

# Development vs “win at all costs”

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What is the difference between training to develop and training to win at all cost? The following paragraphs attempt to explain the difference and illustrate the ideal philosophy that our clubs should espouse:

Firstly, it behooves to acknowledge that our youth clubs have made tremendous progress in player development. Many of our clubs have full time staff of experienced coaches and administrators and offer a training curriculum and programs that replicate the level of professional club academies. The hope is that this trend will continue and that more clubs adopt the correct philosophy.

Youth clubs’ developmental approach should focus on the individual needs and long term growth of players. The focus is on laying a strong foundation that will allow players to reach their potential in the long term. The curriculum be specially designed to spotlight individual abilities and monitor and facilitate individual progress. The training regiment should concentrate on developing well rounded and intelligent soccer players who can transfer their skills to the next level. Success is measured by how many of the players advance to the next level rather than how many trophies are won.

This is not to say that our teams should not play to win. We should instill a competitive mentality in all of our players, but we do it using a positive teaching, player-centered approach. Winning is not the be all and end all. We should place more importance on the process than the short term outcome. Player performance is more relevant to the goals than game results. Success on the field is a byproduct of good coaching and quality programming. Therefore, the winning will come naturally.

Many youth clubs concentrate on a short term, team building approach and are obsessed with winning trophies. This winning ‘as soon as possible and at all cost’ mentality is based on the premise that successful teams will **attract** players to the club. In essence, this approach puts the club before the player. Additionally, research has shown that a ‘trophy chasing’ philosophy produces less creative players. Coaches obsessed with winning invariably over-coach their players in practices and games and control every move and pass from the sidelines. The result is robotic players who never learn to solve their own soccer problems. Other side-effects of a trophy chasing mentality are fear of failure, lack of sportsmanship, performance anxiety and reduced enjoyment. The result-oriented approach is also attributed to player burnout and, according to player surveys and studies, is one of the leading causes for players quitting organized sports.

In most leading soccer countries, the youth academies of the professional soccer clubs play against each other in “friendly” games and results are not kept. The professional clubs don’t

care about results at the youth level. They have a long term approach since all they care about is producing players who can play at the professional level when they reach the age of 19 or 20. In England, they used to keep scores in youth soccer until about 15 years ago. Now, their youth academy teams up to the U-16 level have switched to playing friendlies only and there are no standings, relegations, promotions or 'state cup' type of tournaments. The first time they play in a 'national championship' is at the U-18 level.

Countries like Brazil, Argentina and Africa are developing and exporting players to Europe by the thousands. Many people attribute the technical creativity and flair of Brazilian and Argentine players to "street soccer", and although that does contribute to it, the actual soccer schools and academies in those countries also subscribe to a youth philosophy of training and playing friendly games vs playing "official" games and tournaments and playing for results at an early age in general. The top clubs promote, and even demand that players take chances, be creative and express themselves.

Again, even though the players "play to win", that is not the focal point and no standings are kept. This is meant to keep the coaches and players from adopting a "win at all costs" mentality and encourage attractive soccer and attractive, skillful players.

It's this "win at all costs" mentality that is severely stifling the development of players in our country. All of the National coaching staff and "soccer experts" will agree on this important point.

What is proving detrimental to player development in America is not only the 'win at all cost' mentality, but also the sheer number of games we make our players play. In the rest of the world, elite teenage players train 4-5 times per week and only play one game per week. In the USA, the ratio of practices to games is more like 2:1 or, at best, 3:1. Team training and individual training is the key to player development. Sufficient ball touches and problem solving opportunities are missing in our weekly diet of youth soccer. In a typical game, each player on average touches the ball only 20 times per game. Contrast that with hundreds of touches in a single, well structured practice or in a 3v3 pick-up game.

As an illustration, consider the typical weekend schedule of a U-10 or U-12 Academy player in GA. In many clubs and on many weekends, the player would be asked to play 2 games on Saturday and 1 or 2 games on Sunday. The player will do a lot of running, but the grand total of ball contacts for the player on such a weekend would amount to no more than 100 touches. This is not conducive to player development.

A much better way to spend the weekend would be: Player plays 1 game on Saturday morning. Player watches a high level game from Europe/South America on TV in the afternoon (watching soccer is invaluable for player development and cannot be overstated). On Sunday morning, the player goes to the park to work on technique by juggling, dribbling, and hitting the ball against the wall. If possible, Sunday afternoon the player plays pick-up soccer with a couple of his friends. Number of ball contacts: Hundreds, if not thousands.

Many of our clubs are committed to doing it right. Our Academy players train more and play less, in order to get the ratio of practices to games to the optimum level. A total of 3 to 4 nights per week are devoted to training each week. The weekends will feature a variety of games and game-related soccer experiences. Our players play games against other clubs but they should also be exposed to other format of games, such as mini-game festivals, shoot outs, 'street soccer' days, and other exciting events.

Players need to experience the game in a variety of environments and exposed to different challenges to broaden their skills set and maturity. Our clubs can periodically mix the players in pools and move players around to enhance their adjustment skills, their self-reliance, and their leadership skills. All this should be done under the watchful eyes of our experienced staff who will implement the philosophy and curriculum for optimum player development.

Hopefully, this article gets coaches and parents thinking and debating and become inspired to focus on player development rather than game results.