

Playing to Develop vs Playing to Win

National Teams Program Issue

'Playing to Develop' versus 'Playing to Win'
'Learning versus Winning'

ISSUE

In youth soccer circles today, an over emphasis is being placed on winning. It stems from social pressure in America where we are expected to be the best in everything. We glorify winning and first place finishers. The emphasis in sports on 'winning' is out of balance. Witness the increase in violence at youth athletic events. In sport, we are obsessed with the 'outcome' rather than the 'process.' As long as we win, we are happy. We evaluate coaches only on their win-loss record. What about enjoyment of the process, the journey, the experience and its ultimate influence on us as people, coaches and athletes? What about evaluating coaches on the improvement, growth and development of their players? After all, we can't control the outcome, but we can control the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Admit that we're obsessed with winning. When Suzie comes home after her game, the first thing we ask is did she win and the second thing is did she score a goal? Reframe the way we look at sport. Suzie, "how was the game today? Did you have fun? Did your team play well? How did you play? Did you do some of the new things the coach asked you to try? Are you hungry?"

In youth soccer, the priority for coaches and players should be on individual player development and learning. Set age and ability specific technical, tactical, psychological, and physical goals to aid in optimizing player development. This will provide coaches a framework and structure to follow. These goals also provide an alternative for coaches and parents to measure achievement and development of their players. For under 14 and younger, the primary objective of game participation and training is to provide the players with learning opportunities. Teams should "strive to win," but this should not be the focus of any training sessions, half-time talks or player motivations.

At the age of 14 and above, careful consideration needs to be placed on balancing instances where in addition to developing as individuals and a team, finding ways to 'win' also becomes part of the overall objective. One of the biggest obstacles in women's athletics is that young girls are socialized not to be competitive. By all means, 'teach players to compete, to compete hard, to compete to win, but don't have winning be the only measure of success.' Choose which tournaments and games are to be played to 'learn,' and which are to be played to, 'win.' It is not development to have a schedule where the sole purpose for participation is in the best interest of the players' 'winning.' Individual and team improvement and peak performance should be the measure of achievement, rather than winning or losing.

U6 Coaching Article

Attack the Play of 5 & 6 Year Olds.... Or You Can Sit Back – Relax – and Have as Much Fun as They Do!!!!

By Mike Parsons

It's good to know that some things never change in life – like the play of 5 & 6 year olds on the soccer field. We can all agonize over how to discover the special training techniques that will enable them to score more goals – certainly those who have been in the game for a long time must know the secrets! Or we can stay up late at night and draw diagram after diagram that reveals in precise detail where every player should be in relation to the ball – that will solve the bunching up problem and it will look like real soccer! Or one might infiltrate the marketing department at Mickey D's to figure out why the Happy Meal is more important than the score! However, Mom and Dad (especially Dad - he's a winning machine!), the game of soccer at 5 & 6 years old remains a game – with the thrill of winning taking a back seat the excitement of merely chasing the ball! Anyone... and I mean anyone... can look at a situation and tell you the problems. Instead of that approach, I'm going to make some suggestions for possible solutions to some of the common problems coaching the very young in “chase-the-ball-no-matter-where-it-goes-until-I-need-a-break-and-then do-it-again-‘til-the-game-ends” (that's what soccer for 5 & 6's should be called). Here we go;

Bunching Up Around the Ball. God forbid that all of the kids chase the ball – that would mean that every child would be having FUN!! You see, that is what every player at this age likes about the game – they can run anywhere they like – no adult is going to tell them to walk – and they love the challenge of touching the ball all by themselves! We tend to forget that there is very little organization in the mind of a 5-6 year old and that sharing is not on the top of the list of their favorite things to do. (Do they share their favorite toys with their brothers and sisters???) Remember ... It's my ball !!!!! Soooooo.....let them chase the ball!! They will spread out as they learn to play with their teammates.

Scoring Goals ... is an accident most of the time at this age. Let's be honest-that clump of grass has more to do with the direction that the ball travels than the one who kicks it (at this age shooting and passing are merely “kicking”). However, scoring goals should be the only thing on their mind at this age. Remember this...we can all focus on one thing at a time – focus the young on scoring goals – that's the object of the game!

He/She is a Ball Hog.... Which brings us to the question – Are Ball Hogs good or bad? As a parent the answer is (like it or not) bad if the neighbor's son/daughter won't give the ball to our little cherub – good if the ball is always with our “talented little child prodigy”. Wrong!!! This age is the beginning of individuality – flair for those who really want to exaggerate. Encourage them to dribble the ball and try to beat other players – my best friend boldly told his son at six years old...“ don't pass the ball until you are eleven – and don't worry about the coach when he screams at you to pass. His son can't dribble!”. In fact, all training sessions at this age should be based around each child and a ball. Acceptance of failure (it's OK not to succeed at first ...try again) and the encouragement to try again will help the learning process.

Practice Sessions...the longer the better! What a great way to turn play into work! Ever try to play golf every day on your vacation – double rounds if possible? It gets old fast. So why do we keep 5-6 year olds at the practice field for an hour or more during training? Mom got some more shopping to do? Or is Dad feeling a win coming on after 90 minutes of practice? More is not better at this or any age. Train them for the same amount of time that the game will take on Saturday. Thirty to forty minutes will be long

enough to wind them up ...then give them back to their parents to calm them down. The excitement of the soccer experience will then remain fresh.

WINNING ... it's why we are here... Wow, I hope we all have had childhood experiences that were fun and not necessarily based on winning. Everything in life is based on winning... Do we really want to emphasize the down side of competition – losing - to 5-6 year olds? They are not concerned (except for that Happy Meal) what the end of the game brings – so why should we? Remember that youth sports were started so that kids could have fun. So, bring a chair and your favorite beverage to the next game and save some room for a Happy Meal of your own afterwards!

Work on the Fundamentals in Practice... While other sports work on fundamentals (and soccer's numbers keep getting larger) we have found that the most important things to teach at this age are motor skill development – the ability to control my body – and an appreciation for the fun aspects of the game – me and the ball - look at what we can do! We tend to forget that soccer is not a hand-eye coordination activity like all other sports in the U.S. In addition the kids are presented with an incredible challenge to make their bodies do what they want them to (kind of like Dad playing in the over forty league in any sport – he gets it going, you better get out of his way cuz' no one knows if he'll be able to stop). As a result, the objective becomes one of making my body and the ball work together as one.

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Parental Support - The Key to Peak Performance

The role that parents play in the life of a soccer player has a tremendous impact on their experience. With this in mind, we have taken some time to write down some helpful reminders for all of us as we approach the upcoming season. If you should have any questions about these thoughts, please feel free to discuss it with us, the coaches.

1. Let the coaches coach: Leave the coaching to the coaches. This includes motivating, psyching your child for practice, after game critiquing, setting goals, requiring additional training, etc. You have entrusted the care of your player to these coaches and they need to be free to do their job. If a player has too many coaches, it is confusing for him and his performance usually declines.
2. Support the program: Get involved. Volunteer. Help out with fundraisers, car-pool; anything to support the program.
3. Be you child's best fan: Support your child unconditionally. Do not withdraw love when your child performs poorly. Your child should never have to perform to win your love.
4. Support and root for all players on the team: Foster teamwork. Your child's teammates are not the enemy. When they are playing better than your child, your child now has a wonderful opportunity to learn.
5. Do not bribe or offer incentives: Your job is not to motivate. Leave this to the coaching staff. Bribes will distract your child from properly concentrating in practice and game situations.
6. Encourage your child to talk with the coaches: If your child is having difficulties in

practice or games, or can't make a practice, etc., encourage them to speak directly to the coaches. This "responsibility taking" is a big part of becoming a big-time player. By handling the off-field tasks, your child is claiming ownership of all aspects of the game - preparation for as well as playing the game.

7. Understand and display appropriate game behavior: Remember, your child's self esteem and game performance is at stake. Be supportive, cheer, be appropriate. To perform to the best of his abilities, a player needs to focus on the parts of the game that they can control (his fitness, positioning, decision making, skill, aggressiveness, what the game is presenting them). If he starts focusing on what he can not control (the condition of the field, the referee, the weather, the opponent, even the outcome of the game at times), he will not play up to his ability. If he hears a lot of people telling him what to do, or yelling at the referee, it diverts his attention away from the task at hand.

8. Monitor your child's stress level at home: Keep an eye on the player to make sure that they are handling stress effectively from the various activities in his life.

9. Monitor eating and sleeping habits: Be sure your child is eating the proper foods and getting adequate rest.

10. Help your child keep his priorities straight: Help your child maintain a focus on schoolwork, relationships and the other things in life beside soccer. Also, if your child has made a commitment to soccer, help him fulfill his obligation to the team.

11. Reality test: If your child has come off the field when his team has lost, but he has played his best, help him to see this as a "win". Remind him that he is to focus on "process" and not "results". His fun and satisfaction should be derived from "striving to win". Conversely, he should be as satisfied from success that occurs despite inadequate preparation and performance.

12. Keep soccer in its proper perspective: Soccer should not be larger than life for you. If your child's performance produces strong emotions in you, suppress them. Remember your relationship will continue with your children long after their competitive soccer days are over. Keep your goals and needs separate from your child's experience.

13. Have fun: That is what we will be trying to do! We will try to challenge your child to reach past their "comfort level" and improve themselves as a player, and thus, a person. We will attempt to do this in environments that are fun, yet challenging. We look forward to this process. We hope you do to!