



## POSITIVE PLAYING ENVIRONMENT POLICY

### **Acknowledgement:**

This policy originates (and has been adapted) from the *Positive Playing Environment Initiative* first authored and promulgated for the club by former Coaching Co-ordinator, David Sutton in October 2012.

**Context:** Preston Bullants Junior Football Club (**PBJFC**) fields junior football sides in the Yarra Junior Football League from Under 8's to Colts/Youth Girls (Under 17/18).

**Aim:** That the PBJFC Football Development Manager, in conjunction with its Coaching Co-ordinators, proactively work with coaches and parents to embed the principles of this policy into club culture.

**Reason:** Young people enjoy themselves most and learn best in an environment where they receive regular feedback delivered calmly and directly. Feedback should focus more on effort than result, be educative not punitive and be heavily weighted to emphasise what is being done well and secondly where the challenges lie.

**Need:** Football has a long history of abusive styles of coaching and unfortunately this style continues to be all too common in junior ranks. Equally, it is a coaching trap to focus firstly on mistakes and being regularly critical whilst overlooking the genuine effort and improvements being made. This creates fear and anxiety within players. The PBJFC unequivocally rejects this approach. We want to create playing environments where players are encouraged and feel confident to take risks rather than be fearful of making a mistake.

**ALL VOLUNTEERS ARE AT ALL TIMES BOUND BY THE YARRA JUNIOR FOOTBALL LEAGUE RULES AND BY LAWS.**

### **Underlying Philosophy Within This Approach:**

Coaches place more focus on what is being done well than where challenges might be for an individual or team. Being told regularly what one is doing well opens the individual best to hear the more challenging feedback.

Player and team feedback should be relevant and specific. As much as possible feedback should be directed to the individual player within games and training and be as close to the actual event prompting the feedback as is practicable. Feedback should always be specific and relevant, so the player/team knows precisely what they have done well or what they are being challenged to do/try. The use of the runner and quarter breaks during games is critical to this process.

In such an environment the focus is less on the result of a player's efforts or of the game and more on the effort being put in, the progress being made and the enjoyment of the game and time with teammates. This does not mean we don't try to win a match, but it is not the sole or even primary measure of success.

In this approach there is zero tolerance of coaches, or adults around the team, being constantly critical whilst ignoring the positive achievements of players and teams, or of being abusive, humiliating or belittling towards players. Contrary to the perception of some, a positive environment approach is not a soft option. It takes considerable effort for coaches to implement and apply consistently, and it involves providing direct feedback to players that can on occasion be challenging to them, but because it is delivered in an environment where positive feedback is the norm the player/team is better able

to accept more difficult feedback and feel confident enough to try new and more challenging things within the game.

Angry and abusive behaviour is always more about the adult's ego than it is about the young people we are responsible for. The old approach of toughening them up by abusing them has no place in the PBJFC.

### **Role of the Coach and Assistants (incl. Runner):**

The key people in creating a Positive Playing Environment are the Coaching Panel – the coach and their assistants (including Runner). It requires of these people:

- **A clear understanding of the policies of the PBJFC.** Particularly regarding match selection when more than the maximum allowable number of players are available, player time on the ground, rotation of players through different positions in younger grades and the use of rotations within games.
- **A clear understanding of the philosophy and framework contained within a Positive Playing Environment approach.** Coaches are encouraged to seek clarification from the relevant Coaching Coordinator of any aspect of this approach and to regularly review how they are going in their coaching. The Coaching Coordinator will endeavour to be present on a rotating basis at training and matches to support and provide feedback to coaches. Such feedback will uphold the same principles as apply within this approach for feedback to players.
- **Excellent use of the runner and quarter breaks during games.** Feedback is best provided as close to the event as possible. The runner should be used extensively to tell players during games what they did well. This is particularly important early in the season as it builds a culture where players and parents come to expect a message from the runner is always going to be educative and usually a pat on the back with a specific reason as to why. It seems important that the general culture within football of the runner being used primarily to tell players what they have done wrong is challenged and rejected by the PBJFC. It is therefore important that as much as possible the runner be the same person every week and that s/he fully understand the principles of this Policy. Specific feedback following the above principles should be provided at the beginning of every quarter break address by the coach.
- **Clear articulation of the player's role in a position and specific instructions as to how the team should be playing.** Whilst instructions need to be age appropriate it is important that players are educated into how to play particular positions and that specific team instructions at each quarter address such issues as which side of the ground to play and specific defensive, midfield and forward instructions. Instructions should not be too long or complicated for the age group and individual players should occasionally be asked to repeat the instructions back to the coach as one measure that they understand them.
- **Excellent use of training to provide one on one feedback.** If coaches can have an assistant run a drill or exercise during training this provides another opportunity to provide feedback to players. It is important that this time is utilized to provide feedback to all players without a bias to the better players in the team.
- **Self-discipline.** Coaching young people is a rewarding but at times frustrating experience as individuals can be slow to improve or implement team rules or strategies, and on occasion will behave inappropriately while in our charge. However, when we take on the role, we commit to all feedback being provided in the appropriate manner and within this approach in an environment focused on enjoyment and improvement. Coaches can expect the full support of

the Football Development Manager and Coaching Coordinators as well as that of the PBJFC Committee whilst they are doing their best to uphold the principles expressed in this Policy.

### **Examples of Providing Feedback Within This Approach:**

#### ***Example One:***

A player tries to bounce the ball and drops it or gets caught.

**Negative Playing Environment:** Coach uses the runner or quarter break to criticise the player with the result that the player loses confidence and is reluctant to risk bouncing the ball in the future.

**Positive Playing Environment:** Coach uses the runner or quarter break to deliver one of the following messages depending on the team rules, what options up the ground the player had, the player's confidence and the player's history of bouncing the ball:

- a) "Well done for having the confidence to try a bounce. I haven't seen you try that before, don't be put off that it didn't work. Let's practice that at training and if you get the opportunity and it is the best option try it again."
- b) "Well done on the way you made position and got the footy and I love that you had the confidence to try a bounce, but in that particular instance John was on his/her own 20 metres in front of you. So I want you to keep making good position like you are but look up when you get the ball and if someone is in a better position then kick it to them, otherwise, if you are clear take a bounce and then give it to a teammate."

**Further Learning for the player:** It is the third time the coach has delivered message (b) above to this player and s/he is refusing to take it on. It is completely appropriate in this instance to use the runner to bring the player off the ground during the quarter to speak with them as close to the event as possible. The coach re-emphasises the message above, gives the player 2 minutes on the bench to digest it and then puts them back on the ground. This process rarely needs to be repeated more than once or twice before the player takes the message on board. At no stage is there communication that is belittling of the player or a sense that the player is being removed as punishment, this is an educative process, and it is important the coach speaks to the player calmly.

#### ***Example Two:***

Player hangs back and doesn't go for the ball.

**Negative Playing Environment:** Player told by runner or coach "don't be soft and get in harder". More than in any other example this is the area where children get yelled at by spectators and adults around the group.

**Positive Playing Environment:** Recognises that football is a demanding physical contact game and that even league footballers on occasion hold back from going hard for the contested football. The coach's response will take account of the age of the player, the specifics of the situation (this is important given that body size varies a lot in children the same age) and the players underlying confidence levels. Some possible responses within this framework include:

- a) The coach recognizes that this will be an issue for most players at various times in the season, so s/he provides no feedback to specific players but makes physical contact, tackling and contested drills a focus at training. By providing opportunities for practice

and not making it a public issue the coach is allowing children's confidence to develop naturally.

- b) The coach implements (a) above with regard to training but makes a point of providing positive feedback in front of the group regularly when a player goes in positively to get the ball. In this approach it is important to use examples from across the team and not just highlight the player who is the biggest or who always goes and gets the footy. The point is to build confidence and encourage players across the team to take reasonable risks. Within this approach the player who holds back from going for the footy three times and goes in to get it once quickly learns that whilst they will not be criticized for holding back, they will be praised for going in. If applied consistently and combined with opportunities to practice this at training most players soon reverse the ratio.
- c) Players are usually very sensitive to feedback about how positively they go in for the ball. In this instance direct feedback should not be provided using the runner or in front of the group. The coach should speak to the player at training and find things to praise in their game whilst feeding into the conversation that the next challenge for the player is to develop the confidence to go and get the footy more often. It is often good to start this conversation by asking the player to tell you what they think they did well in the last two games and for the coach to affirm and add to this list. If the coach, then asks the player where they think the next challenge in their development is they will usually now feel more comfortable to name that going in for the footy is where they would like to improve. The coach can then encourage them to practice this in the next drill at training. In future games the coach should look hard for opportunities to praise the player in front of the group when they do go and get the ball. It is not uncommon that the use of this approach results in seeing quite timid players becoming much more confident at tackling and going for the ball within the space of six or seven games.

***Example Three:***

Player tries to kick on his/her non-preferred side in a match, the kick dribbles 10 metres and is picked up by the opposition who kick it towards their goals.

**Negative Playing Environment:** The runner or quarter break is used to criticise the player for costing the team an attacking opportunity. By focusing too much on winning the game the coach falls for the trap of limiting the development of important skills within the game environment. One measure of whether a coach is implementing a negative or positive playing environment is how much players feel confident enough to dispose of the ball using their non-preferred side. Another measure is how anxious players feel if they make a mistake. Implementing a positive playing environment may well cost games because players are encouraged to extend themselves and will therefore make mistakes.

**Positive Playing Environment:** The coach creates opportunities at practice for players to regularly use their non-preferred side to kick and handball. Depending on the age of the group it may be appropriate that in games a team instruction is for players to avoid doubling back into the pack to try and get onto their preferred side. Rather they are expected to use their non-preferred side even if they make a mistake with the execution of the kick.

The two critical questions the coach must answer in providing feedback to the player in this example are:

- a) Was the situation of the player in the game one where the decision to use their non-preferred side was the correct one?
- b) Has the player put enough practice in at training using their non-preferred side that it is reasonable to try it in games?
- c) If the answer to both of the above questions is yes then the player should be praised in front of the group. The fact that the execution of the kick was poor is only relevant to emphasise that work on this difficult skill needs to continue.
- d) If the answer to one or both of the above questions is no then feedback should be provided using the already stated principles.

**Note:** Some coaching instructors emphasise that a player should become proficient on their preferred side before attempting to use their non-preferred side. PBJFC rejects this approach whilst accepting it is a debatable point. The club's belief is that the earlier players learn to use both sides of their bodies to kick and handball the more natural it feels to them. Only a handful of players across the competition at Colts level are proficient at disposing of the footy using both sides of their bodies. This may be seen as an indictment on the coaching of junior football.