

How to use the patches

There are many ways to use the patches. They work best to help you achieve your objectives, and these vary from team to team.

Use them to motivate your players to come to practice sessions regularly and/or on time. A favourite of mine is to give a patch to players who turn up early for six consecutive practice sessions, but you can also use them for anything you want to encourage.

Please remember, though, to use the patches sparingly. They have to be valuable, sought after. If a coach sprays them around like confetti, they can soon lose their appeal.

Also, make a big deal of giving them out. You can give them as an immediate reward, or in a ceremony at the end of practice or at the end of the game where all the players see who is getting them and why. I have found this to be an excellent motivational technique.

Here are a few ideas I've had for using the patches:

Smile! – Everybody's favourite patch, the smiley face can be awarded for just about anything you like. Not being downhearted when the team loses, getting up and carrying on after a knock, or simply playing with a smile on your face! The choice is yours.

Practice attendance -- It's not always easy to motivate children to come to training or away games. You can encourage attendance like this: give a coloured Star patch for each 4 to 6 practices and games attended. Once they have earned six Green Stars, let's say, you could give them a Red Star. At the end of the season, give a Gold Star patch for perfect practice and game attendance, and ONLY give the Gold Star for that. Maybe a Blue Star patch to players with a 90% attendance record.

Improvement – This is 100% better than just giving patches to the “best” players. An “improvement” can cover anything you want it to – skills, tactics, decision making, team work. By giving patches to players who make a significant improvement, you are encouraging all your players (even the best ones) to get better at everything they do.

I use the Lightning Bolt as my “improvement” patch, and use the symbolism of the design to encourage the players. I describe how lightning is devastatingly powerful but takes loads of energy to create. Meaning that you can improve your performance, but only if you put real energy into working hard on your skills, work rate or for the good of the team as a whole.

Defence, Determination and Bravery – As Darrell Royal, the famous U.S. football coach said: “You never lose a game if the opponent doesn't score.” The “Big D” is the clear choice to encourage good defence, and it's in blood red... the toughest, bravest colour.

Your choice is to decide how you will determine “defence”, maybe depending on how your team is likely to do. Is defence a team effort of limiting the number of tries conceded? Is it for individual commitment to making tackles? Maybe you'll decide to look ahead and award it to players who never give up, despite poor score lines?

I use the “D” patch to motivate my players to play the way they SHOULD play. I give them all a “D” at the start of the season and tell them the attitude I want them to have – be brave, be determined. I then use this patch to inspire them individually and as a team – “Remember the Big D”, I shout out at critical times. Then, when they do something great, I give them another “D” to reward them.

I usually award the next “D” for great individual play, but I am always mindful that I want to reward good technique with the second patch and not just bravery and determination. I want to inspire my timid tacklers. I think I can do this best by rewarding the player who regularly makes those great low tackles to stop key attackers, not the player who maybe recklessly flies into every tackle high.

Whatever you decide to do, make sure you give these patches sparingly. Make it a BIG DEAL to get a "Big D" patch. Award it in front of the whole team. Praise the player's technique, decision making, bravery, hard work, toughness.

This approach really works. Remember, not every kid can be a good athlete, but every kid can work hard to improve their defensive skills and can learn to enjoy contact.

Attack – If your team isn't scoring many tries, it can be beneficial to use the "A" patch to motivate your players to do the things that can produce scores. For instance, passing the ball to players in a better position, learning the rules about when you can steal the ball, being alert about being the first to a dropped ball. Maybe they just need to be more aggressive. Once your team learns how to score, you can discontinue giving away these patches for scoring.

Team work – "T" is for team work. The "T" patch is cool and distinctive. Here's the story I use: "All of our patches are in a circle. The circle has been an important symbol worldwide for centuries. On the "T" patch the circle represents the team. It is a reminder that the players are within the team, that the team holds us together, and that every player should remember that he or she is part of the team.

You can use the "T" patches to encourage kids to listen to the coaches and follow instructions, or to encourage them to practice at home.

I find it's a great patch to reward those players who maybe don't have natural rugby, but who really work hard for the team and their mates. Maybe these players even make loads of mistakes – drop the ball, can't pass left, miss tackles – but they are the first on their feet after a tackle, getting back in the game, working hard to make up for theirs and others' errors. They can be the heart of the team. They have the spirit you want your better players to emulate.

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