**The Way of the Silent Coach**

**https://drowningintheshallow.wordpress.com**

Imagine this scene:

The pupils are silent as they file into the exam hall. Their names are checked, valuables left at the side and they quietly walk past the rows of desks and chairs till they find their own. Nervous tension fills the room. The exam papers are distributed, instructions issued and timings written on the whiteboard. They hear the words ‘you may begin’ and they open their paper and start reading and writing furiously. As soon as that happens several teachers and parents who just happen to be at the side watching, start shouting instructions at those who are taking the exam:

‘Jimmy read all the questions first and underline the command words!’

‘Jimmy start with the long answers. Get them out the way first!’

‘Bobby remember to write in full prose, show your depth of knowledge!’

‘Bobby remember to bullet point your answers, be succinct!’

‘Frankie don’t leave blank answers, make sure you answer everything!’

‘Frankie leave the answers you don’t know, move on to the next question, come back to them if you have time!’

The scene is ridiculous. It just wouldn’t happen. It would disturb the pupils and have negative consequences on their concentration and focus. People would offer different viewpoints which would lead to confusion and possibly poorer performance. It would undermine the validity of the exam as a test of the pupils knowledge and ability on that day. We then wouldn’t know whether it was their own ability or the advice that was being shouted at that influenced their performance. It certainly wouldn’t ease the tension that they might be experiencing, in fact it would only ramp it up.

Yet if we look at matches in youth sport this is what happens week in and week out. If we continue to look at those matches through the lens of an examination, then we could see them as a test or challenge to the players knowledge and skills on that given day. As a teacher or a coach, we want to glean as much quality information as possible from the solutions the players come up with to the problems being asked on the pitch. Their answers would help us to see their understanding, check whether the training we have delivered has been successful and to offer us information on future planning and development. We can’t realistically do this if the performance has been affected by constant streams of advice from the side.

I have never been a massive shouter during game day, but I did feel that it was my role to solve all the problems my players faced. However, since a chance meeting on a trip with an ex pupil and an incident I witnessed last year on the side of a football pitch, I have tried to take a step back. I am slowly walking the path of the Way of the Silent Coach.

What is a Silent Coach? I think this is a coach that assumes that every child has the capability for independent analytical thinking in terms of solving problems presented to them in competitive sport. The Silent Coach tries to create an environment for their players that empowers them to solve problems rather than dictating to them what the answers are. A Silent Coach isn’t silent but is comfortable using silence to support player development and sees it as a major part of their coaching toolkit.

Over the course of the last 3 years my approach to coaching school sport on game day has changed:

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| Previous Coaching Approach | Silent Coach Approach |
| Pre-Game: Immediately telling players about the conditions, what they should do. I initiate conversations reminding them of what we worked on during the week and what they needed to improve from last game. | Pre-Game: Greet them warmly, usually with a handshake and ask how they are feeling. I have already nominated 2 or 3 people to set the tone of the changing room. I leave it to them but listen to the conversations happening and give advice if wanted. |
| Warm Up: Everything set out in advance. Fully in control of what they are doing, with most feedback from me. Telling them what they need to do during the game. | Warm Up: This is now the shared responsibility between a nominated player and myself. We set up together. I support and advise where needed. |
| Pre-Game Talk: I recap game plan. I recap what we have worked on in training. I set us three targets to focus on during the first half to review. All information from me. Captain gets time just before kick-off. | Pre-Game Talk: This is now a shared responsibility with players giving their thoughts. I have asked them to come up with to focus on during the first half and ensure the whole team understands them. |
| During Game: A combination of talking into my phone to record my thoughts and events from the game which I listen to later and make notes and shouting technical and tactical instructions and some encouragement. | During Game: I talk to my bench and ask them questions, trying to get them to accurately describe what they see happening on the pitch. I make notes on paper. Any verbal communication with team playing is encouragement and support during breaks of play. |
| Post-Game: Sit down. Take apart the game. Look at positives and negatives from the game. Pick things on which we need to focus on next week. Discussion usually led by me. Personal judgements are made. | Post-Game: Thank them for their effort. Tell them I enjoyed watching and coaching them. Then I will speak to individuals and groups of players. Focus is about getting them to accurately describe what they saw and experienced in the game. Personal judgements are not made. |

After years of coaching the former way I still do slip back into old habits. It takes considerable effort not to do this at times, especially when we are losing. For the latter approach on game day to become more effective, my coaching approach during the week has had to change. I must give more opportunity within training for the players to take ownership, so they become more comfortable doing this on game day. It also requires modelling and giving feedback on how they take ownership. This sometimes takes valuable time away from the actual physical practice, but I am beginning to see glimpses of its power during the game when small groups of players get together on the field, unaided by myself, to try and find solutions to the problems the opposition are presenting. It is difficult at times not to take over, as I know this would improve the performance there and then. However, I need to view my role as a Silent Coach was promoting the long-term development of the players, through a positive environment that keeps them coming back, rather than the short-term improvement of performance and the next win.

I am continuing my journey in the Way of the Silent Coach. At times it isn’t easy, and I constantly question whether it is the right approach, and what is the right age and experience It should be started at. I am yet to consistently challenge others on the side lines who offer their thoughts and opinions throughout the game. Finally, there is always the worry that I’m short changing my players by not imparting my knowledge and experience by telling them what to do. It would be great to hear from other teachers and coaches who are making similar journeys themselves and hear what they do on game day to empower their players by remaining silent.