upside down.

All checkpoints are important but the pre-flight part of the training session is extra important. As a coach, have a lesson/flight plan that allows each player to get as many repetitions as possible, be creative, and express themselves out on the field!

In Flight

Once in flight, a pilot will be in “scan” mode. Scanning all of his/her instruments to make sure that everything is in order. While in autopilot, they have to make sure that they are not “lulled” into sleep. Even though the course has been set, a pilot must always be aware of everything.

Like a pilot, a coach must also be aware of his/her environment. A good coach will scan the field and make sure that all of their players are “measuring” right. That means everything to making sure they are getting properly hydrated, performing an activity correctly, and making sure they have fun.

Do you also notice that while in flight, a pilot doesn’t give a play by play broadcast of how the flight is going. They speak at the beginning of the flight, maybe a little bit during the flight (prepare for turbulence), and thank you after the flight. Do you notice during turbulence that they rarely come over the intercom and say anything? Do you think that they want the passengers to be calm? Yes.

Coaches need to be more “pilot-like” in both training and in matches. I see far too many coaches that want to spotlight themselves as opposed to highlighting their players. A good coach will almost be in “stealth” mode during a match. In training, they definitely need to be visible but make your coaching points very brief (no more than 30 seconds) and to the point.

Some coaches though for some reason when the training session or a match gets “turbulent” they go to screaming mode. That is when the players need you to be the most calm and collected. You need to show a face that your team and parents need to see. If you get upset outwardly, then so do your parents and players. If you are calm and collected, then most likely your players will do the same. Be like a pilot through times of turbulence.

Landing

The landing when you separate a pilot from a person who is simply flying. Once coming into the final approach, a pilot has to make sure that they are able to communicate with the tower, that the landing gear is right, brakes are checked firm, landing light is on; the altimeter is set, to name a few steps. When the plane finally lands safely; that is what separates someone who flies from a pilot. A good pilot goes on instinct and “feel”. I know for me personally, I am always evaluating how the pilot lands. Was it a smooth landing? Was it a little bumpy? Was it very bumpy or rough? Often times the airline that gives me a smooth landing will get my business again.

A coach needs to also have a pre-landing checklist then often go on “feel” and instinct. This is when experience and education prevails. A good coach will read his/her players body language in order to get the best out of them. For example: when your team is down at halftime that is when you need to be the most positive, calm, and collected. Your team already has a low self esteem. Assure them that everything is fine we just need to make some adjustments in order to get back in the match.

Another example: If your players are bored at training ask yourself why? A good coach will then not look out the window and blame others but look in the mirror and fix it. That is a feel though that coaches need to have. Younger players of 5-10 years of age will

often tell you what they think. If they don't tell you, they will show you by sometimes being disruptive, fidget, and show frustration verbally and non-verbally.

There are many other examples of when a coach needs to go by the manual or by "feel" like a pilot. The bottom line is that a coach needs to remain positive, calm, and collected during the flight and landing in order for all to have a good experience.

After the Landing

Once a pilot has landed the plane they are not finished! There are other checkpoints that they must perform. Some of those include: Making sure the landing light is off, getting ready for cross-check, shutting down the engine, setting the parking brake, making sure the throttle is set at 1000 RPM to name a few. Then after that get up, greet and thank the passengers as they are walking or rushing to get off.

A coach, like a pilot, needs to also do an after landing checklist. Those should include:

- Is everybody ok?
- What are some good things from this training session/match?
- What are some things that we can take from this training session/match to improve on?
- Did my players have fun?
- How can I get better as a coach?
- Finally thank ALL who were a part of the trip. A pilot will give thanks to passengers, flight attendants, co-pilots, ground crew. The same should be true for coaches. Coaches should thank the other coach, assistant coaches, players, parents, volunteers, and referees.

My comparison between a pilot and a coach was to stress the importance of being prepared and educated to work with players of all ages. It was also to stress the importance of how coaches need to be more "pilot-like" when times are turbulent and ride out the storm. Stay calm! Thank your players each and every time they come to play for you and keep them wanting to come back to you or your program or play on their own because they enjoyed the flight!

Safe Travels.