This article details methods that coaches could utilize to improve upon their players’ and team’s practice performances. Being a former Division I soccer coach, I know firsthand the frustrations coaches go through trying to motivate players day in and day out. The particular focus will be on empowering athletes with quality practice skills. I devised and have worked off of a “quality of practice” model which was derived from the theoretical, empirical, and practical work from numerous disciplines, including motor learning, pedagogy, coaching, and sport psychology. Specific topics included deliberate practice, practice distribution and variability, practice methods, simulation, transfer, and efficiency of feedback (Butler & Winne, 1995; Ericsson, 1996; Ericsson, 2003; Fischman & Oxendine, 1998; Magill, 2001; Schmidt & Wrisberg, 2000).

The model encompasses four main factors: (1) adopting a quality attitude; (2) utilizing quality preparation procedures prior to the lesson; (3) incorporating quality execution strategies during class activities, and then (4) taking the time and effort for quality control or evaluation of their performance of the activity or game.

Quality Attitude

USC football coach Pete Carroll a recognized “educator” at both the professional and collegiate levels, spoke at a sport psychology conference (Carroll, 1999) on quality of practice issues, most notably the attitude that participants bring to the practice. In an interview (and subsequent article), Coach Carroll noted a distinction between two types of athletes: mediocre-attitude versus professional-attitude athletes. “Mediocre-attitude players wonder ‘what is coach going to do to us today’? Players in this mindset go through the motions, put in their time, and just want to complete the drills and get out of there. Professional-attitude players consider practice as an opportunity for improvement and refinement, and not something forced onto them” (Voight and Carroll, 2006, p. 328). Do you have many students who fit into these particular categories? To change the mindset of a ‘mediocre-attitude’ student-athlete it is important to do the following:

1. Get to know your students as more than just “players” who are put through drills and games for a class period. Getting to know the students will let them know you care, and chances are they will give more of themselves since you have done so.

2. Knowing them in this way will also enable you to be aware of student preferences for specific teaching behaviors: namely types and timing of feedback and their motives for participation. The coaching literature shows those players not receiving their preferred feedback or having their primary motives met will be dissatisfied (Chelladurai, 1990; Voight & Callaghan, 2006).

3. Today’s generation of students want to feel part of the process, so providing them with as much instructional information regarding the purposes behind the activities and how it relates to the game will go a long way to improving upon their attitude.

Quality Preparation

How many players actually prepare for practice? Most players probably shove down a burger, race to the locker room, busily put on their gear, get to the practice field and wait until they are told what to do. Sounds like a mediocre-attitude athlete. A professional attitude athlete will attempt to find a way to prepare better for practice. Actually having a set routine to follow, made up of proper eating (fueling up) and rest, as well as finding a way to let go of non-soccer-related problems (school, friends, significant others) can ensure that the two hours of practice can be dedicated solely to quality execution. The ability to park distractions is an important skill to acquire. It is very difficult to truly commit and focus on practice if outside stressors are brought onto the field. One routine that has worked with several top players is to write down the stressors that are nagging them, and, prior to walking onto the field, shredding or throwing this paper away, symbolically throwing away the stressors so that the player can focus on practice objectives.

Coaches can be a great help in assisting athletes with their practice preparation by setting up pre-practice routines, such as arriving to the field prior to the start of practice to perform a wide array of warm-up activities. Players who do this routine can be truly ready to begin practice once the coaches arrive. Also, athletes

Continued on page 10
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Coaches can be a great help in assisting athletes with their practice preparation by setting up pre-practice routines, such as arriving to the field prior to the start of practice to perform a wide array of warm-up activities. Players who do this routine can be truly ready to begin practice once the coaches arrive. Also, athletes can prepare better for practice by setting standards of performance (goals) for each week’s practice or individual session (e.g., “What do I want to accomplish by the first preseason scrimmage? What do I want to accomplish in this defending drill?”). In addition to setting standards, players can visualize what they want to accomplish prior to physically and technically executing the drill. Another strategy that top players have used is to scrimmage? What do I want to accomplish in this defending drill?”). In addition to setting standards, players can visualize what they want to accomplish prior to physically and technically executing the drill. Another strategy that top players have used is to mentally picture themselves executing their most important roles and responsibilities over and over again, often the night before practice or prior to practice. Strikers would shoot 100 shots a night before bedtime in their mind’s eye. Keepers would make crossed-ball saves and block a certain amount of shots. Each position could easily do this type of “homework” every day or night. Visualizing these actions help to devise a mental blueprint that is used during real, physical training. The more often players perform their particular actions, both in their heads and with a real ball, the more reps they are putting in.

Quality Execution
Mediocre-attitude athletes often go through the motions and do just enough during practice so they do not get yelled at or called out. Professional-attitude athletes have set purposes and objectives for each practice session and view practice as a valuable opportunity. They also utilize techniques geared toward their own quality execution, whereas the “mediocres” attempt to survive the session. It is important that coaches not just let practice end; instead, coaches should make sure that players finish practice.

Examples of quality execution techniques used by professional-attitude athletes include the following:

- Taking notes during a team meeting or after practice sessions regarding specific points they find important, especially coaching points on technical and tactical elements.
- Evaluating practice performance “on the fly” or during practice, so they can be more aware of what is working versus what is not. “Mediocre” just want to get to the end of practice and are not aware of how they are doing.
- Devising competitions with themselves to increase the quality of execution. For example, if a professional-attitude athlete is doing sprint work, he attempts to chase down a teammate instead of just trying to survive the running. During technical work, a professional-attitude athlete counts the number of successful attempts made instead of just doing the drill until the coach stops it (again, merely surviving).
- Utilizing preset routines when concentration begins to drift during practice. Professional-attitude athletes utilize refocusing routines to ensure that when focus fades they have a routine from which to draw.
- Knowing exactly why they are doing a certain drill, what the end result should look like, and what they should be focusing on during execution. This knowledge can have a big impact on the quality of effort and execution. These issues should be discussed prior to drill execution. Although this responsibility primarily lies with the coaches, players should ask if they do know the answer to these pertinent questions.

Quality Control
Once practice is done, do players evaluate their performance? Professional-attitude players ask themselves the following questions:

- How was my physical, technical, and tactical execution?
- How was my work rate?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of my play?
- What will I do differently during my next practice?
- What should I do in preparation for the next practice?
- What helped to motivate me for practice today?
• How did I refocus and stay focused today?
• What did the coaches say to me regarding my practice performance?

Mediocre-attitude players do not ask these questions. They are simply pleased that practice is over. Using standards and goals is very helpful, especially if a coach has players who evaluate their progress. If players accomplish a particular goal, they should take pride in their accomplishment and press on with higher goals. If goals are not accomplished, players should then reevaluate their performance (positives/negatives), and either start fresh to accomplish the goal the next day or revise the goal.

A survey has been developed to assess the use of the essential quality practice techniques by top players in their respective sports (contact the author directly for a copy of this survey). Obtaining this feedback can be an excellent springboard for discussion with individual players and the team. Players should be informed of the results, with the trust that they will only be used to assist the athletes in their play and not as a punishment in any way. For example, no player should be called out for having low scores on the subscales. Players will derive the appropriate feedback if they score it themselves as well, but this survey will be more valuable if the coach is active in the process. As with any questionnaire, players can record answers that they know the coach wants to see, but this practice can be limited if the coach explains the importance of honest responses, and that the results will only be used to better each player’s training habits.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: For more information on improving upon the quality of individual-team practice, leadership training for captains, team building, coaching today’s athletes, or performance-enhancement information, visit my website [www.drmikevoight.com] or contact me directly [e: voightmir@ccsu.edu].