

Preparing for the Big Game

By Stephen T. Davis

The overriding responsibility of the coach is to win games. This is not at all costs, of course. For the college coach, winning must take place in the context of observation of NCAA rules, the rules of one's own conference and of one's own sense of what is morally right. Still, within those limits, our job is to win games.

What this meant to me, during my 29 years as a college coach, was that I wanted to feel, every time my team took the field against an opponent, that I had done everything I could to prepare the team for the game. Sometimes I had that feeling and sometimes I didn't. But I felt it my job to do my very best. This meant having my team fit. It meant my players being able to express the skills of the game. It meant each player knowing how I wanted them to play. It meant having plans and contingency plans. The players had to know how to play a man down, for example, or what they were expected to do if it was our 11 players against the other team's 10 players.

Let me mention a big game when -- at one small but crucial point -- I failed to prepare the team well. On Dec. 3, 1983, my team played in the NCAA Division III national championship against (and on the home field of) the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. By the day of the game, I knew a great deal about the Greensboro team (it had been the top program in Division III for many years), and knew that there would be a large crowd.

What I didn't know, because I didn't ask anyone, was the configuration of the crowd. Seated directly behind one of the goals was a large and fairly steep hill that would contain, at game time, some 800 enthusiastic members of the Greensboro student body (this was before UNCG built its current soccer stadium).

We were leading 2-0 about 10 minutes into the second half when Greensboro was awarded a free kick about 20 yards from our goal, just outside the penalty arc. With the fans screaming behind our goal, my players, who were forming the wall, could not hear our goalkeeper's instructions. They set up a poor wall, and Greensboro's NSCAA All-American, Eddie Radwanski, put a well-placed shot through the gap.

The momentum turned and Greensboro eventually won, 3-2. Obviously, if I had known the about the hill full of noisy students, I would have coached the players to align the wall via the hand signals of a player in front of it instead of the goalkeeper shouting. But I hadn't asked anyone about the configuration of the rooters, and this was one factor (there were others, of course, including the fact that Greensboro was the more talented team) in our losing the match.

Every team has matches every season that count as big games. For a good team, the league championship game, a regional playoff or a national tournament game are big games. For a mediocre team, a big game might be a game against the team just above you in the standings, or a game against a local rival, or a game against a team that beat you last year. For a weak team, a big game might be a game against one of the teams you have a legitimate chance to beat.

Big games are the matches that you feel you must win. During my coaching career, I would often evaluate a season, at its conclusion, by how we fared in our big games. I recall one year when my team had a good overall record (14-5-1), but I told the team at the end of the season that I didn't consider it a good season. We had won only two of five big games, and that was not enough.

So every coach faces the problem, usually several times each year, of getting the team ready for a big game. As with so much else in our sport, there are a few hard-and-fast rules for how to do so. Indeed, I believe that coaches who are attempting to prepare the team for a big game face three dilemmas:

- To continue with the normal practice and pre-game routine or to make changes?
- To adjust to your opponent or to try to make them adjust to you?
- To "psych up" the team or to take the pressure off?

Let me talk about each of these scenarios:

To continue with the normal routine or make changes?

Every team develops a certain practice and pre-match routine. That is normally a good thing. Of course, we don't allow our practices to become predictable and stale; players take a certain psychological strength and even comfort from the fact that the team does things in a certain regular way. And the question is whether to continue with the established routine before a big game or to make changes.

My own view is that the correct answer will depend on many different factors and circumstances, and the coach will have to decide what to do. At times it is best to continue with the usual routine. This will let the players know that the coach is not giving in to panic, that the upcoming game may be a big game but is a winnable game like others, and that things will proceed as they normally do. But in most circumstances, I think it is best that the players see clearly that the coach considers this a big game and is making special preparations. In other words, some new items in practice or in the pre-match routine should be introduced. What some of the others might be I will consider in the remainder of this article.

To adjust to your opponent or to try to make them adjust to you?

This, too, can be a tricky point. There are coaches who claim to be not particularly interested in the other team; it is always better, they say, to concentrate in practice on what your team does and do it better. But my own view is that the position "I don't care who the other team has or what they might do when we play them," is a luxury for coaches who have far superior talent than the other team. (I myself, during my coaching career, never bothered to scout the weakest team on our schedule.) For most of us, a big game is, almost by definition, a match in which the two teams will be at least fairly equal in talent. And if we are going to do everything we can to prepare our team for the game, we will want to know some relevant information about the other team.

Suppose I'm scouting an upcoming opponent or have sent an assistant coach to do so. Let's call the other team the Kickers. What I want to do, obviously, is discover the strengths and weaknesses of the other team and figure out how to neutralize their strengths and capitalize on the weaknesses. What sort of information about the other team will I want? The first thing to do, of course, is collect a team roster from the game program, and then start taking notes. Statistics from the school's sports information department are often included with program and can be helpful. I once discovered from the program that one forward on the team I was watching, a player whom I had previously considered only slightly above average, had scored about 70 percent of the team's goals thus far in the season. Naturally, I changed my opinion. Here are the main items in which I would be interested:

Who are the crucial players on the Kickers? What are their strengths and weaknesses? If a player is especially fast, or good in the air, or a clever dribbler, I will want to know that. Which is his strong foot, or can use both?

What is the team style of the Kickers? Do they play long ball (direct play) or do they make short passes (indirect play)? Do they try to move right up the center of the field or do they play wide to the wings? Do they use two forwards or three? Do they play with a flat back line or with a deep-lying sweeper? Do they use man-to-man marking or a zonal system? Are they primarily an offensive or defensive team? Do they have good team spirit, or will they start quarreling with each other when things go wrong?

How do the Kickers handle restarts? What are their free kick plays? What do they try to achieve on corner kicks? Who takes their penalty kicks and where does he try to place the ball? Do they have a long throw-in artist, and if so, how do they try to use that player's skill?

The goalkeeper. We will always want to know as much as possible about the Kickers' goalkeeper. Is this player tall and good on high balls or short and quick? Are the keeper's hands reliable or are rebounds given up? How about judgment? Is it good or does the keeper get caught out of position? Is the distribution of the ball good or poor? What about the keeper's foot skills?

Characteristics of the other players. Here I will make notes like "lazy," "decidedly weak-footed," "weak on judging head balls," "dribbles too much," "shies away from physical play," etc. I also try, in a loose and informal way, to rate each of the Kickers' players along an axis of superstar, very good, barely adequate, and poor.

Of course not all of this information is to be shared with one's team. Scouting reports to the players must be concise (maybe five minutes in length) and simple. Each player must know what he will be up against, and what will be expected of him in the match. It is important for the coach to come up with a game plan that will succeed against the other team (neutralize its strengths and capitalize on its weaknesses), and will convince our players that it will succeed. It can be a great boost to team morale, if the players believe that the coach has found a way of beating the other team.

But it is almost always a mistake to make major changes in the way your team plays before a big game. Adjustments are

one thing, and can be (as I have said) important. But "going back to the drawing board," as if you've got a brand new team and a brand new season, is never the way to go.

Years ago I was about to play a team whose coach always did a great deal of scouting and game-planning. That year the right side of our defense was considerably weaker than the left. Having noticed this, the other coach, who had two terrific players, a striker and a center midfielder, decided to move the midfielder to left wing. Apparently a good idea, but it backfired and we won the game handily. The problem was that prior to this game, the coach had been using a barely adequate player at left wing all season, and consequently his players were never comfortable passing the ball into that area. In the game against us, the striker played well at times, but was not receiving the service he normally got from the midfield behind him, and the left winger hardly ever saw the ball and had no influence on the match. When the other coach recognized what was happening, and switched the winger back to midfield, his team was behind 2-0, and it was too late. This, then, is an example of making too radical a change before a big game.

To "psyche the team up" or take the pressure off?

This too will depend on various circumstances, and the coach will have to decide what approach to take. At times it is best to take the pressure off, to tell the players "Hey, just go out there and have fun." This works well especially if the team does not respond to pressure.

What exactly is the relationship between "psyching up" (or arousal) and performance? This is a complicated question. The answer surely varies from sport to sport. (American football and weightlifting, for example, probably require a great deal of arousal; golf and chess very little) It definitely varies, even within a given sport, from player to player. In soccer, I believe that a modest amount of arousal can be helpful for most teams before a big game. But too much can be counterproductive. Indeed, there have been occasions before big games in which I have gone through relaxing exercises with the team because I thought they needed it.

Every player is different. Before a big game some need to be left alone; some need a word of encouragement; some need a kick in the pants; some need a few words of cognitive instruction; some need a pep talk. (Emotion can be used by the coach, but again in moderate amounts; even Knute Rockne admitted that some of his fiery pep talks got the Irish football players too keyed up.) The players I coached during my college career were almost all highly intelligent, competitive, intense and goal-oriented. They knew the meaning of the upcoming big game and were largely able to get themselves properly focused.

There is no question in my mind what is the single biggest factor for a coach in preparing a team for a big game. It is for the coach himself or herself to have an infectious attitude of confidence and optimism. "This will be a rough game," the coach can say to the team, "but I'm confident that you'll find a way to win." The coach must be positive, must program the team for success and must believe that the team will win. Equally important, the coach must communicate that attitude to the players.

A related item is the commitment of the coach to the cause of winning the match. The players must hear, see and sense that the coach is doing everything possible to prepare the team fully and deeply to win the game. I mention this because the coaches who were less than fully committed and the players always noticed that point. I once knew of a highly technically skilled college soccer coach who had all the attributes, so I thought, to be a winning coach. Moreover, he coached at a school that, in my opinion, could have been highly successful. But his teams never were. I was always puzzled by this fact until a player who had played for him and whom I had known since high school told me: "Winning is not coach's highest priority; his main concern is the money he makes at his summer soccer camps."

All athletes have to deal with fear. Indeed, the young people of today are particularly fearful about all sorts of factors--about their own ability to measure up, about the future of their parents' marriage, about their college grades, about their own future careers and ability to be successful, etc. (Thus the great prevalence of "No Fear" T-shirts among the teenagers of today.) Athletes, particularly, must deal with the fear of performing poorly and the fear of losing. (A few athletes actually fear winning, but that is too complex a topic to be discussed here.) A coach with a reassuring attitude of healthy confidence about the upcoming game can do wonders for the morale of the team.

Once, two days before an NCAA play-off game, my All-America goalkeeper twisted his ankle rather severely in practice. The next day, he of course sat and watched, and the team went through practice as if it were in mourning. Having previously checked with the team trainer and with the player himself, at the end of practice I announced to the team that our goalkeeper would indeed play the next day; his ankle would be heavily wrapped and his mobility restricted, but he would play nonetheless. Then I told the team that we were now going to practice celebrating at the end of a great victory. I had the goalkeeper limp out to the goal mouth, had the scoreboard clock run down to zero, and as the horn sounded had the players run onto the field, pick up our injured goalkeeper on their shoulders, and carry him, cheering, off the field.

It is important for the coach to inform players that pre-game tension and nerves, when handled properly, can be positives rather than negatives. They are not to be feared or shunned because there can be ways in which the mind helps prepare the body for a top performance. But it is also important that the players not relax too much. I would sometimes remind them of the game's importance. "I recruited every one of you players," I would say to them, "and I didn't recruit you to come here and play in games like this one; I brought you here to win them."

Let me make seven specific suggestions about preparing the team for a big game.

1. Physical and mental rest. Before a big game, very few items are more important than getting the team rested, both mentally and physically. Sometimes this is not possible. But is usually is, at least to some degree. At times it is wise, on a regular practice day, to give the players a day off, or at least a light or almost entirely fun practice. I believe my team lost the last match of my career because of mental and physical exhaustion. We had won an intense and very tiring NCAA play-off game on Wednesday, and had to play the next play-off match the following Saturday. I gave the players a day off on Thursday and even Friday was only a light practice. But on Saturday, although the will was there, the tired legs and maybe minds were definitely factors in our losing 2-0 to a very good team.

2. The pre-game speech. Virtually all soccer coaches give pre-game speeches to the team. They must be brief (say, five minutes), calm (the players must not sense any panic or hysteria), simple (too much information or too many instructions will go in one ear and out the other at this point) and enthused. You might end on a note of challenge to the team or of reassurance for the team. One problem is that by the time the big games start arriving on the schedule, the players have heard so much from the coach already that whatever he or she says can sound trite and stale. Sometimes it helps to have a respected guest give the pre-game talk. A former player, a faculty supporter of the team or even an injured senior player. Whatever you do, spend time planning what you are going to say; do not try to make it up on the spot.

3. Demand effort. One way of demonstrating to the players the importance of the upcoming big game is to demand extra effort in practice and thus in the match. Obviously, coaches want maximum effort from the players at all times, but of course we do not always get it, especially not in practice. Demand extra intensity in practice before a big game; reward it when you see it and criticize it when you don't see it. That in itself will be instructive to the players.

4. Show a videotape of the team playing well. Before a big game, I would occasionally try to send a message to the team by showing a videotape, while they were dressing for the game, of the team playing really well. The message: There's no reason we can't play this way again today. If no such tape exists, you might show your players 20 minutes of one of the many "goals videotapes" that are on the market. That too can do wonders for morale and confidence.

5. "We're in this together." Sometimes it helps a tense team or a few tense players to remind them that "we're all in this together." "We've this far as a team," you might remind them, "and we're going to win or lose today as a team." The players must be encouraged to take pride in themselves as a unit, not primarily as individuals. Players must not enter the field with an overriding feeling of fear that playing poorly or making a big mistake will cause their teammates to reject them.

6. "Your job today is..." Although this may push the pre-game speech a bit over five minutes. It sometimes helps to run through the 11 starters, or the 14 who will play the most, and give them brief reminders as to their responsibilities. "John, I predict you're going to get four chances to score today; your job is to put two of them away." "Peter, your main responsibility today is to make sure their number 10 has no influence on the outcome of the game; don't let him trap the ball or turn with it."

7. Something new. As noted above, before a big game it sometimes helps to break the routine and do something special. My team had two games every year that we badly wanted to win, games against a local rival. The night before each of those matches, we had a habit of gathering at the coach's home, eating frozen yogurt together, giving the scouting report on our rivals and hearing brief talks from the coaches, captains and seniors. I believe it was a wonderful device for focusing the players on the importance of the match. I ended my career with a record of 41-13-6 against this team, despite the fact that many years the teams were pretty close in talent (there were also years when our talent was slightly above theirs). I attribute at least some of those records to the meetings at my home.

Preparing the team for a big game is one of the most important responsibilities of every soccer coach. Whether the team is boys or girls, men or women, recreation or MLS, coaches will be judged, to a great extent, on how their teams perform in the big matches. Coaches must approach these matches with care and planning. Doing so can pay great dividends.