

Filling a player's 'emotional tank'

By David Jacobson

A player's "emotional tank" is similar to a car's gas tank. When the tank is full, the player runs well. With an empty tank, the player does not run at all. Coaches, parents and players can fill or drain tanks, depending on how they communicate.

"Filling Emotional Tanks" is one of the techniques that can help develop elite U.S. youth players.

The sports and educational psychology that underlies Positive Coaching indicates that a full tank generally results from a ratio of five specific, truthful praises to one constructive, specific criticism. That may seem like a lot of happy talk, especially for coaches who focus on correcting weaknesses and tearing down player egos in the name of "team-building."

But Filling Emotional Tanks works. It has helped Brendan Eitz lead both the men's and women's teams at Chicago's Loyola University into the NCAA tournament over the last several years. The technique also has taken hold in elite programs, such as Chicago's Sockers FC, the Washington, D.C. area's National Capital Soccer League and the San Francisco Bay Area's Mustang Soccer.

Filling Emotional Tanks works because an uplifting, positive atmosphere keeps players open to the inevitable criticism and correction that leads to improvement. Conversely, too much criticism, especially ego attacks that do not focus on improving skill, will cause players to tune out.

So, what might a tank-filling coach sound like?

"Jimmy, it was exciting to see you dribble past that defender."

"Way to read the flight of the ball and get into position."

"I like how you used your lower body strength to maintain balance when the opponent tried to move you."

"You out jumped him."

"Next time, let's make sure you strike the ball on the top half so you can direct it down toward the goal."

"You have the ability to win and direct every head ball."

Although the 5:1 ratio is ideal, coaches and parents need not count their praises and criticisms. When it's time to correct a player, do so. As long as you're generally supportive and encouraging, most players will be receptive to your correction.

A few keys to Filling Emotional Tanks:

Keep praise truthful and specific. Nothing goes in one ear and out the other like "Lookin' good," or "Way to go." Recognize the specific behavior you've been seeking, which lets a player know that you are paying attention, that you are earnest in your desire for improvement and that you have caught him or her doing something right.

Praise in public and criticize in private. Public praise is a huge tank-filler, as you know from receiving it yourself. "Criticize in private" does not preclude you from instructing a player within earshot of others so all can learn together. But that fish-or-cut-bait conversation with a player should remain private, where the player is not humiliated and feels free to respond frankly.

Reward effort. Praise is not just for results. In a scoreless match would you praise only your goalkeeper? Praise is to reinforce desired behavior. This is especially important for less-skilled players to keep them from becoming discouraged and failing to try their hardest, when effort is about all they can offer your team.

Remember, Filling Emotional Tanks is not just happy talk. It is a strategy for keeping your players open to correction. Full tanks can lead to full nets. Then the real happy talk begins.