
A young woman with red hair in a ponytail, wearing a red and white soccer jersey, is looking at her smartphone on a soccer field. She has a purple ponytail holder and is wearing earbuds. The background shows a green soccer field with two goals under a cloudy sky.

From text and video messaging to online training and internet forums, today's ever-changing technology is revolutionizing the way volunteer coaches interact with their team and teach sports skills. As an NYSCA Coach are you taking advantage of all these exciting new tools – available only to NYSCA members – to enhance your team's experience?

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Years ago coaching youth sports primarily consisted of filling out a roster, cheering from the sidelines and taking the team out for post-game ice creams. As anyone who has coached a youth sports team in recent years will attest, that role has blossomed well beyond that.

Today's youth sports leagues serve as an extension of a child's developmental education and, as with all other areas of education, technology is playing an ever increasing role.

dynamic technology

By Adam Shilling

Youth sports coaches around the country are relying on these various technological tools to not only prepare them for their role as a sports educator, but also as a means of improving their teaching skills and communicating easier and more efficiently with the young athletes in their care. As online educational opportunities become more dynamic and as mobile communication continues to evolve, the way in which adults and children experience youth sports is

changing as we speak. Ready or not, today's "mobile-web generation" is making an indelible stamp on the youth sports culture.

Leading the charge in this technological evolution in youth athletics is the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS), whose volunteer coaches training program – the National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA) – has long been the world leader in youth sports education and certification for coaches.

Dynamic technology

To equip youth sports coaches with the latest and most effective educational tools available, NYSCA continually goes all out to offer the very latest that the technological world has available.

Along with access to NYSCA's easy-to-use online clinics, coach rating system and online forum, NYSCA coaches now have access to ShapeStuff™ mobile-web technologies as an additional membership benefit.

"We are constantly striving to offer our coaches technological benefits that have the ability to enhance their coaching experience and help them make stronger connections with their players," said John Engh, chief operating officer of NAYS. "With NYSCA Online, the NYSCA coach rating system, the NYSCA Online

and unique member benefits to its coaches. Just recently it announced the launching of ShapeStuff mobile technologies, an online tool that may very well revolutionize the way in which coaches and players interact.

ShapeStuff is an easy-to-use tool that enables youth sports coaches to create skill-building exercises for their players to use between practices. Coaches quickly create short, customized skill-building programs on their PCs. Programs can contain any combination of video clips and interactive exercises supplied by NYSCA, as well as anything on their own computer – even personalized audio or video messages. A push of a button then sends the skill-building exercise to players' personal computers and even cellular phones.



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– Dr. Joy Hughes

Forum, and most recently ShapeStuff mobile-web technologies, we are helping to redefine how organized youth sports are conducted in this new and exciting technological era.”

All of these tools comprise what NAYS refers to as the four-step process, a blueprint for communities to follow that ensures their youth sports volunteer workforce is made up of quality, reliable individuals. The process consists of background screening, training, evaluation and ensuring accountability through organized enforcement of policies and procedures.

As the technological curve continues to expand, new innovations are likely to impact every facet of our culture and youth sports are certainly no exception. How these technological advances will enhance or improve the value of the youth sports experience for the children involved is being determined as we speak.

MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

As more sports-related technological applications are developed, NAYS is committed to offering more dynamic

“Most youth coaches get involved in coaching because they want to shape boys and girls into productive and contributing young men and women,” said Dr. Joy Hughes, founding partner in Mason Mobile Media and vice president for Information Technology at George Mason University. “Often, though, time pressures and the need to deal with the group rather than the individual limit the influence of the coach. ShapeStuff gives coaches the opportunity to influence each team member each day. I see team members becoming much more engaged in the team as the positive influence of the coach permeates their lives.”

All NYSCA coaches are now able to review skills or strategies with their players, update parents with news and information, send fun skill-building games and much more with just a few clicks of a mouse. Team members and parents also have access to a special personalized team Web space – enabling easier interaction when away from the field, court or rink. Coaches can also use the service as a valuable networking tool,

which can easily communicate important messages, announcements and reminders to players and parents.

“Most coaches know that attitude, focus, flexibility and reaction time are as important to a player’s success as the sport-specific routines,” Hughes said. “The Mobile Interactive Practices (MIPs) help to develop skills in all these areas, whenever and wherever the player chooses. Thus, coaching becomes 24/7 and integrated with the player’s life.”

This all new member benefit should be a perfect fit for many of NYSCA’s members who are already making great use of the online coaching tools offered.

INFORMATION SHARING

Online communication has soared to heights greater than anyone could have possibly anticipated. Alongside email, chat rooms and social networking are communication forums where like-minded individuals come to congregate and discuss pertinent topics that they are passionate about.

Launched earlier this year, the NYSCA Coaching Forum provides a platform for NYSCA coaches all around the world to communicate. Whether it’s a question on how to deal with an overzealous youth sports parent or a suggestion for how to help a youngster with a certain skill, the forum is a technological breeding ground for healthy youth sports information sharing on a variety of issues.

“It gives us a chance to see how others are doing things and shows us that there are many different ways to achieve the same objective,” said Patrick O’Connor, an NYSCA girls fast pitch coach from Springfield, Mont. “The point of any forum is to make the entire group a more knowledgeable, more prepared group. Now, we don’t expect any forum to turn Joe Youth Team Manager into Joe Torre overnight – but he can at least have the ability to pull information from those who have gone before him to make better decisions for his team.”

One of the benefits of being associated with a national organization like NAYS is the wide network of like-minded individuals who are willing to share their experiences. With more than 150,000 active

members worldwide, the NYSCA network is comprised of a vast array of individuals of varying levels of expertise in youth sports. Each of these coaches brings to the forum their own unique set of perspectives, opinions and experiences relating to youth sports.

“There are such a variety of coaches out there,” said Paul Sanford, an NYSCA youth baseball coach from Elgin, N.C. “Some don’t know much about the inner workings of the game, but want to work with the kids in a positive activity. Some know the game inside-out, but maybe don’t have the best teaching skills. Some coach their own children because they enjoy the game and want to make sure their child learns properly. Some coach without having a child on the team, because that’s what they enjoy doing. No matter how long anyone’s been in the game and at what levels they’ve played and/or coached, there are always new things that can be learned from others.”

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WHO’S COACHING OUR KIDS?

Youth sports decision makers must make sure to cover all the bases when it comes to protecting the youngsters in their program. When recruiting and evaluating volunteers, no youth sports administrator wants to strike out by appointing someone who may not be qualified for the job.

Thanks to the power of the internet, NAYS is now helping youth sports decision makers when it comes to selecting volunteers. It recently introduced an all new system for leagues and associations to totally manage their volunteer youth sports coaches with just a few simple clicks of a mouse.

The first in the four-step process – and possibly the most crucial – is administering background screening checks on all potential volunteers. To make this process headache-free for youth leagues, NAYS teamed up with leading background screening provider Priority Research to provide an all new, easy-to-use feature that enable NAYS members to access and view valuable volunteer background screening information directly on a league’s NAYS Chapter Management page.

This newly designed feature enables NAYS Chapter Directors to request important background

check information directly from the View/Update Member feature on the Chapter Management site. NAYS members who access the background check service through the Chapter Management site receive an exclusive discount on background checks. League administrators and decision makers can also view background check information results directly on an individual coach's NYSCA profile page.

Communities who have already begun conducting background checks can use this new Chapter Management feature to organize existing volunteer profiles and screening results in an easy-to-use database.

COACHING EVALUATION

Even coaches who have been screened and trained must be evaluated and monitored to ensure they are maintaining proper perspective and are upholding the

(Mo.). "I like that it is made very clear that individual comments will not be known by the coach."

The evaluation tool consists of 14 questions designed to gauge how well a volunteer youth sports coach is performing in his or her role in the eyes of parents, administrators and officials. The questions hit all the key coaching areas, such as safety, sportsmanship and how well they teach skills, among others.

This new tool is becoming particularly useful to communities who spend large amounts of time administering manual evaluations.

"I love the coach rating system," Phillips said. "We actually do a manual evaluation of our coaches and it is sent to every single one of the 800 kids in our program, and then they all have to be tallied. This will be a huge cost savings to us in both time and postage."



"It's a good idea to have parents have the ability to rate their child's coaches, as well as have the ability for the coaches to log on and see their ratings."

– Mark Lowry, Director, Orchard Recreation Center (Kan.)

NYSCA Code of Ethics. One of the most effective ways to gauge a coach's performance is by speaking to the parents of the children in their care.

In addition to providing all these easy-to-use internet tools for coaches and administrators, NAYS has designed a valuable communication tool for the parents of youth athletes playing in NAYS affiliated communities. Since early 2009, parents of children in NAYS affiliated communities can anonymously evaluate their child's coach directly through the NYSCA Chapter Management site.

"I think the site looks great," said Mark Lowry, director of the Orchard Recreation Center (Kansas). "It's a good idea to have parents have the ability to rate their child's coaches, as well as have the ability for the coaches to log on and see their ratings."

The NYSCA coach rating system allows league administrators who are affiliated with NAYS to provide a digital link for parents to evaluate coaches anonymously. The link can either be placed within an email or posted directly on a league or organization's Web site.

"I think it is very user friendly to both the coach and the parent completing the evaluation," said Dottie Phillips, recreation superintendent for the City of Wentzville

While the parents' answers are confidential, coaches can see their average scores in each category. The tool is extremely valuable for providing constructive criticism to coaches looking to improve, as well as for administrators looking to identify problem coaches.

Although an optional member benefit, communities have the flexibility to make coach evaluations mandatory in their leagues. The youth sports league of Pearl Harbor Naval Base in Hawaii recently became the first NYSCA Chapter to officially mandate that parents fill out and submit coach evaluations.

"I feel this evaluation system is important because it provides a value to something that we strive to achieve," said Joe Stanczyk, assistant youth sports director for Pearl Harbor Youth Sports. "The program can benefit from the evaluation. We can see if what we are trying to accomplish is working or not. We can see our strengths and areas that are deficient or need improvement."

Even though the coach evaluation system is currently being offered as an optional member benefit, NAYS urges all member communities to follow the lead of Pearl Harbor Youth Sports.

"Evaluations provide us valuable information to improve our programs," said Dee Donahue, program

manager for Commander Navy Installation Command. "A coach's influence on children is very meaningful. By requiring utilization of the evaluation tool, it tells me that they truly care about their program and want to do everything they can to make it the best possible experience for the youth involved."

ONLINE CONVENIENCE

NAYS's first foray into the world of online educational tools was the advent of NYSCA Online in 2005. Traditional NYSCA clinics are held in classroom-like settings where individuals can benefit from group discussion and face-to-face interaction. However, accommodating large groups of coaches with varying schedules can prove difficult for many communities.

"Many of our coaches have full-time jobs and multiple active children, so volunteering to coach becomes another full-time job for them," said Angie Gardner, recreation manager for the City of Mason (Ohio), which has trained more than 200 coaches through NYSCA's online program. "It helps to bring in coaches who would normally decide not to help because of time constraints."

To alleviate this problem NAYS created an innovative online version of the NYSCA training program for coaches to complete in the comfort of their home or office. The NYSCA Online Clinics provide a convenient and exciting way for volunteer coaches to obtain their certification. Using state-of-the-art Web pages, coaches can complete an interactive online version of the live on-site NYSCA training program.

"I've been training coaches since 1989," said Celia Wetherill, recreation center activities director for Tulsa County Parks (Okla.). "I'm not offering nearly as many clinics since it's become available online."

NYSCA Online offers certification in all 11 NYSCA sports. Although NYSCA Online clinics do not offer the same face-to-face interaction as the live clinics, coaches can have the luxury of replaying any of the video material at any time, and have access to the video transcripts to use as a resource. All clinics contain live-action video and audio, realistic graphics, expert commentary, informative topical discussions and exclusive printable materials.

"The ability to use the online clinics to view content straight on the Web is so valuable," said Tommy Dooley, superintendent of athletics for the Paulding County Parks and Recreation Department (Ga.). "As an administrator we get so caught up in the day to day operations that it's hard for us to find such content to help our coaches."

Many youth sports administrators like Dooley are finding that the convenience of NYSCA Online is just as helpful for them as it is for the coaches utilizing it. With fewer hours spent organizing clinics and filing paperwork, administrators can spend less time focused on the adults in their program and more time on the kids.

"The coach being able to schedule on his or her own time when to take a clinic is a plus," said John Luton, athletic director for the Spartanburg County Parks and Recreation Commission (S.C.). "It is also very convenient for our agency. It eliminates the hassle of record keeping, ordering journals, reserving rooms, scheduling clinicians and collecting money. It is also much easier on the coaches because they can access their account and check their status at any time."

Although NYSCA training provides comprehensive instruction for how to coach a youth sports team, for any sport there are always additional skills and strategies that can be learned. In order to provide continuing educational opportunities for those coaches looking for further practice tips, NAYS' member Web site provides animated videos that provide detailed instruction on skills and drills for a particular sport. Coaches can reference the skills and drills at any time to assist with practice plans or pre-game instruction.

"I have checked out the skills and drills on the NAYS Web site and I have to say it is incredibly well done," said Love Ishie, rural youth athletics coordinator for Charleston County Parks and Recreation (S.C.). "The 3D animation and step-by-step voice narration on how to execute a skill, depending on a given sport, is amazing. This is an excellent tool for volunteer coaches who may not know how to teach certain skills or drills. As an ex-college basketball player, and a youth sports administrator/chapter director, this is by far one of the best tools I have seen out there available for youth sports coaches."

Coaches often hustle directly from their day jobs right to the field, court or rink to work with their team, leaving little time to prepare practice plans or drills. The skills and drills offered on the NAYS member Web site provide busy coaches with a virtual cheat sheet that is backed by today's leader in youth sports education.

Clearly, technology is dramatically changing – for the better – the way volunteer coaches handle their responsibilities and interact with players. In the coming years it will be truly interesting, and exciting, to see what other innovations arrive on the scene that youth coaches can use to enhance their young athletes' experiences. 

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