

Why a coaching course?
Dr. Lewis Atkinson
Delaware Youth Soccer Association
Director of Coaching



Whenever we offer a coaching course questions come up regarding coaching courses and the USSF licensing program. Implicit in the questions are, (1) "are licensed coaches 'better' coaches than those who are not licensed?" or, (2) "does a 'higher' license mean the coach is better than those with a lesser license?"

The questions are silly, really.

I hold an earned doctorate. It's a great title, but does it mean that I'm a better educator than someone with a bachelor's or a master's degree? Of course not. It means I have completed a particular program of study (so, I know something). It means I've conducted research that has passed some scrutiny (ok, I've done something once). It means I know how to get across the academic finish line (I can be patient). But if I never improve my educational practice as a result of the program and research, etc, then no, I'll never be better than the next guy. To improve in anything you have to find a better way and act on it.

It's just that simple, and to a degree, it's just that complex.

The coaching license curriculum of the USSF progresses from technical and tactical decisions made on and around the ball (C license) through functional training (B license) to the technical /tactical training of senior players (A license). Acquiring a license means you have completed a program of study (you know something) and have been evaluated coaching that material (you have done something once). But does it make you better than the next guy? Depends.

As a practical matter, completing our coaching schools can't guarantee that a candidate will become a good coach any more than a MBA will guarantee that its holder will become a good manager. Some things: common sense, observation, man management, and a deep understanding of the game, can't be taught; and those qualities usually make the difference between success and something a good deal less.

By their nature, world wide, coaching courses are process oriented in the evaluation of candidates. Coaches are assessed on how they handle the day to day task of conducting a training session that addresses a particular theme. Essentially what the evaluators look at is; do you know the game, the player, and the topic well enough to expect improvement. The reality of coaching is that improvement is a long term issue that the schools can't realistically evaluate.

So what do the courses offer? Actually, quite a lot; Our courses are very good at teaching you how to take the jumble of ideas you need to work on with your team and finding a focus that communicates to your players and can bring about improvement. Our courses will give you a structure to think about the game; and along the way you will learn a little more about soccer as well. On top of that it is an environment where you absolutely enjoy yourself.

But (one last time) taking a course will not make you a better coach if you don't attempt to improve you're coaching as a result. I'm disappointed when coaches just use the courses to pad their resume, and never actually change their approach to the training of their teams.

To be a better coach you begin by answering the question, "What am I going to do this year to make myself a better coach?" Maybe it's watching how other coaches train their teams and get performance out of their players; maybe it's watching the game at the pro level to see the bigger picture; maybe it's observing games with a more experienced coach and talking about what they see out there.



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Or, maybe it's taking a course.

As coaching courses approach, particularly the D license course, we invariably get a request that goes something like this, "I have played soccer for (fill in the blank, anywhere from 10 to a trillion years), can I be waived through the E Certificate into the D course?"

The second most common request is a variation of the above. It goes like this, "I have been coaching for (fill in the blank), do I really need to take the E Certificate before the D License?"

Let me address each of these requests.

First, how does playing experience equate to coaching ability? Well, there is no question that knowing the game is a key to teaching the game. Those with the "content knowledge" have more to offer than those who are trying to learn the game through books and tapes. But (and this is a big "but") does being a player mean you have a notion of how to communicate the game, particularly to children?

Some people are "naturals." They have an innate sense of how to communicate the game, of what is important, and of how to challenge children in a child friendly environment. Unfortunately, most people are not naturals.

An example...I was at a tournament Labor Day weekend watching Central Delaware Soccer Association teams. In one U/12 game the opposing coach clearly had taught his team all the game's little tricks, (you know, how to use their hands, push off the ball, obstruct, etc.) at the expense of learning how to pass and receive. As a consequence, the result was never in doubt; the CDSA team played the ball faster and with a purpose. The other team was never dangerous. The CDSA team won 3-0.

This is what scares me. When that coach left playing the game, at some adult level, the tricks were perhaps useful, but not with children, and not at the expense of their development. Knowing children is as important as knowing the game. And knowing what in the game is important is everything.

If you ask me if a course would have helped this guy, I'm doubtful. There are some that will never get it. But, what about the coach who has been around the park a bit. Should they be waived through the E? When I am asked that, I am usually at a loss as how to respond. I thought the coach wanted to take a course. Why would waiving make sense, because they have (pick a number here) years of experience? How does that equate? It's the old saw, "do you have 20 years of experience, or one year of experience times twenty?"

In the D License, the candidates are evaluated by actually coaching a theme. I can honestly say this, whenever we waive someone through the E, for what ever reason, we are disappointed in his or her performance when it comes time for the coaching evaluation. The E means something in our progression. The E Certificate and the D License are not redundant. Don't be so anxious to get past material you think is elementary. It isn't.

If your coaching development is important to you, then take the time.