

ETHICS IN YOUTH SOCCER

A Message to club Leaders

First, The Good News - Bad News

The explosion in youth soccer participation in this country is attributed by most experts to the facts that soccer is a relatively cheap sport, is healthy, building a solid base of coordination, speed and stamina for life, and it doesn't discriminate against any body size or height. In short, anybody and everybody can play, enjoy, and reap the benefits.

After over 30 years of sustained growth, youth soccer has become very much entrenched in our communities across the nation. For soccer lovers, this is a great time to be involved with the game and revel in its coming of age. There are many positive signs associated with this growth. The level of organization and sophistication in the youth game is steadily rising. The players are certainly getting better. Our national teams at all age groups, male and female, are making progress, and professional soccer has finally gained a beachhead in the American sport landscape and is in the process of consolidating. We are also beginning to notice the emergence of a new generation of youth coaches, coaches who actually played soccer when *they* were growing up. Many of these coaches work in youth soccer full-time as Directors of Coaching or paid staff.

Youth soccer has also become very competitive. Although competitiveness is a natural and desirable mindset in the quest for sport excellence, it can also spawn negative consequences if not harnessed properly. And many people are noticing the warning signs and are trying to raise the awareness of the decision makers in youth soccer, the club coaches, administrators and parents. For example, the Citizenship Through Sports Alliance has a panel of youth sports experts from across the country. This panel publishes an annual Youth Sports National Report Card. The CTSA's 2005 report was highly critical of the lack of a child-centered philosophy in youth sports, giving youth club leaders a grade of 'D' (Poor) while the coaches didn't fare much better, receiving a grade of 'C- minus' (between Fair and Poor). More alarmingly, the panel gave a grade of 'D' for parental behavior.

Like all youth sports, soccer cannot escape the negative effects of over-competitiveness. The main areas of concern are:

Flawed Player Development

The competitive element in youth soccer can be counterproductive by hindering player development. When the emphasis is on playing to win, acquisition of basic skills takes second place to team organization. Over-coaching stifles individual creativity and problem solving skills, size and stamina of the early developers is

valued over skill, and the whole practice-to-game ratio is out of whack in favor of games. The formative years of 6-14 should be spent honing technique and encouraging self expression, best accomplished in practices where ball contacts can be maximized. But coaches prefer to put their players through an interminable procession of games and tournaments where actual touches of the ball are minimal and secondary to the requisite hard running. This is also a time when a life long love of soccer should be fostered. But the excessive travel and grind of too many games, coupled with the direct or indirect pressure to perform, result in player burn out and loss of interest. The high attrition rate of teenagers quitting sports sends a clear and unmistakable message.

Another adverse effect of our burgeoning soccer culture is the notion that more is better and that to reach ones potential and be discovered, one has to spend loads of money traveling all over the country in search of the next 'showcase' tournament. This notion blinds coaches and parents into a spending spree that is needless and misguided, not to mention that it squeezes financially needy families out of the system. One of the original attractions of playing soccer, it being an inexpensive sport, is no longer true. It's a universally acknowledged fact that low income communities in any country are a breeding ground for many elite athletes. A player development process that prices out low income children will pay a price of lost talent, in the long term.

Every country has its own soccer culture, evolved over decades. The US soccer culture is in its embryonic stage but if we are not careful, a flawed American soccer culture and player development philosophy could ingrain itself, with a misplaced emphasis on games and tournaments at the expense of practices and technical development, with an accent on quantity over quality. And once that happens, it's very hard to change.

Turf Wars over Players and Coaches

When winning is the main goal, youth clubs resort to poaching the best players from each other. The quick fix strategy of recruiting the best players is more enticing, compared to the long term and labor intensive approach of developing ones own. Coaches are training their eyes on the outside instead of focusing on excellence and best practices on the inside. Furthermore, the recruiting wars create a caustic environment of mistrust and animosity among coaches, parents and administrators from competing clubs.

Deterioration of Core Values

When games become too competitive, the teaching of sportsmanship, maintaining dignity in dealing with winning and losing, respect for opponents, and developing character all take a back seat. In the heat of battle, the reason for playing is lost under the large shadow cast by the end result.

Some of the important life lessons that youth sports is supposed to teach our children, from building character, to humility, to taking responsibility for ones own actions and performance, are neglected. When the better kids are courted by coaches who fall over themselves to sell their programs, what kind of message does that send to these impressionable players? It nurtures the instant solution culture where problems can be solved simply by moving to another club rather than deal squarely with character deficiencies. And when results don't go ones way, the blame game becomes the escape route from accountability and responsibility.

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