

Encourage Creativity and Ball Skills Before Tactics!

From US Soccer "Best Practices"

The youth coach has an important role in encouraging the development of these fundamental tools. One of the goals of this coaching guide is to introduce parents/youth coaches to an approach to coaching youth players that 1) embraces the lessons that are found in the game itself, and 2) is player-centered rather than coach-centered.

What does this mean? Consider the following comments by Hans Bongers on the growth of soccer around the world in the last 30 years, and how adults/coaches have approached player development:

Organized soccer "boomed" in the seventies. Not only did the number of people around the world who play in leagues drastically increase, also the age at which the youngest kids could start to play official games went down to 5 years and even younger. Parallel to this, many well organized coaching clinics and soccer schools, based on different educational theories were created, all hoping that a new Pele or (Johan) Cruyff would emerge from them and the brilliant collective play of the Brazilian team in the sixties and the Dutch ("total soccer") team of the early seventies could be reproduced. In the last decade many soccer associations from different countries have asked themselves how (even if!) soccer can be taught. (Hans Bongers: Somagic Street Soccer/ www.streetsoccer.hypermart.net).

By default, the well-intentioned and seemingly reasonable approach of many youth coaches is to look to adult soccer as their guide to teaching the game. What most youth coaches find helpful in the adult game is the organization and positional responsibilities (tactics) that the adult players exhibit so well. They are concepts that adults can understand well and so, as coaches, many tend to bring an organizational or tactical approach to coaching youth. Coaches often focus on keeping the players under control and teaching what appears to be the basics of the game: organization,

positions, tactics, how to prepare to win games. We choose order over apparent chaos. It is tempting to strive to have the youth games look like adult games, with kids holding their own in set positions, organized and disciplined. The magic of the Dutch players of the early seventies, or Brazil's great players of the sixties, however, was not created from an organized practice routine. It began when they were children, in pickup games where the player and the game were the dominant factors. There were neither adults nor a set schedule of mandatory practices and games. That said, we live in a different world today. Adult supervision is often necessary to ensure proper safety. The presence of adults, however, does not have to inhibit the opportunity for children to be creative and experimental in their approach to learning soccer.

Manfred Schellscheidt, Boys U-14 National Team Head Coach, describes the scene that many of our beginner level players face in the following quote:

Let us take a look at what typically happens to our youngsters as they are introduced to the sport of soccer. Day one for most of our players is probably the day mom and dad registers them with the local or the town recreation league. Based on the number of applicants, teams are formed, coaches assigned, and playing fields coordinated. The available fields serve all ages and are quite often adult dimensions. And so the games begin. Children that may have never previously kicked a ball are faced with the ultimate challenge - playing eleven v eleven

on a field too big for them. Are we really surprised that they cannot do this? But do not worry; this is where the coach comes in. He or she is the one who is called on to fix and remedy the situation. With the help of positioning, the players are spread all over the field and told, 'This is how the big guys do it. The ones who just won the World Cup.' Since this proved to be the winning formula, we must all learn from them and imitate them. (Manfred Schellscheidt: Experimenting With The Game).

In reality, what is needed from the youth coach is quite different. Again, we need to keep in mind that most of the great soccer players today played their early soccer in unsupervised games. International conferences about this topic often conclude that well-intended coaches and parents should try to withdraw from influencing young players too much, if not completely. It is suggested that if you do want to train young players the emphasis should be on 'play and fun' and various smaller versions of the 11-against-11 game have seen the light. One concept that pops up more and more in all these discussions is 'Street Soccer.' 'The streets' (alleys, parks, beaches ...) being the mysterious setting where brilliant players like Pele and Cruyff – and their fellow magicians in other sports – developed in a natural way." (Hans Bongers: Somagic Street Soccer).

A primary focus for the coach at the youth level, through the U-12 age group, is to provide an environment that comes close to simulating the “pickup” games of our youth. In this setting much of the creativity and personality of kids developed naturally, without the involvement of adults. Kids need to be allowed to play freely, develop their skills and use them in a creative manner. Coaches should organize only so far as it helps to create this environment. Again, Manfred Schellscheidt comments on this idea of “street soccer” and how the coach can help to create this environment. Beside the games, what do our training sessions look like? Are they mobile or static? Are the players free to experiment and learn from the game or are they constantly instructed? Is there room for trial and error, or are they simply told what to do and where to go? (Breathing life into soccer) ... is more about converting our training sessions into some form of street soccer in which players, with the help of the coach, experiment with the basic elements of the game in a competitive way... Learning (in this case, soccer) is about experimenting with new things and relating to them.

Mastery means coming to grips with things we have experimented with, often with repetition. It is all about developing an understanding and feel for the game. The lessons for all of us will come from the game and so will the answers. In the beginning the person and the game are separate, maybe even far apart. When things get good, the game and the person become one. (Manfred Schellscheidt:

Experimenting With The Game) With this in mind, try to encourage comfort with the ball and the confidence to use this skill creatively. Encourage the dribbler at the younger ages; your team of 8 to 10 year olds should be full of them. Dribbling, at the younger ages, is the child’s attempt to gain control over the ball. Controlling the ball is the primary skill that every other skill in soccer depends upon. Although controlling the ball may seem to be a simple task, it actually takes an enormous amount of the child’s energy. Do not expect him or her to look to pass or to pass with any level of competence or awareness, until he or she has first mastered this skill. Consider these two points. Children from about age 6 to 12 have an almost limitless capacity to learn body movement and

coordination (i.e., motor skills). At the same time, their intellectual capacity to understand spatial concepts like positions and group play is limited. Work to their strengths.

CONSIDER THIS: At the younger ages (6 to about 10), soccer is not a team sport. On the contrary, it is a time for children to develop their individual relationship with the ball. The fact that younger children are placed into team environments is not their fault. Do not demand that the more confident players share the ball. Encourage them to be creative and go to goal. Do the same with the rest of your players. Work to bring all your players up to that level of confidence and comfort with the ball. Coaches should avoid the impulse to “coach” their players from “play to play” in order to help them win the match. Coaches should not be telling their young players to “pass rather than dribble,” to “hold their positions” or to “never” do something (like pass or dribble in front of the goal).

Many kids who have been involved in organized soccer will often look to pass the ball or kick the ball down field as their first option. They have been taught to “share” the ball or they have learned that the best way to keep from making a “mistake” with the ball at their feet is to kick it away as fast as possible. For this reason, it helps if the coach continually encourages the players to make dribbling their first option. It may also help to make the players take at least two touches on the ball before they can look to pass. Remember that making mistakes at these early ages is a very important part of the player’s learning and development. Encourage risk taking and applaud effort.