



National Soccer Coaches Association of America

Team Notebooks: Writing to the Next Level (Part 1 of 3)

The following article is Part I of a three-part series focused on Team Notebooks, or what Dr. Rich Kent calls “writing to learn in athletics.” These three articles provide coaches at all levels with the how-to’s and why-to’s of employing Team Notebooks as learning tools to more fully develop individual players and teams. The writing in Team Notebooks helps players think like coaches, moves team discussions to new levels and adds another way to learn the game of soccer. The writing in these notebooks keeps coaches more thoroughly informed and serves as a unique teaching tool. Kent’s research in the field of “writing to learn in athletics” and his use of Team Notebooks as a coach offer us a unique opportunity for professional development and team enrichment.

For years, on international tours and during high school seasons, I have used Team Notebooks to enhance communication and amplify learning. As learning tools, the notebooks serve as a place for players to reflect, analyze and note-take as well as to set goals. Over the years, Team Notebooks became as much a part of my players’ kits as water bottles and foul-weather studs. They may do the same for you and your players.

Getting Started

Team Notebooks engage seniors and first-year students, stars of the pitch and benchwarmers... in different ways. And that difference is the beauty of such a learning activity. Writing adds insight and variety to a player’s athletic experience and has the potential to fill in knowledge gaps, for example when players start analyzing a match in their notebook and realize they don’t quite understand how a 3-5-2 defends a 4-4-2. Writing is not the ultimate in learning for every player – but then again, neither is a coach’s halftime talk. The version of notebooks introduced in this series of articles has five sections:

- **Pre-Season Thoughts** – Guides players in thinking about the previous season and the upcoming season. Players write about their preparation and goals for the season. Writing Preseason Thoughts takes the average player 10-15 minutes. Coaches will read and perhaps take notes on the collection in 15 to 30 minutes.
- **Match Analysis I** – Guides players in reflecting on a match. The one-page reflection takes an average player three to five minutes to complete. Coaches will read and perhaps take notes on the collection in 10-20 minutes.
- **Match Analysis II** – Guides players in writing about a match that their team watches together. The two-page observation takes average players 10 minutes to complete. Coaches will read and sometimes take notes on the collection in 10-20 minutes.
- **Post-Season Thoughts** – Guides players in thinking about the past season while making plans for the future.
- **Player’s Notes** – A place for taking notes and sketching plays as well as storing information from the coach.

These notebooks may be adapted in any fashion to fit your program needs. There is no one right way. If the notion of Team Notebooks is appealing to you, my best advice when starting out is to keep them manageable for both you and your players. The bottom line in using Team Notebooks for me as a coach: Writing improved my “soccer classroom.” Let’s begin with Pre-Season Thoughts.

Pre-Season Thoughts

These forms may be handed out at a pre-season meeting or at the first training session. If you mail home a player information packet (as we often do for travel teams), the Preseason Thoughts may be included. The two-page sheet takes a player about 10-15 minutes to fill out. The coach, assistant or team manager collects and photocopies the sheets. The photocopies are placed in the coach’s four- to six-inch three-ring binder, and the originals go back to the players for their notebooks.

Falcon Soccer Pre-Season Thoughts

Player: Jonathan, sweeper

My strengths last year as a player: Last year I felt confident in the air. I loved winning 50-50 balls. I've gained a lot of confidence on the pitch these past couple of years. I understand the game better – I can see how attacks are developing and I know what to say to my defenders. I bet if you asked the forwards from other teams they'd say I'm good at delaying. I love playing against great players (Remington from Telstar) – I used to get scared, now I get up for them.

My weaknesses last year as a player: My communication wasn't the best. Like you said, young players think about themselves & don't talk much – experienced players speak up. Thanks to the summer matches I already have better talk. My left foot was squirrely...Not this year! :)

My preparation for this season has been the following: Winter soccer, summer matches, and camp. I coached community center summer soccer. I did the deal! I'm prepared. Bring it on.

My goals for this season include the following: Talk, composure & leadership on and off the pitch.

Last year our team strengths included: Moving to space. Staying composed during the physical matches. We liked each other!

Last year, our team weaknesses included: What can I say, we were young. Not really a weakness but like you said our age defined our play. We didn't have the strength to finish a lot of our attacks. Not this year! Light it up!

I am taking the following classes this fall:

Physics
Pre-Calculus
Writing Center
English
US History
Psychology

Other thoughts: I'm psyched we have friendlies against Class-A teams like Lewiston – playing up will help us.

I know it's a pain – BUT, everyone likes the spaghetti feeds at your house. The first 11 will help with clean up and everything.

I guarantee we'll make it through the second round of the play-offs this year. We're ready.

Jonathan's Pre-Season Thoughts reveal an 11th grader who has prepared well for the season. On the pitch and in the classroom, this 16-year-old shows himself to be a thoughtful young man. His balanced personality and steady play bring calm and confidence to his fellow defenders and, indeed, to the whole team. What's striking in Jonathan's writing is how well he sees himself as a player. He writes with the kind of knowledge and understanding that next-level players possess, and yet Jonathan's writing is that of a fun-loving teenager who's all about the game, his friends and spaghetti feeds at the coach's house.

When reading my players' Pre-Season Thoughts, the coach can use a highlighter to note certain passages (e.g., a player has a part-time job). Even though coaches may know their high school players fairly well, they always may discover something through this reading. Naturally, these pages provide special insight into new players. For newcomers, first-year and transfer players, keeping a Team Notebook often proves to be a unique experience and tends to elevate the stature of the team in their eyes.

The assistant coach and trainer also can read the Preseason Thoughts. This common experience adds to the conversations

about individual players. Used as references, the sheets may help the coach decide that last spot on the first team, assist in filling out all-star award forms, highlight health/fitness issues and offer points of contact with players for future discussions about training and match play, college and work.

When players write about their preparation for the competitive season, several benefits emerge. For dedicated players, those who have fully involved themselves in off-season training and arrive at pre-season fit and determined, writing such a reflection can build confidence. In addition, sharing these accomplishments with coaches and training staff proves motivational.

For those players who have prepared only marginally for the competitive season, composing the Preseason Thoughts' pages can be a hollow experience. This can prove motivational, too. The reality check may impact long-term player development by serving as an incentive. Clearly, writing about poor preparation won't necessarily inspire an athlete to train to new levels in the future, but then again it might. At the very least, this activity can help players see the emerging picture of their athletic identity and serve as one more piece of a larger wake-up call.

Pre-Season Thoughts generate deeper conversations, provide players with a forum for goal-setting and keeps the team staff informed. In some ways, the Match Analysis I builds on the work of this preseason writing.

Match Analysis I (MAI)

The MAI guides athletes in reflecting on their individual performances as well as those of their teammates and the opponents. The prompts in this section of the notebook steer players away from reducing a match result to one-dimensional accounts like "the referees had it in for us." The MAI helps players gain perspective and moves them, in large and small ways, toward thinking as coaches.

Falcon Soccer

Match Analysis I

Player: Jonathan, sweeper

Falcons v. Leavitt

Date: 9/17

Place: Away

Final: 1-0 Win

Records – Falcons: 4 W 0 L 0 T Opponent: 3 W 1 L 0 T

My strengths as a player in today's match: Maintained defense's compactness. Right amount of talk – I didn't talk too much like at Lisbon. I had a brilliant run through the midfield into the attacking third. :)

My weaknesses as a player in today's match: I could have been more supportive of Jason. When I encourage him he plays better.

Team strengths in today's match: Maintained defense's compactness. Right amount of talk – I didn't talk too much like at Lisbon. I had a brilliant run through the midfield into the attacking third. :)

Team strengths in today's match: We worked as a team – great support – positive comments...Good halftime adjustments.

Team weaknesses in today's match: We could have been more inventive in attack during the 2nd half. We used Matt too much.

Opponent's strength: They never let down. #9 had warp-speed. His runs opened space and chances on goal.

Opponent's weakness: Their midfielders and forwards did not mark us well in attack.

What was the "difference in today's match: Our midfielders support of the forwards...and, did I mention, a brilliant run by the sweeper?

What team adjustment would you suggest for the next match against this opponent? #9 = FAST. Move Dusty? More variety in attack.

Other comments about team strategy, attitude, preparation... We were prepared! The seniors had us ready to play. UN-DE-feated

Jonathan's analysis as sweeper begins with a discussion of his ability to maintain compactness in defense. His writing about communication ("Right amount of talk – I didn't talk too much like at Lisbon") shows that he has applied his

learning from one match to another. Jonathan also recognizes the difference he makes in the play of less confident teammates like Jason. When reading an entry like this one by Jonathan, the player may recognize his/her greater role on the pitch.

Jonathan's comments on team strengths parallel what I mentioned in both my halftime talk and post-match debriefing. However, his observation of our lack of inventiveness in attack raised my awareness. I knew we used Matthew a great deal – he's an all-conference player and tends to demand the ball. Jonathan's wording – "We could have been more inventive in attack" – raises issues such as how opponents prepare for us (e.g., "Matthew is their main weapon"), how balanced our attack is and how surprising we are as a team. Jonathan's words led me to discuss our offense more comprehensively with my assistant and the team.

During the fall 2006 season, Coach Mike Keller of the University of Southern Maine Huskies discovered through reading his team's MAIs that more than several of the younger players were confused about their roles in the 3-5-2. In addition, some players thought the team would be more productive with a 4-4-2. Through team discussions, more intense coaching and an unsuccessful trial run of the 4-4-2, the Huskies learned the 3-5-2 and became more confident with the system. Certainly Mike would have recognized the issue with the 3-5-2; however, this veteran coach believes the MAIs brought the matter to his attention more quickly.

In Part II of *Team Notebooks: Writing to the Next Level*, we'll look at the final three sections of the basic notebook, including the Match Analysis II, Post-Season Thoughts and Player's Notes.

Editor's note: Richard Kent is an assistant professor of literacy and director of the National Writing Project site at the University of Maine. A soccer and ski coach for three decades, Kent researches writing to learn in athletics and serves as a consultant to athletes, coaches, and teams. A National Educator Award recipient, Kent is the author of seven books.