

Be aggressive,



B-E-Aggressive!

As a coach most people think we have an aggressive personality, although I prefer not to use that word. If you ask anyone that knows me I believe they would tell you that Adam is very passionate and charismatic. I believe if you ask any players/teams I currently coach or have coached in the past 20 years, they would say “Adam coaches with energy and passion from a love of the game”. I run my teams in an aggressive way, but I would define that as playing to the limits of players’ individual skills, pressure on the ball and attacking the goal.

Of course there are ways to get your point across at every level, including Major League Soccer. Players, coaches, referees and spectators must respect (and must show respect) to all parties involved.

The problem we have is that the average “Joe” watching the MLS or EPL and seeing coaches & spectators shouting at referees & players probably don’t appreciate the difference in youth soccer, so he shows up for Saturday morning games and does the same thing.

As players develop and get older the physicality of the game becomes an important factor. You often hear coaches telling their players *“you need to play more aggressive.”* What the coach may fail to do is explain to them what playing aggressive really means. On a lot of occasions that same player will begin to commit a bunch of fouls because they *don’t understand what playing aggressive means.*

Being aggressive is:

- Understanding the game and being able to read a pass and step in front to steal it.
- Playing shoulder to shoulder and *legally* getting your body in the right position to knock the ball off the attacker.
- Challenging for a ball aerially.
- Understanding how to use your arms to *legally* hold off a defender.
- Knowing the right time to go for a challenge.
- Getting to the ball quicker than your opponent.
 - ✓ Being aggressive is **not** being fearful to get in on a 50/50 tackle.
 - ✓ Being aggressive is **not** being anxious to take a player on one-on-one in the attacking third.

Playing dirty is:

- Going in for a challenge and intentionally charging or sliding into your opponent.
- Grabbing their jersey to gain a competitive advantage.

We must also be mindful that some explanations why players are playing dirty are because that is what their parents are telling them to do. You often hear a parent telling their child, "You need to play more aggressive, don't be afraid to give them a little push here and there." I have heard parents after their child received a Yellow Card; "do it again" or "you just keep playing with that aggression." ***Make sure you educate your players on the laws of the game and how you can play aggressive without committing fouls.***

So, how do you teach a player to be more aggressive yet not dirty?

I remember the first time I was taught how to do a slide tackle. I thought it was the coolest thing ever. The coach taught us never to slide straight onto an attacker and to not go in with our cleats up in the air. We were given certain situations when sliding might be appropriate. For example, when you are running shoulder-to-shoulder with a player and they expose the ball with a long touch you can slide to knock it away. We were also taught situationally when it would be appropriate to slide. For example, when you are the last defender chasing down an opponent who is on a breakaway. Educate, educate, educate. If you are able to demonstrate a proper slide tackle...please do so. ***Make sure they understand that a slide tackle should only be performed as a last case scenario and the importance of proper technique to avoid injury. A good time to introduce slide tackling is when the ground is soft and wet.*** We also want to insure the appropriate age for intruding certain aspects of the game like slide tackling, poke tackling, headers, 50/50 balls, shoulder to shoulder contact, legal ways to use their arms to hold off defenders.

The three biggest ways a player can play more aggressive is:

1. Being able to read when a pass is coming to the person they are marking and stepping in front to steal it.
2. Strongly going into a 50/50 tackle.
3. Challenging for the ball aerially.

As you play the game more and gain experience you become a better "reader" of the game. Anticipating where the next pass or what run your opponent will make becomes natural. Being able to read the game and the body language of your opponents is where you can become more aggressive.

A great way to demonstrate this is to either

- a) Have mom or dad record your game and point out moments where they could have stepped up to win the ball or
- b) Watch professional games with your players and explain when, where, why, how. ***Being able to visually see what you are coaching makes it easier to understand exact moments in time where it can be applied.***

A lot of the more fragile youth players get "scared" to go into a 50/50 challenge, especially when their opponent is bigger. ***What players don't understand is that when you don't go into a tackle all the way, this is where you are more vulnerable to get injured.*** Again, your players need to understand the laws of the game when it comes to 50/50 challenges. You can't use your body to run through an opponent, you can't push, elbow, and charge into them. And players need to make sure they are going for the ball and not the player and make contact with the ball first and not the player.

Aerial Challenges (headers): I had a fellow teammate that absolutely hated heading the ball! He couldn't time his jumps to save his life. Half the time he ended up taking the ball to the face and he was forced to come off the field with a bloody nose. He was six-foot three, which you would think he would be able to win a lot of headers, but he couldn't jump. And did I mention he hated heading the ball? He finally had a coach who said "look Jeremy, you might not be able to win every single header but you need to put a body in and at least challenge for it." "Make it difficult for the opponent to cleanly win the ball." And that's what he did, he finally accepted that he was "aerially challenged", but he knew his role. Later on he found the main reason he had so much difficulty was because of his eye-sight. He refused to accept getting glasses/contacts, which could have benefited him tremendously on the field.

I cannot stress enough the need for everyone to keep-in-mind that players, coaches, officials and spectators are also individuals. If this is always foreknowledge, you can tell when a player is going over the top, and that's when you call "sub", but even when the player is off the field, they have to be handled properly.

The coach who gets into a player's face the moment he sits down is not doing anything to discharge the situation- if anything, the coach is adding to the level of aggression and anger. Let the player cool down, have a drink and then give him a few quiet words about what was going wrong. That way he/she can be refocused and be ready for the next opportunity on the field.

Aggression on the ball is essential, but *not on the player*. On the ball you can be strong and dynamic, but striking and elbowing goes over the top. It is then that aggression is being used as a substitute for skill.

Sometimes in training, and due to soccer being a contact sport, the coach has to be aware and monitor that players are competing for a position every weekend. Social influences are producing a society that is more tolerant of bad behavior and violence, and that is spilling over into sport. We are not a collision sport, but we are a contact sport, and players need to find out early on what the "**Laws of the Game**" define as "contact" and play each match within those guidelines.

There is no place in the game for a dirty player. Make sure you are not that team that everyone hates to play because they are worried they are going to get their legs taken out. Instead, be the team that everyone fears because they know technically, tactically and physically you are a tough opponent and your team won't back down from challenges. Teach your players the difference between playing aggressive and playing dirty. Demonstrate what a clean tackle looks like and proper technique. Most important, make sure your players understand the laws of the game.

Our social changes are producing a more relaxed attitude towards violence and confrontation with authority. Youth Coaches must guard against this development, as soccer, by its very nature is about respect and has to be played within standards and established rules. ***Play Hard, Play Smart, Play safe, Never Give Up!***

Soccer doesn't build character, it reveals it. - OSC Director of Coaching, Adam Kenes