

Comfort Zone

by Lawrence Fine

Hesitating to push players beyond their comfort level can impede development

An issue I have noticed to be a huge problem in youth soccer these days is that coaches are hesitant to push their players outside their comfort zone. It's a concept that most coaches either don't understand or don't seem concerned about, since they fail to address it in a variety of ways.

Describing what a person's comfort zone is exactly isn't easy to do. The best way I can do it is to say that many players like to only compete with and against players who they believe they can be successful against. They are not willing to go out on a limb and take the chance of being embarrassed or experiencing failure. Unfortunately, this does not force the players to get better in order to remain competitive.

Some coaches are so obsessed with winning at the youth level that they will not play teams that will force them to get better. When I hear coaches talking about their won-loss record, I wonder what the level of competition they faced to achieve the numbers they're so proud of. Are they facing the best competition available, or just playing against teams they are confident they can beat?

One regional championship team I worked with had a surprisingly poor won-loss record considering their level of play. (I actually don't know what their record was because I don't keep such records, but I do know they lost more than people would have expected.) Did they lose because of poor performance? They actually were a group of very consistent performers. The reason they had so many losses was that they played up in as many tournaments as possible. They also competed in as many major tournaments and high-level friendly get-togethers as they could find. Was there grumbling from the parents after losses against older teams? Of course there was, but I place little emphasis on the short-term goal of keeping parents happy. I'm more concerned with doing what is best for the players and their development.

There are other ways coaches can force players out of their comfort zone. The easiest way to force a player to improve without traveling all over the country for competition is to increase the pressure in training. Pressure is defined in soccer as the absence of space and time. Pressure can be increased by reducing the amount of space used for small-sided games or by increasing the number of players in the same small-sided games while demanding the quality of the play remain the same.

It's easy to decrease the space or increase the numbers, but both are useless without the demand to keep the quality of play high. It will take players some time to get used to the increased pressure, but they should be able to adjust and, in fact, improve with the proper encouragement.

One of the most annoying things I hear on soccer fields is players automatically saying "I'm sorry" or offering some type of apology when they make a mistake. While it's nice that they are willing to acknowledge their mistake, it's far more important to do something about the mistake to make sure it doesn't happen again. It's one thing to recognize that a mistake has been made, but it's another to turn that recognition into a learning experience to avoid having the same mistake being made over and over again. There is nothing wrong with a coach demanding that things be done correctly every time. Until the coach does this, the players will never get better.

In short, by decreasing space, decreasing time and striving for perfection during training sessions, coaches can get players out of their comfort zone and force them to improve. If you are a coach who is not forcing your players out of their comfort zone, you will never help them achieve the highest level of play at which they are capable of competing.