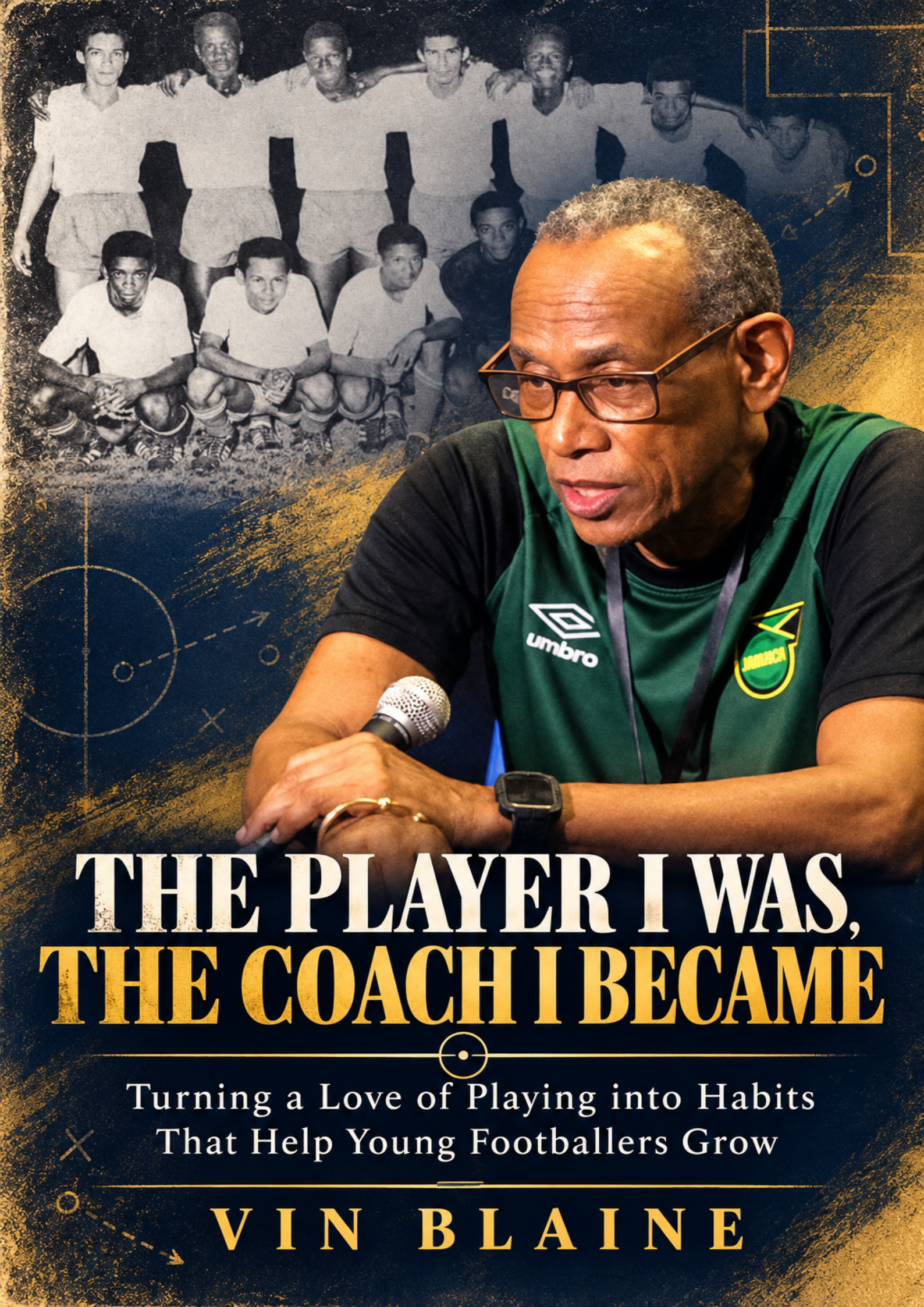


THE PLAYER I WAS, THE COACH I BECAME

Turning a Love of Playing into Habits That Help Young Footballers Grow

VIN BLAINE

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Vin Blaine | Game Changer Coaching Library

A note to coaches

This book begins with my experience, but it is a practical guide to the player who loves the match and hesitates when invited to train. The aim is to preserve that love while helping the player discover what purposeful preparation can make possible. The examples and conversations are coaching models, not accounts of particular children. Adapt them to your players, resources and safeguarding policies.

Introduction — The boy who wanted to play

As a young man I wanted to play football at the park with my friends. I could see my potential, but formal training did not attract me. I did not take part in it until I was around fifteen or older. I wanted the game, the company and the freedom to solve its problems for myself. Later, as a coach, I found myself asking players to train consistently, eat well and get enough rest. That apparent contradiction became a useful question: how do we help a child who loves football see training as an extension of that love?

My path gave me valuable experiences. Informal play demanded initiative, improvisation and resilience. Yet the fact that I eventually progressed does not prove that avoiding training is a sound development plan. Nor should my story be used to frighten a young player with claims about what would have happened if I had started earlier. We cannot know the alternative life. We can know that I now value preparation and want players to have more choices than I understood at their age.

The coaching challenge is therefore an invitation: keep the joy, add the habits. A player should be able to say, “I still love to play, and I understand how training helps me play the way I want.”

1. Listen before prescribing

“Doesn’t like training” describes an observation, not its cause. A player may be bored by queues, afraid to make mistakes in front of teammates, exhausted after school, unable to find transport, disappointed by limited match minutes, or unconvinced that the activity resembles football. Another may simply prefer the autonomy of the park. The response differs in each case.

Begin privately: “Which part of playing do you most enjoy? What part of training feels least useful? What would make one session worth your time?” Listen without rebutting the first answer. Ask what the player hopes to do in six months. Then connect one training habit to that goal. Do not treat a missed session as proof of weak character before asking about access, health and family circumstances.

Coach action: For two weeks, record attendance, involvement, and the player’s own stated reason for enjoying or avoiding a session. Look for a pattern before changing the programme.

2. Protect what informal football gives us

Small games with friends can develop ball familiarity, creativity, negotiation, adaptation to uneven teams and ownership of decisions. The rules change, teammates come and go, and the player must read the game without constant instruction. Research on youth football has observed that informal play and organized practice can both contribute to development; pathways vary, and neither an exact hour count nor a single route guarantees senior success [1, 2].

Ask a reluctant player to show you a park game they enjoy. What makes it compelling? Perhaps everyone touches the ball, a goal has immediate meaning, teams reorganize quickly, and the next game begins without a speech. Bring those features into practice. Protect time for uncoached play too. The park is not a defective classroom awaiting correction.

Reflection: Which parts of your sessions offer players genuine decisions, and which parts merely require them to follow your sequence?

3. Explain what training adds

Purposeful training helps a player revisit situations that a casual game may not provide often enough. A defender can practise receiving while pressed from one side; a midfielder can learn to scan before the ball travels; a forward can time a run against a moving line. Coaching also brings feedback, progressive challenge and a chance to review an action before trying again.

Explain the link in the player's language. "You love taking on defenders. Today we will work on recognizing when your first touch gives you the advantage, and when a pass lets you get the ball back in a better place." The player sees a route from a valued game action to a training activity.

Use a simple cycle: **play** → **notice** → **practise** → **replay** → **reflect**. Start with a game that exposes the problem. Let players name what they saw. Create a short, focused repetition with choices and opposition. Return to the game to see whether the action transfers. Finish with one question: "What did you do differently?" FIFA and the FA both emphasize game-like, enjoyable and age-appropriate experiences in youth development [3, 4].

4. Tell your own story without turning it into a lecture

A personal story earns attention when it is honest, brief and relevant. I might say: "At your age, I preferred playing with friends. Training did not appeal to me. The games taught me things I still value. As I grew older, I learned that consistent preparation can help you enjoy more of what you love doing on the field. What part of your game would you like to improve?"

Notice what the story does not do. It does not claim that all players must copy my path, or that my later career proves that organized training is unnecessary. It does not shame a player for enjoying the park. It offers a bridge and then gives the player a voice.

Three-minute conversation: (1) Share one truthful experience. (2) Ask what the player enjoys. (3) Agree on one experiment for the next two sessions. (4) Review together. Avoid repeating the story every time attendance is discussed; the relationship matters more than the anecdote.

5. Make preparation visible in football terms

Young players may hear “discipline” as an adult demand. Show them how preparation changes an action they care about. If a winger fades late in games, compare the quality of their decisions in an early and late match sequence. If a midfielder struggles under pressure, show how a short scanning practice changes the first touch. Do not interpret one tired performance as evidence of poor diet or effort. Ask about sleep, school, travel, illness and training load before drawing conclusions.

Give each player a small development question: “Can you find the forward option earlier?” or “Can you recover your position after your run?” Select one observable behaviour, collect a baseline, revisit it after two to four weeks, and ask the player what changed. A completed action is useful evidence; so is a better decision that narrowly failed in execution.

Coach action: Use two clips or five observed possessions rather than an overwhelming dashboard. Tell the player what you saw and invite their interpretation first.

6. Build sessions players want to return to

An example 70-minute session for U13–U17 players, adjusted for readiness: 10 minutes of player-led 3v3 or 4v4; 10 minutes of a directional game exposing the chosen problem; 12 minutes of a focused practice with defenders and realistic choices; two 12-minute games with a brief question between them; 10 minutes of normal play; four minutes of player reflection. Account for transitions and water. Smaller or younger groups need different duration and demands.

Suppose the focus is receiving to play forward. In the first game, observe whether receivers scan and change their angle while the ball travels. In the practice, use a 5v5 plus two neutral players with end zones. Score by receiving beyond a line and keeping the next action. Defenders decide how to press; players may turn, set, switch or recycle. Do not require a back-foot reception on every occasion. In the final game, remove the special scoring rule and check whether the behaviour survives.

Observation: Count the first five suitable receptions before and after the practice. How many involved a look before the pass, a useful adjustment and a controlled next action? Discuss the sequence, not merely whether the pass was complete.

Keep instructions short. Let players solve enough of the problem to feel ownership. A player who helped design one rule or chose a challenge may engage more deeply than one who merely received another command.

7. Introduce habits gradually

The first goal is a repeatable routine, not perfect compliance. Agree on a realistic arrival time, a way to communicate absence and one self-directed football activity that the player likes. Add one preparation habit at a time. For example: bring water; arrive ready to begin; complete a ten-minute ball challenge on a suitable day; reflect on one match action. Avoid extra work when a player is already overloaded.

Offer two choices that serve the same purpose: “Would you rather practise the first touch with a partner or use a wall and then test it in a game?” Choice keeps agency while the standard remains

clear. Review the reason a habit matters, then celebrate its use in football. Never make food, body size or a child's family resources a public test of commitment.

Four-week habit bridge

1: Listen	Identify a valued game action and one barrier to training; agree on a small experiment.	Player's account, attendance context, five baseline actions.
2: Connect	Run a game-like practice tied to that action; let the player choose a personal challenge.	Engagement and the player's explanation of the task.
3: Prepare	Add one feasible routine for arrival, rest or practice; coordinate with family if helpful.	Whether the routine was possible and how the player felt.
4: Transfer	Observe a match or free game, compare with baseline, and reset the next goal.	Decisions and actions in less predictable play.

If the habit fails, adjust the design. Ask "What got in the way?" before "Why didn't you do it?"

8. Fuel, rest and recovery without shame

For developing players, regular meals and snacks, access to water, sleep and appropriate recovery support both health and participation. Coaches can set practical conditions: provide water breaks, plan around heat, avoid unnecessary early or late sessions, allow recovery after heavy schedules, and communicate with families. FIFA's sleep guidance highlights scheduling and stress as factors coaches can influence [5]. The American Academy of Pediatrics warns that young athletes need adequate nutrition and rest and that coaches should watch for harmful pressure around weight [6].

Say, "What helps you feel ready to train?" instead of policing a player's plate. Ask families about barriers such as cost, travel and school demands. Offer low-cost, culturally familiar food examples with input from families; do not prescribe calorie targets, supplements, weight goals or an individualized diet. Refer persistent fatigue, pain, eating concerns or sleep difficulties to a qualified clinician or dietitian through the proper safeguarding route. A coach's role is to support a healthy environment, not diagnose.

The message to players is simple: preparation helps you have the energy to enjoy and learn from the game. It is not a measure of your worth.

9. Work with the player's circle

Parents and guardians may value education, safety and a stable routine while the player values football with friends. Invite both perspectives. Explain the training purpose, expected schedule and opportunities for free play. Ask about transport, fees, caregiving duties and competing commitments. Avoid making family circumstances sound like excuses.

Staff should use consistent language. A player cannot build trust if one coach encourages experimentation and another benches the player for every mistake. Agree on three standards: preparation is explained, effort is recognized, and feedback addresses an action the player can change. Maintain fair opportunities for players who develop later or need time to adapt.

Family conversation model: “Our goal this month is to help your child carry a strength from informal games into team play. We will work on one specific action and check how they experience the sessions. What would make participation manageable for your family?”

10. Respond to the player who reminds you of yourself

One player arrives only on match day. Another is brilliant in free play but avoids coached exercises. A third attends but withdraws when corrected. These are different situations. Do not label any of them “the next me.” Ask, observe and co-design an experiment.

For the match-day player, establish the attendance context, then connect one training task to a role they want to play. For the free-play specialist, keep an opening game and let them investigate a tactical problem. For the player who withdraws, ask how feedback lands and try a private question or a brief demonstration. In all three cases, state the team commitment clearly and offer a way to meet it. A supportive coach still has standards.

Use this review after four weeks: Is the player attending more consistently? Are they engaged during the relevant practice? Can they explain how it helps? Does the behaviour appear in a game? What should we change? If participation has not improved, revisit the cause rather than intensifying the lecture.

Field tools

Player conversation card

1. What game moment do you enjoy most? 2. What makes training difficult or unappealing? 3. What would you like to do better on the field? 4. Which small practice will you try? 5. What support do you need? 6. When shall we review it? Record the player’s words and one agreed action; keep personal information private.

One-page session check

Football problem: _____ **Game to reveal it:** _____ **Player choices preserved:** _____ **One coaching cue:** _____ **Baseline observation:** _____ **Transfer game:** _____ **Player reflection:** _____ **Next adjustment:** _____

Weekly reflection

Player: “One thing I enjoyed / one thing I learned / one thing I want to try.” **Coach:** “One action observed / one barrier to remove / one change to the next session.” The reflection should be a conversation, not a graded diary.

Closing — The choice I want players to have

I cannot revisit the park and rewrite my youth. I would not erase the freedom or friendships that made football matter to me. I can use the perspective I gained as a coach to offer today's players something I did not fully understand then: a way to keep the joy of the game while learning how preparation expands their possibilities.

We do not need children to become miniature professionals. We need to help each one connect a meaningful goal to a manageable habit, practice in a game that asks real questions, and see their own growth. The player I was helps me listen. The coach I became helps me design the next opportunity.

Coach the player in front of you. Keep the game alive. Build the habit together.

Sources and further reading

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Image note: The background is the author's 1967 Kingston College Manning Cup squad photograph; Vin Blaine appears second from the left in the crouching front row. The foreground derives from an author-supplied coaching photograph. Confirm archival photograph rights and final caption before public distribution.