

Gordon Miller: Look before you leap

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Some parents believe that their child must play on a winning team in division 1, all the time, to guarantee automatic success in later years. It does not. They believe that if their coach isn't winning the overwhelming majority of games, they need to move their child to a "successful" program with a "winning" coach. Some feel that even if their child isn't getting quality playing time, being on a winning team is what is really important. These parents are doing a great disservice to their children.

There are more than enough studies that point to the fact that the No. 1 reason why kids drop out of youth sports is there was too much pressure to win. Winning and pressure are not necessarily bad things, as they force players to compete, battle and develop a fighting spirit. These are all important ingredients that are necessary for success. However, the long-term development of the child is what's important here. And, if the emphasis on winning takes priority, then player growth takes a back seat. The pressure to get a result should be layered in over time and incorporated into a positive training and game environment in order to be fully maximized.

We have "game-it is" in our country where we feel the more games of soccer that we play the better off the player will be. When we go to a tournament, we want the biggest bang for our buck. Give us four games, five games, six games on the weekend. We want more games for our money. If playing more and more games were the answer to development, then the rest of the world would be copying us. But, they aren't. Studies show that in a 90 minute match, the ball is in play roughly two thirds of the time (on average around 60 minutes). That means that the rest of the time the ball is out for throw-ins, goal kicks, injuries, etc. With two teams on the field, the ball is shared for about 30 minutes each. With 11 players on each team, the individual player may have accumulated possession of the ball for 2-3 minutes. Strikers normally have it less because they are usually outnumbered in the attacking line by the opposition's defenders. The defenders also have it slightly less because they are encouraged to play the ball quickly out of the back and not to get caught in possession. Therefore, if the team is playing game after game and tournament after tournament, then player development is not exactly being as enhanced as well as it could be. The games will reveal what the player needs work on, but if errors are made over and over, without the opportunity to correct them, then the mistakes can habitualize in the individual.

Trying to coach a player and get him/her to play in a different manner in a game, is difficult at the best of times. Let me give you an example: the coach notices that the right fullback is always playing the ball either long into the striker or wide into the midfielder. He wants him to start carrying the ball a little more and then passing inside to the central midfielder and thus instructs him to do so from the sideline. Under the pressure of a match most young players cannot effectively change the way that they play because they haven't done it in training. You can't expect players to change their habits in game situations when they haven't been exposed to them in practice. You train it and then put it back into a game to see if it's working.

Success comes from well-constructed and plentiful training sessions where players are given repetitions and plenty of encouragement. The training environment must be one that allows the players to make mistakes without constantly getting shouted at. Plus, the overwhelming emphasis should be on technical training and mastery of the ball. There is no tactic or system of play that will cover up the inability to control the ball well and strike it cleanly. Some coaches are quite simply good recruiters and think that by putting the best players together they will ensure immediate and lasting success. If the coach doesn't know what he is doing when they come together, then all is for naught. Does he have the right ratio of training to games? Does his practice have a lot of technical development and flow to it? Is there a lot of encouragement and repetition? Or, does he just roll a ball out session after session where the kids play and he either yells all the time or says nothing at all? Watch out for the "used car salesman" that talks a good game and sells winning above everything else but doesn't do anything to develop your child. The coach must have integrity and character. At the end of the day you want your children to be taught by people with good human qualities. However, the person must also have received good coaching education, or at least be open minded to acquiring it. There is a direct correlation between player development and coach development - it takes talent to coach talent.

Look for a coach that develops the individual. Make sure your child has fun in the environment and is enjoying the game itself. Look at the coach's preparation and the qualities of the person in charge of your child. You have a say in your child's development, but you must have a critical eye at who leads it. Take a good look before you leap. Because success is, indeed, in the detail.