

# The Words You Choose....

## Make All the Difference in the World

by Steve Bender

As coaches, we are presented with countless opportunities at each practice and each game to influence our players for better or worse simply by the words we choose to use. Words used to describe a skill or technique. Words used to correct form. Words used to encourage. Words used after a win. Words used after a loss. Even the words that we use toward others-the referees, for example-can greatly impact the development of the children entrusted into our care. Even if you aren't a David Letterman fan, you're probably familiar with his Top Ten lists. Here is my Top Ten List of Words and Phrases That Should Never Be Heard on a Soccer Field:

**Number 10: "...and go to the back of the line..."** Well, since the last issue had a full article from me on this subject, let me just touch on the key point. Please understand-the line does have a place in soccer. Before the game, the players should line up for equipment check. And, after the game, they should line up to congratulate the other team. But at practice, if you put 10 players in a line for a five minute drill that they do one at a time, you are wasting 90 percent of your practice time. Sure, one of them will be doing something at any point in those five minutes, but at that same point in time nine of them will not. As my daughter's soccer camp trainer said last summer-"We will do it the Dutch way-Always with the Ball!" Whatever you do in practice, do not use lines.

**Number 9: "Trap"** I don't like the word trap-I can still catch myself using it sometimes, but I don't like it. I know it's been around for a long time. I know there's nothing wrong with the concept of trapping-once you do it right. But I found when I got back into coaching that kids took me too literally. They trapped the ball. They corralled the ball. They brought it to a dead stop. And then, instead of moving the ball to a better location for the pass they wanted to make, they step away from the ball, walk around it until facing in the direction they want to pass, back up, take a stutter step, back up again, and then kick at the ball. When it's them and their ball in practice, that's not a disaster. But once they are on the playing field, the ball and the opponent are long gone before they get anywhere close to making their pass. Now, instead of "trap" I try to always use the phrase "receive and go" or "receive and pass" or "receive and serve." It combines the two concepts of gathering in the ball and keeping it moving toward a goal.

**Number 8: "You're Doing It Wrong..."** No one ever likes to be told that they are doing it wrong. This is especially true of children trying to learn something new. Only when there is imminent risk of injury should you tell them it's the wrong way. If there's no danger, accentuate the positive. Always look for some aspect that is right and build on that. There is always room for improvement-even at the highest levels of soccer. I think one of the greatest moments from last year's Women's World Cup-from a youth coach perspective-was Brandi Chastain's own-goal against Germany. It was incredible-an incredible mental error, an incredible lack of concentration, an incredible, unbelievable, how-could-they-do-it-that-wrong-at-this-level mistake. But it was also an incredible teaching tool for youth coaches. On several occasions I have referred to that play when a girl has been upset by a mistake she made. Most of the girls who have been on my teams since then saw that play, and they understand the reference. No matter how good you are, there's room for improvement. Recently, my daughter gave up her first regular season goal in two seasons. She was looking straight into a 25 mph wind. Her sweeper tracked the ball, but didn't hear the keeper call. She tried to stop it, but didn't adjust for the wind and ended up deflecting it out of my daughter's reach for a goal. As we met after the game, I complimented her for the effort she made to try and stop the ball. I also complimented my daughter for the way she positioned herself for the ball. I told everyone that had it not been for the wind, she would probably have heard the call, so the lesson is the goalie can always yell louder and everyone needs to remember to listen for the goalie's call when you are in the box. Knowing the things that can be done better, the girls will work on those positives. Otherwise, the list of things they worry about not doing just grows longer and longer until they become afraid to make any play at all.

**Number 7: Cone** I don't mind using cones to mark small sided goals or a makeshift penalty box on a practice area, but, in my opinion, teaching players to dribble through cones is waste of time and even counterproductive. I don't let my players practice their dribbling drills around cones. Why? First, I have not yet seen a game where an attacker is defended by a cone-or a stationary player. Defenders move. Sometimes they fall back, sometimes they attack left, sometimes right, and sometimes, straight at you. But they do not stand motionless while a player dribbles close by. Some will say that moving around the cones is a good way to focus on dribbling skills. That may be, but let them focus on those skills against other players. They will develop better skills faster. Even worse, I think cones develop bad habits. I have seen a tendency in better recreational players to rely too much on the dribble. They try to carry the entire team on their own skills. There are very few players at our level that can routinely dribble through entire defenses and get off a shot for goal. I stress with my players that dribbling skills are critical to soccer. But, they should be used to get away from pressure, not fight through pressure. I want them to always be aware of where their open teammate is and make the good pass before they are pressured. There is no player that can outrun a strong pass. Pass-get open-receive a pass-find the open player-pass again. That is always much more effective than trying to dribble through eleven players. And, when young players practice dribbling against cones, I believe they subconsciously reinforce that desire to try it on their own.

I do have a couple passing square warm up drills that focus on precision passing and moving off the ball. When I first teach those drills to girls, I use saucers to mark the corners of a square so that they can focus on learning the drill and not be distracted by where they should be. But once they learn it, all I have to do is call the drill. They can set it up themselves without markers. And that is how cones should be used. They should be markers, they should be lines. But they should never represent players.

**Number 6: Are you blind, Ref?!?!?** This shouldn't really need saying, but it does. Our club is a large one, with nearly 4000 players from U-5 to U-19. For younger age groups, we have to rely on youth referees that are sometimes as young as 12. They are kids. They are just learning to call the game. As adult coaches, we need to remember that no matter their age, they are the authority on the field. We must set the example for our players-and, more importantly, our parents-by never publicly questioning their calls during a match. I recently set up an offside trap, and stood and watched as two players moved past my defense at midfield and merrily dribbled and passed their to the goal with no whistle. My goalie stopped the shot and booted it out with a 25 mph wind at her back, but the referee never said a thing. Once we had the ball at the other end, I quietly asked the linesman why he didn't signal offside. His responded "Oh, does this age play offsides?" Is that his fault for not knowing? Yes, but is it also mine for not making sure before the game that they were aware of our age specific rules. Sure, I could have yelled out about his failure to make a call, but just as players need positive feedback, so do refs. Instead, the linesman got his attention and told him they were supposed to call offsides. The following week, he was the linesman on our side. He overheard two of my girls complaining about a spectator's constant taunting on the other side. When he asked what that was about, I told him the girls were complaining about taunts from a kid on the other side, but that I told them to ignore it because you can't do anything about it. The response from this 12 year old was "Actually, I can." He got the ref's attention a second later before a goal kick, stopped play, walked out and talked to the ref, who immediately addressed the situation on the other side. When they are treated with respect, they act in a way deserving of our respect.

**Number 5: Starters** Travel soccer is a different animal, but in recreational soccer, there should never be a "starter." I always have eleven girls who are "Starting today." But they are not my starters. In fact, before I work out starting positions for each game, I look back over the last couple to figure out who hasn't "started on the bench." My girls view bench as a very important starting position. Without my asking them to do so, they stand beside me and we talk about things that need to be corrected and ways to take advantage of the other team's style. Then, when they go into the game, they take charge. They tell their teammates what to change. And they can do it without me trying to vicariously play the game at the top of my lungs.

But there's an even more important reason to take this approach. Our league rules require every player to play at least one half of the game. If I start the best eleven, when I put in four subs who are less skilled, I substantially weaken my team. Instead, I balance strengths and weaknesses and blend my subs into the skill mix on the field. In addition to keeping my skill level on the field even, less experienced players can better learn by watching and playing next to the more experienced players. I go to each game with 4 pre-planned substitution cycles per half.

It takes more time before the game to plan it out (If you are interested, I will privately share with you the computer program that does it for me) but it pays off in a lot less frustration during the game. Not only do I not have to worry

about who to put where, but the players know that it's already been determined who is where and they don't need to pester me about where they want to play.

**Number 4: Loser** I really, really, really dislike the word loser. A few seasons back we didn't win until the last game of the season. We were 0-3-4, but six of the seven were extremely close matches. The girls knew when the last game started that the other team was 0-5-2-their two ties coming against us. Sure, they wanted to win a game, but they were concerned about the fact that doing so meant the other team would finish the season without a win, and they felt badly about it. They had the shots all season. A few inches here and there and they would have been 7-1. But they never came off with a bad attitude. They always complemented each other on some good play made in the game and they always knew that "We won in effort!" Whatever the score may have been, one thing they knew-they were never losers.

**Number 3: This game is important!** The only important thing about any game is the level of effort put in to the games. Did you go out and play the best you were capable of playing today? Our number one objective is to have fun-not place first. Yes, winning is fun. But when every principal of recreational soccer is sacrificed on the altar of victory something is fundamentally wrong.

Other than an injury or scheduled sub, I have only pulled a player out of a game twice. In one instance, a girl told me that she wasn't going to run and I couldn't make her. I told her that I wouldn't think of trying to make her run and told her to have a seat with her dad until she felt like playing. After he finished with her, she not only wanted to run, but went back out and played her best half ever. The second incident was during an all star double header. A girl had been shoved down or had her shirt yanked five or six times by the same player. The last time, she managed to kick the ball off the offender and out of bounds for a throw in. I called her over to me, and could see tears in her eyes. Before I could even ask if she was okay, she said "Bad attitude, right?" She thought she was coming out. Actually I just wanted to make sure she was okay, but she was so upset, I told her to come stand with me for a minute and put in a sub. After the game, she told me that I pulled her out at just the right time. She was so fed up with the other girl's dirty play that she was about to scream at the ref. Later in the day I watched her continue to do it to the next team. She was finally whistled when a girl was injured by her play. One of the assistants was about to go onto the field to confront the ref during the stoppage. I went instead and asked him to consider me a field marshall. I told him I had watched this girl take dirty shots for more than three halves, and opponents have gone down at least five times. I also asked him to pay special attention to her for the rest of the game. Then I realized she had heard me. She was a perfect angel for the rest of the day. We were playing for the love of the game that All Star Day. There were no prizes for placing first. But that other girl was focused on total victory and whatever it took to get there.

Once the outcome of the game becomes more important than the outcome of the players, soccer can actually become a destructive influence on the lives of a recreational player. The player that does not have the athletic ability to measure up to the coach's requirements eventually walks away from soccer and learns to walk away from other challenges in his or her life.

**Number 2: You're a ??????** , you should play here. At least once each season I gather all my players together and ask them how many players are on offense or defense. Of course, it's a trick question. This season a girl who is not only new to my team but is new to organized soccer tried to answer my question about defense. She brought her hand up to her shoulder, then tilted her head as the hand inched higher. I could see the hesitation in her face-afraid to actually say something that would make her the "new player with the wrong answer." Nevertheless, I called on her and got a couple of "umms" before very sheepishly answering "eleven." When she found out that she actually knew the answer, her grin was a mile wide. Fifteen minutes later, the other players learned what I already knew. This may have been her first season of "organized" soccer, but she had been playing pickup ball for years with her brothers and friends wherever they could find space. Her hispanic heritage no doubt contributed to her opinion that soccer was having fun moving the ball around space-who needs a field! Her ball skills were very good. More importantly, she knew that when the other team has the ball, everyone is on defense. When we've got it, everyone is on offense. Even the goalie-a good punt after handling the ball is but the first step in moving down to shoot on the goal.

If I ask a girl to play left defender, I don't want to see her standing on the corner of the penalty box waiting for the ball to come to her. She should challenge the forwards at mid field. A midfielder might even move behind her to

lend support. And once play direction is again moving in our favor, she and the midfielder would adjust to a more normal relationship. Positions should be relative to teammates, not touchlines and goals.

**And the Number One phrase that should never be heard on the soccer field: That's not soccer!** I have actually heard this phrase used by a coach this season. He happens to coach my oldest daughter, who resumed playing at 14 after a nine year break. My sister was in town recently and watched this coach work the sideline. She was stunned. Frankly, she couldn't believe I even allowed my daughter to stay on the team. The girls weren't playing well. They were dragging. They were missing balls. But they were playing soccer-even if it wasn't their best. To be fair to the coach, he has done a good job of working with my daughter and encouraging her and letting her adjust back into the game. But he does not respond well to mistakes and lack of effort.

How many articles have been written about coaches trying to direct a player from the sideline? We all know in our heads that isn't doesn't work. But putting that concept into practice is more difficult. I teach my subs when they are on the bench. They stand with me and we talk about things that should be done differently at the position they will be playing when they go in. That communication will register with them. They will probably still forget a lot of it once they are back in the game, but eventually they will learn it. At least they are thinking the right way for a while. Yelling constructive instructions and explanations to players in the middle of the game will, if it registers at all, only confuse them. Their brains are too busy processing input from the field to register the coach's words. That changes though, with destructive information. For some reason the mind that so successfully shuts out positive information will collect negative words like a steel trap. When a coach berates play, that sinks in. When a coach tells a player "That's horrible!" it sinks in. The negative comments get through. Correction should take place privately when they aren't playing, not publicly when they are.

Do any of these sound familiar to you? Do you sometimes use these words and phrases? Do you know a coach who does? Think about the effect they have on those who hear them. Then, do your best to see that these ten words and phrases are not heard on your field.