

Recreational Soccer: Are the Kids Having Fun?

(Note from Jacob Daniel: This article was the first one written by me back in 1993 as Director of Coaching for Georgia Soccer and is still relevant today)

Coaching at the youth level, especially at the recreational level, can be summed up tongue-in-cheek as grown-up structure on a collision course with youthful spontaneity. If you ask many coaches, they will tell you of their constant battle to impose organization on a bunch of exuberant carefree kids.

Let us study the weapons used by both sides in this war on grass. The coaches arm themselves with whistles. The kids, who, I am sure, would love to get their hands, or lips, on some of those, tend to rely on their complete range of vocal chords. The coaches use line ups with boring, repetitive drills. The kids use peer fighting, tickling, hair pulling, tears and a complete lack of collinear principles. When the going gets tough, the coaches like to wear out the kids by resorting to long team talks, lectures and dissertations. The kids, when cornered by lectures, respond with short attention spans and perpetual motion techniques. The coaches, in an attempt to convince the kids into believing that everyone is on the same side, initiate goal setting and seasonal objectives. The kids, once they read through this tactical maneuver, revert to goal climbing and seasonal objections.

Who am I rooting for in this inter-generation conflict? For the kids of course!! Call me a traitor, but I am on the side of playful abandon.

Seriously, when one considers the amount of structured, disciplined organization inflicted on our kids in school and at home, one appreciates the need to balance it out with periods of play and fun activities without regard for results, provided, of course, that child safety is not sacrificed. Allow me to relate to you some real life examples:

HOW COULD YOU LET ME DOWN LIKE THIS?

In one 3v3 game between two U-6 teams, I witnessed a mother running onto the field to scream at her child and spank him on his derriere for scoring on his own goal (the poor child lost his orientation for a moment, dribbled towards his team's net and scored a beautiful own goal).

MY CHILD WILL GO ALL THE WAY TO THE TOP!

I frequently get inquiries from parents who are looking for a trainer for their child as a form of "individual soccer tutoring". In some cases, getting a trainer is not a bad idea. But when a parent wants to find out what his/her seven year old child's weaknesses are so that the child can work to improve on these weaknesses, I tell him/her that seven year olds have not lived on this planet long enough to develop strengths and weaknesses. Does the parent of a grade 1 student ask the teacher what weaknesses should he/she work on to enable his/her child to become a lawyer??? A seven year old child should play soccer for one purpose and one purpose only: to have fun!

At this point, most of you reading this article are probably saying to yourselves that the above

examples are but extreme cases of overzealous parents whose behavior does not resemble yours. I hope so. But below this extreme level of unrealistic parental expectations exists a multitude of more subtle examples of misplaced priorities of well meaning but misguided coaches and parents. Read on.

POST GAME INQUEST.

Your nine year old son plays goalkeeper and has just conceded a soft goal with two minutes left in the game, which caused your team to lose 2:1. On the drive home, you can't help yourself and start dissecting the play that led to the goal. You are extra careful to sound calm, friendly and not accusing. After all, you are merely trying to help your son learn from the experience, learn from his mistakes. Your son bursts out crying and says: "I don't want to talk about it!" I am no child psychologist, but the above incident suggests to me that this keeper is under too much pressure to perform and is not enjoying himself.

ORGANIZED CHAOS.

Some coaches, when they want their teams to work on passing, use drills with line ups similar to this one: They place their players in two parallel lines about ten yards apart. The two players in front of the two lines move up the field inter-passing the ball while all the other players watch and wait for their turn. In one such practice session that I observed, each player touched the ball about once every four minutes. Suggestion: Why not give one ball to each pair and let all the pairs simultaneously inter-pass while moving randomly in a large area. Some coaches do not like this suggestion because it's too messy – balls flying all over the place, players bumping into each other, balls hitting the wrong players (sounds much like the real game, doesn't it?)

My point is that at the recreational level, the game is kind of messy and the suggestion mentioned above is a lot more game-like than standing idle in a line waiting for your turn, and then, when your turn comes, passing the ball while running in a straight line.

PLAY YOUR POSITIONS AND DON'T BUNCH UP!!

We have all seen the 'swarm'. Six year olds all bunching up on the ball. We have all screamed at them: spread out! Play your position!! Now, if I was a six year old, I would also go after the ball and disregard my position. After all, the ball is always up for grabs. Nobody really has any control over it. Does anybody really expect me to believe that my six year old team mate is going to control the ball, look up to see me on the other side of the field and switch play by placing a 30-40 yard pass to my feet?? There is no point in worrying about positions if your players have not yet mastered the technique of passing the ball under pressure. Let the swarm be. You cannot artificially speed up the learning process. It's for this reason that modified soccer and 3-a-side soccer exists: to reduce the size of the swarm, because you cannot eliminate it before its time.

In closing, I do believe that the coaches at the recreational level are getting better all the time. There are many coaches and parents who are in sync with the sensitivities and needs of their kids. I hope that through the coaching courses and clinics, we can get more coaches to stop and ask themselves: Are the kids having FUN?