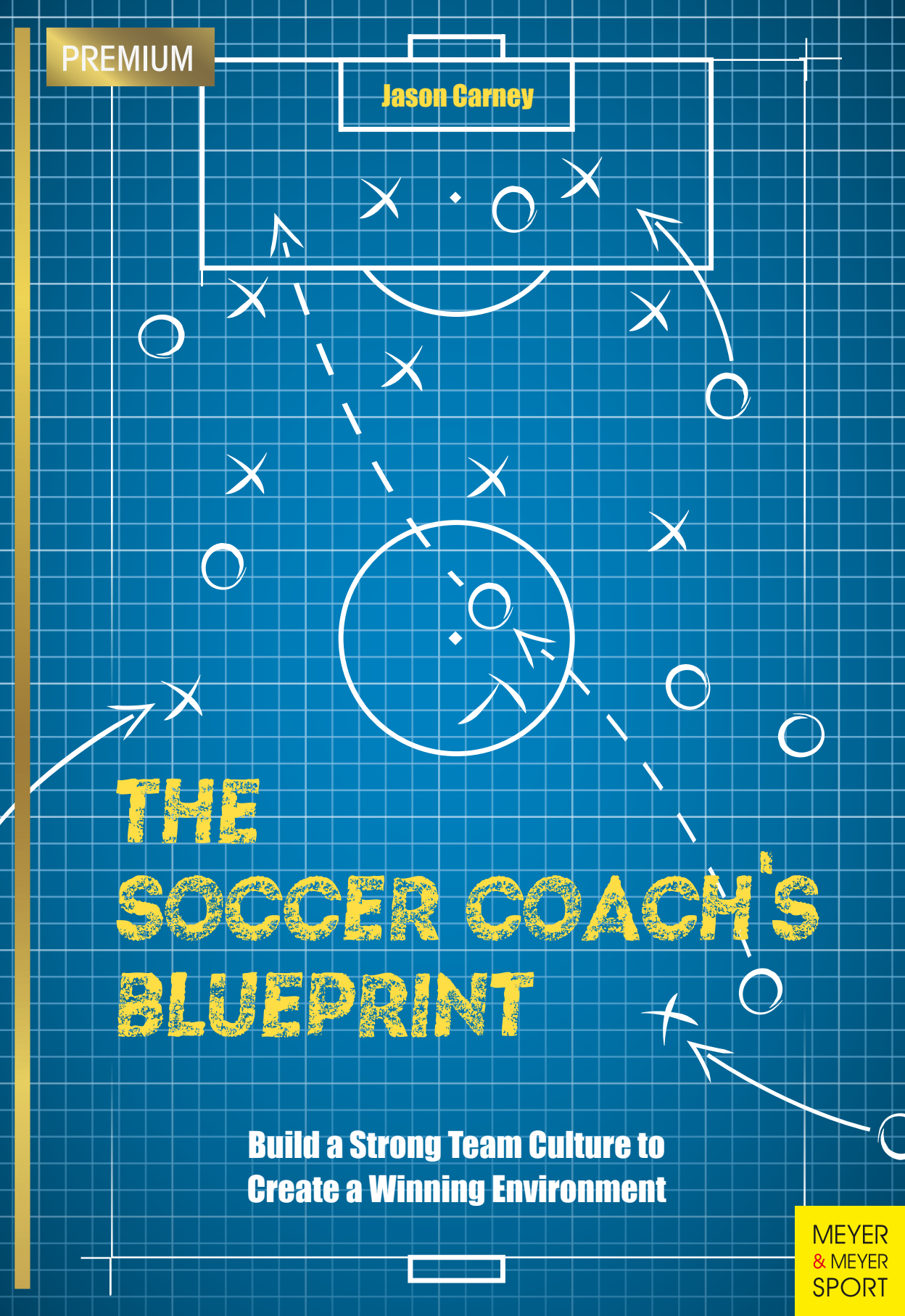


PREMIUM

Jason Carney



# THE SOCCER COACH'S BLUEPRINT

**Build a Strong Team Culture to  
Create a Winning Environment**

MEYER  
& MEYER  
SPORT

## The Soccer Coach's Blueprint

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JASON CARNEY

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# INTRODUCTION

As a child, I loved soccer. I would finish my homework at recess so that when I got home, I could have dinner and then get out on the soccer field. Rain or shine (it was mostly rain) I played with my friends or, if my friends were not playing, I would go out and kick the ball against a wall. I had a great imagination, and when I was kicking the ball against the wall, it was just like I was at Anfield, playing for the mighty Liverpool FC. My soccer imagination was a hindrance when it came to school work. All I ever thought about was the beautiful game. While studying math, English, and science, I was consumed by the thought of playing professional soccer. The time my mind was more at ease was during PE. We always played soccer or ran cross country in our PE classes, so I was way more focused when it was time to exercise.

I grew up in Bolton, Lancashire and became a loyal Bolton Wanderers supporter. My father was a Liverpool fan and was disappointed when I jumped ship to support the Wanderers. I thought it was the right thing to do to help my local team. It became an obsession. I had some great moments supporting the Wanderers. The one that sticks in my mind was the 1995 playoff final that the Wanderers won 4-3. Reading went 1-0 up after four minutes, Nogan with the goal. Williams made it 2-0 within 12 minutes. Lovell missed a penalty for Reading on 34 minutes, and that was the turning point. Bolton scored a 75th-minute goal to give them hope and, with four minutes to go, De Freitas scored the leveler for the Wanderers. Bolton went 3-2 up in extra time, Paatelainen scored on 105 minutes, and De Freitas scored the Wanderers' fourth goal on 118 minutes. The Reading player-manager Quinn scored a late goal to finish the game 4-3, and ultimately Bolton was promoted to the Premier League. I remember feeling so happy! I was also learning about persistence and teamwork. The Wanderers showed great character that day, and I remember thinking how the coach must be feeling. By this time in 1995, I had already had two opportunities to make a professional team. One was with Bury FC, and the other was with Oldham Athletic, and both times I was unsuccessful. I thought that if I couldn't make it as a professional soccer player, then I wanted to be an expert soccer coach. When I watched soccer games on TV, I always got frustrated when the man of the match was always the guy that scored; he would do nothing all game and then score the winner. I thought the real man of the game was the central defender who tackled well, never lost a header, and barely gave the ball away to the opposition. The next day at work, all my colleagues would be talking about the goal scorer. "Rubbish!" I would now start a debate. "How can someone get man of the match when they only touched the ball twice?"



One of my work colleagues ran a local U11s team in Ramsbottom, Bury, and he asked if I would like to help. I was 25 and thought that even though I was still playing, I wanted to start my coaching career early so that when I finished playing soccer, I would already have about six years of experience as a coach. I had such a great time with the group. I then became a scout for Oldham Athletic. I traveled the northwest of England looking for players that could make the grade as a professional soccer player.

In 1996, I got my big break. Preston North End FC hired me as an academy coach. I was thrown in at the deep end, and I was assigned as head coach of the U16 boys team. I told the club I was not qualified to run the group as I only had my UEFA C license at the time but that I would like to be an assistant. "We don't have anyone else to do it," said the technical director at PNE, "It's all on you."

I thought it was unprofessional for a rookie to be coaching the U16 boys at PNE FC. Not only was I inexperienced, but I was also too young to be given a group of players that only had one year left before a decision would be made about them becoming professional soccer players. I was shocked at the lack of professionalism at the club. That all changed when Gary Peters took over. He was a great mentor for me. I approached him and asked about becoming an assistant coach. He placed me with Ged Starkey, an A license coach who was a good teacher with a great personality. Ged allowed me to have an input and also gave me opportunities to run some practice sessions. After the practices, we would talk about how the practice went, what I did well, and any improvements needed. I look back on those days with fond memories. Gary restructured the staff and the academy. He put together a group of faculty that were humble and authentic. We had one of the most influential youth programs in the northwest of England. After two years with Ged, I was ready to be a head coach. I'll never forget the moment Gary spoke to me about it. He said that I had something that he wished he had: a great connection with people and the players. That was my strength; there is more to coaching than just getting the players to play.

Coaching involves lots of different aspects, and every coach has strengths and weaknesses. I wanted to learn as much as I could about soccer development. I studied the game every single day (and I still do). My obsession to play professionally had now moved to the coaching side.

I wanted more. I was learning a lot, but I felt I needed to understand the game even more. I wanted to travel and experience more cultures. Two opportunities presented themselves: one in New Zealand and one in the United States. In 2003, I headed to the US. I started off in Virginia. In a country where soccer was probably fourth in popularity behind football, baseball, and basketball, I came across lots of players that never really

watched soccer on TV. Sure, the kids loved the game; they loved it for that 90 minutes of practice. After practice, though, youth in America have plenty of opportunities to do other things.

Their only improvement would have to come from three hours of practice a week and the game at the weekend. During my time coaching in Virginia, I coached at eight soccer clubs. I had no communication with any of the technical directors of these clubs. They never once came to me with a blueprint for the club. Nothing! In 2008, I moved to Oregon and started working with a local club. After coaching my team for a few months, I asked them about a development plan for their coaching staff.

Their response? "You don't understand soccer in Oregon." It was then that I realized that not many clubs in the US have a development plan—hence the reason for writing this book.

I hope this book will encourage you to create a culture of development and learning. This blueprint will take you on a development journey. I have remembered all my past experiences: I remember some of my old coaches that had no authenticity, I remember the practice sessions being fitness only, boring and unproductive. These thoughts helped me to become a better coach. Young players thrive on having an authentic coach. They crave structure, honesty, and fun. This blueprint works for all ages and levels of ability. We want to keep the most active child occupied. We want players to be at your practice sessions and to tell their parents, "I want to play soccer!"

The system is successful. We define success by development. We should not coach results. We look at performance. This book will improve your coaching style and your players.



# CHAPTER 1

## THE VISION

The first part of building a culture is your vision. Turn your desire to become a great role model and leader into actions. You need to look at the long-term goal of your club or team. You need to focus on the performances both at practice sessions and at the games. When the environment you are in is committed to learning, then the winning will take care of itself. The vision can start with a mission statement, a statement that emphasizes your beliefs and goals. A mission statement is not merely a description of a soccer club by an external party, but an expression, made by its leaders, of their desires and intentions for the soccer club. The purpose of a mission statement is to focus and direct the organization itself. It communicates primarily to the people who make up the soccer club: its coaching staff and its members. It gives everyone a shared understanding of the club's intended direction. Your mission statement and your playing philosophy are promoted within the club. You should also mention on the club website that you do have a development plan.

You will be able to judge your performance from the players' (and parents') reactions. Players can quietly let you know how they feel about your performance as a coach. If you start with twenty players at practice and in a few weeks it's down to ten, then something is going wrong. There are many other ways to judge how you are performing—don't be too quick to blame the players. More often than not, you are the one who picked the team and now you have to coach them!

I have worked with a few coaches that refused to follow any plan, and I can honestly say that their teams did not improve. The teams stayed in the same low division, and the players did not look like they understood the game. When you do not have a process on development, you will not see improvement.

When implementing a club blueprint, you need loyal, hard-working people by your side. When I sat down with coaches that wanted to join my club, I had an open mind. I took the club blueprint with me and was excited to talk soccer. While I was in conversation with a potential coach, I was thinking:

- Where can this person take me?
- Am I being inspired by listening to this person?
- Is this person capable of encouraging young players to give it their best effort?
- What is their body language when I show them the blueprint?
- How can I inspire them to commit?
- Is this person capable of following the plan and also adding some of their experiences to it?

## MISSION STATEMENT

### Sample Mission Statement

*Our goal is to develop well rounded children who will understand:*

- ***The game of soccer*** – All aspects of the game
- ***Teamwork*** – Knowledge and awareness
- ***Work ethic*** – Speed and mobility
- ***Discipline*** – Courage and bravery
- ***How to win*** – Technical and tactical awareness
- ***How to lose*** - Mental toughness
- ***Fair play*** – Character
- ***Enjoyment*** – Kids who have fun in soccer try harder, perform better, and stay involved longer

Understanding your mission statement and following through on it are so important when building a team culture. Everyone involved has to share this vision. Your core values have to be included in your statement. You cannot just write something down because it looks good on paper. You have to really believe in what you are doing. As you can see, the above statement does not just include soccer skills, it also involves life skills. You can learn valuable life lessons from sports. Yes, you want to teach the players how to play the game, but you also want them to learn how to treat others and to understand work ethic. If a player is working hard and they feel and see their self-improvement, then the player will be on board with your teaching process. Players thrive on structure and guidelines. If the guidelines are not followed by the coach, then the coach will lose the respect from the players and they will feel cheated.

### What does the mission statement mean?

**The game of soccer** – You are teaching the players excellence. Yes, you allow them to play and learn from their mistakes, but you also have to guide them along. Times have changed. I became a decent soccer player by playing on the streets and with friends. If I had worked with a coach to learn more about the game, I would have been a much better soccer player. Game intelligence is key to building a club culture. Players need to feel like they are improving. If players do not get a sense of self-improvement, they will move to another team or sport. You will not be able to create a team culture if you keep losing players every year.

**Teamwork** – Picking the best players does not necessarily mean you will have the best team. The All Blacks—the most successful rugby team in the world—have a motto on building a team: “Better people make better players.” They recruit players that fit into their team. This is why Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United and Bill Belichick at the New England Patriots were (and are) so successful. Their vision of what a team should look like never wavered. If any player disrupted that teamwork, they were kicked off the team, no matter what skill sets they had. This book is similar to that approach. Before you kick a player off the team, try to find out about their background. Communicate with the player and let them know that your job as the coach is to help them. If they continue to work against the team philosophy, then you will have no choice but to let them go. The strength of the team as a whole is the decisive factor in determining the outcome.

Comparing the above professional teams to your team may seem like comparing apples and oranges, but when it comes to teamwork, you should be mimicking the process of the aforementioned teams.

## 1. How Do You Handle Your Players?

Team building is a product of the coach's credibility. The coach must be honest and must be a good teacher. He or she needs to communicate the vision to the players and have realistic targets while building for the future. For the coach to reach the maximum potential of the team, he or she may need to work on two or three priorities to get the group moving forward.

## 2. Do You Communicate?

Good communication is a way of perfecting team building; it creates the right atmosphere for players to learn. In your practice sessions, you will communicate the exercise and demonstrate, then watch your players solve the problems.

## 3. How Do Your Players Get On With Each Other?

There will be a pecking order within the team. The team leader must be one that is respected by all the players. They must also have a close relationship with the coach. Players do not necessarily have to be best friends off the pitch, but it does help. As long as they know their task when they are on the field and in the locker room, your team will be strong.

**Work ethic** – Once again, the coach sets the standards. The coach is always the first to arrive at practices and games. The players will be more likely to jump on board the development train if they see their coach working hard to make them a better player and a better person. Challenge the players to self-manage. Allow the players to be the disciplinarians of work ethic. Working hard does not guarantee a win; in the coach's eyes it is a win, but not in the players' eyes. You have to educate the players on the importance of work ethic.

I always tell my players, "Be the best you can be today. It may be different than yesterday, but get out there and give it your best effort. Have the mindset of can, will, and do!"

Your practice sessions will be competitive. Every action the players take will have a result. When your practice involves players winning and losing, be sure to watch the reaction of all the players once the exercise is over.

**Discipline** – Being disciplined does not mean you will not make mistakes. Some coaches equate making mistakes with not trying. This is just not the case. Do not get the two mixed up. No player wants to be punished for making a mistake. Do not punish the whole group if some players decide to disrespect the practice or game. Sit out the players who

are not disciplined. Explain why they are sitting out and then ask them, "Are you ready to give it your best?" If a player has good discipline, they will learn quicker and the group will progress at a faster rate. The development process is a lot slower if the coach is wasting valuable time on disciplining players. This should never be the coach's job. This is why, when holding tryouts, it is important to look for the player's attitude first. Ajax use the acronym TIPS—technique, intelligence, personality, and speed—when they are looking to recruit players. The blueprint philosophy uses the same letters, but has them rearranged as SPIT. Many grassroots youth soccer clubs do not get the luxury of recruiting players that have TIPS. If you are a local grassroots soccer club, look for personality as your top criteria. We believe that a player must have a great attitude when embracing the blueprint philosophy. We know that the philosophy of decision making will enhance the player's technique and intelligence.

**How to win** – Players need to buy into the phrase "Games are won on the practice field." Explain to the players that they need to rely on each other to become successful. It is impossible to achieve your goals alone. As the coach, especially in youth soccer, your motivation is not the win. You must believe in the process you are taking and you must always be looking for excellence. Coach performance, not results but understand that to get the team on board, you need the results. Players want to win; you want them to want to win. Finding that balance as a coach is vital to building a learning culture.

**How to lose** – The coach (and parents) has a vital role to play when it comes to teams losing. When things are going badly, no one wants to propose solutions because players put their own interests first. There are a thousand excuses when a team loses, but only a few reasons why they lost. Make sure your analysis on why the team lost is accurate and that the players understand. You will come up with a solution to fix it. You cannot turn it into a me-versus-them situation. The message to the team is "We come to practice this week and work on..." When a coach first joins the team, they should discuss dealing with adversity and what they will do if the team starts to go through a bad spell.

For every team I have coached at U13 and above, I use the perfect player table (table 1). I got this idea from Bill Beswick (*Focused For Soccer*) who reshaped my thinking about coaching soccer. I highly recommend that you read Bill's views on sports psychology.

This chart helps me to understand the player's mindset. I look at the answers the players have written down and then I store them away. I only pull them out when a player is having a problem that is related to the perfect player form. I want to see what they wrote. The one that I used the most was the "Making mistakes" part of the chart. I would see players beat themselves up time and time again because, in their eyes, they were not performing. I would sit down with them and show them what they had written on the form at the start of the season. This cleared the air and always seemed to get the player back on the right track.

**Table 1 The Perfect Player**

Situation	The perfect player responds by...
Dealing with poor form	
Making mistakes	
Poor calls by officials	
Being a goal down	
Being a goal up	
Constructive coaching	
Mistakes by teammates	
The big game	
Being substituted	
Coming on as a substitute	
A run of defeats	
Yelling from the crowd	
An intimidating opponent	

We know that no player is perfect, and I had a few issues with some parents when this form was handed out. You have to explain that this is hypothetical. If the form was called the average player table or the good teammate table, I do not think you would get a true answer from the players. The form is a way of setting standards for themselves and is a great tool to fall back on when the situations mentioned above occur.

**Fair play** – This does not mean you go onto the field and allow the opposition to mow you over. It means you play with integrity. You do not abuse officials or supporters. Players do not dive or fake injuries to con the referee. Fair play is respected by the team, players, and staff. Your players are able and willing to perform their role within the team.

**Enjoyment** – Players learn quicker and stay involved in the game longer if they are enjoying themselves. Here *enjoyment* means players being in a learning environment and feeling like they are improving, and being around good teammates and feeling like part of a team. The coach needs to set guidelines and then stick with them. Your practice sessions should be planned, engaging, and fun.

You should never waver from your mission statement. Before joining your team, every player (and parent) should be shown your mission statement and understand that this is about the team.