

Social Reinforcement on the Football Field

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Section I Introduction

To learn anything one must observe those who have gone before you. We all learn from our own mistakes but one of the fastest ways to progress is to learn from observing others'. I have been coaching high school athletes for three years and have always run against a rising tide when it came to reinforcing players. From simple instruction to the post-game pat on the back I never seemed to have a good handle on how to properly and proficiently use social reinforcements. This field observation set me out on a football field for a short one hour pre-game practice with a long time, very successful, coach. I observed as he used social reinforcements to his full advantage. Not only did he use these specific comments as instructions or critiques of skills, but also to maintain control of his large group of kids. What I had struggled with, attention seeking athletes, I observed him master using well time and well-directed comments.

For the entire hour practice I followed him and marked tallies whenever a verbal or non-verbal/physical reinforcement was made. While I could tell while the practice was running that the positives were more common it wasn't until I got home and went through calculating ratios of the eight different types that I noticed the lean toward technical over behavioral. This became an interesting difference between his coaching and what I had been attempting.

Overall I learned a great deal from watching a practice and being able to specifically look for and pick out different social reinforcements and notice how and when they were used. Then to compare them and see the importance they have in setting the tone for a practice.

Section II Methods

For the field observation I was invited to join a football practice coached by Steve Graff at my old high school. I had first talked with him on the phone and purposely did not mention the specifics of the assignment. I did not want to pre-place what I was specifically looking for into his mind, so all I said was it had to do with motor learning and I would be observing and writing down comments. I showed up for a short (day before a game) 1-hour practice and was introduced to the team as a causal observer. I then followed the coach around as he had them get formed up, go through warm-ups, and run drills. He then had them huddle and they talked over mistakes from the last game and what to fix for tomorrow. They practiced some more in groups and together and then were done. Throughout the hour I had my clipboard and chart of the eight types of reinforcement and marked a tally each time Mr. Graff made a comment to the players. At the end of the day I thanked him and came home to count up all the numbers. Later at home I went through and used the “analysis of results” equations given to us to figure out the ratios.

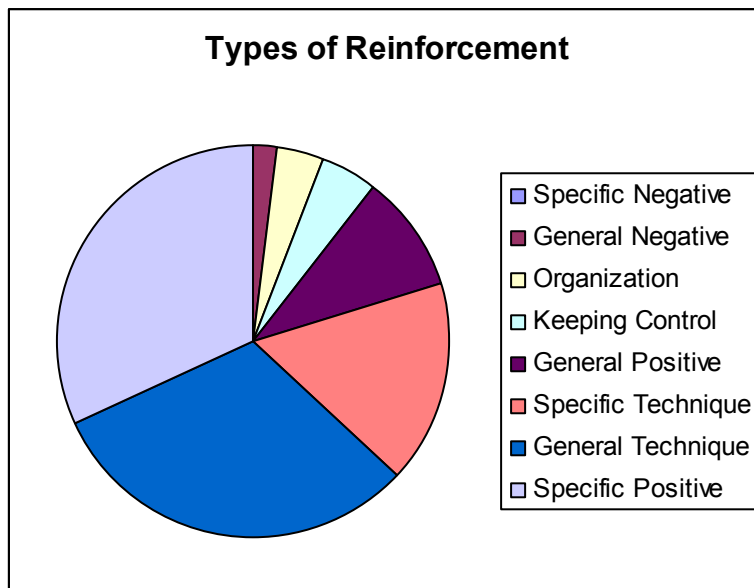
Section III Results

After a brief one hour of following and listening to Coach Graff with his football team I tallied 103 reinforcements, both verbal and physical. Chart 1 lists the type of reinforcement and the amount of times I marked a tally for each. I then created a pie chart (Chart 2) to visually illustrate the amounts of each type. I have also included a small chart (chart 3) to see all the ratios, in number form next to each other.

Chart 1

Types	Amounts
Specific Negative	0
General Negative	2
Organization	4
Keeping Control	5
General Positive	10
Specific Technique	17
General Technique	32
Specific Positive	33

Chart 2



It is clear that positive reinforcement is the main tool that the coach used for his practice. And that technical work was a very close second.

The next step was to go through my data and figure out certain ratios. The first ratio was looking for a comparison between any positive and any negative comment. I came up with a forty three to two ratio for this relationship. This means that for every one negative comment Coach Graff made over twenty-one positive remarks. The next ratio got more specific and looked at Specific Positive reinforcements versus Specific Negative ones. In my hour of observation I did not see a single negative comment made only to one athlete. So the ratio turned out as thirty-three to zero. The third ratio compared Specific Positive to General Positive. I calculated a thirty three to ten ratio. Next I looked at the relationship between Specific Technical and General Technical. Coach Graff's entire practice was heavy in the technical critics and I observed a seventeen to thirteen ratio between specific and general. The last ratio asked to evaluate both technical reinforcements against the total comments I observed for the day. I got a forty nine to one hundred and three ratio, meaning just under half of his total comments for the practice were technical remarks.

Chart 3

	Ratio
Positive/Negative	43:2
Specific Positive/Specific Negative	33:0
Specific Positive/General Positive	33:10
Specific Technical/General Technical	17:32
Specific & General Technical/Total	49:103

Section IV Discussion

I thoroughly enjoyed observing the short football practice held by Coach Graff and was glad to see a coach with a different strategy than I had previously used.

Throughout the hour I tallied 103 different incidents of social reinforcement and came to understand the benefits of technical reinforcements over specific behaviors, as well as positive comments over negative.

The first question asked what was the most frequent behavior and why. I had two top behaviors but Specific Positive had one more response than General Technical. To me this illustrates Mr. Graff's strength as a coach. He focuses his main effort on teaching to the group and then reinforcing single players as they excel at the new skill. He made many comments throughout the practice along the lines of "Everyone watch Jimmy, he really has the right form here."

Question two asked whether the reinforcements were used mainly for motivation or instruction. Mr. Graff seemed to use as an instructional tool. There were a few motivational comments made, mainly to individuals and mainly non-verbal movements, but the majority of his time was spent instructing and critiquing the team.

The next question asked if the reinforcements were contingent on the behaviors of the players. From my observation, and a different practice not held the day before a game might be different, I saw all the coaches strictly focused on skills and technique. The attitude of the player or their behavior in down time and while listening, did not garnish much attention from the coach. Reinforcement, even negative, was mainly aimed at the skills being worked on and the athlete's ability with those skills.

Question four asked if I thought the coach was effective and if so what behaviors illustrated this. I was very impressed with how the reinforcements were used. The previous two questions narrowed down for me that the coach was very on task with the technical skills that needed work and did not give attention to much else. I would originally think that this approach would lead to the players not paying attention or getting away with poor behavior. But that was not the case. It seemed that the athletes gravitated to his mindset of just getting down to work. Most kids act out for the attention and these athletes seemed to know they wouldn't get any attention that way. They didn't act out or require much 'Keeping Control' or 'Organization' reinforcements instead they strived to earn 'Specific Positive Reinforcement'.

Question five asked my opinion on the personal relationship between the coach and the players and I thought he had a very strong leadership quality. Like I answered in the previous question; his athletes want his attention and know the only way to earn it is through displaying correct technique and positive behavior. It was a very father-son situation on the field. The kind of father that you want to have proud of you and makes you work to earn that approval. There were times of practice that he would joke and cuff them on the head in a playful manor but at the end of field time they went their separate ways. It made me see that if you wanted to earn the coaches approval you did it on the field.

The last question pertained to my take-away from the field observation and how I would utilize social reinforcements. I learned a lot from a small hour of observation. I have previously coached high school athletes and have been bogged down by their need for attention. This usually resulted in negative behaviors and then negative attention from

me. But I now see how that results in a constant down-word spiral. They learn they can get the attention easier by being bad. From watching Coach Graff and his approach of basically ignoring negatives and emphasizing positives creates an atmosphere where attention seekers must perform at the top to get noticed. He did not completely ignore poor performance or bad behaviors but, as the ratios showed, focused most of his attention to the technique and to those completing it correctly.