

Development A-Z

by Ian Barker, MYSA Director of Coaching and Player Development

I do not think that any time soon Bruce Arena will be accompanying me on the 350 mile round trip to Caledonia, MN for a three hour coaches clinic.....though he is invited. Nor do I think that Tony DiCicco will be making it to any of your clubs end of season team picnics. I am confident; however, that the work we all do as coaches at various levels is important to the top coaches in this country.

The USSF and US Youth Soccer have identified the need for improved player development to increase the number of available players ultimately reaching the international level of play. For some of us that means refining our coaching to develop superior athletes whom can demonstrate technical and tactical excellence. For others that means creating a training environment, which is both safe and fun and enthruses players to stay with soccer.

I would qualify that we can “blackmail” the players to enjoy themselves with gifts and “sideshows”. Clearly we need the players to stay with soccer because they have developed a love for the game and have fun with the sport itself. It is our responsibility to keep the sport foremost in the players’ minds during training.

As coaches we need to determine where we fit in with player development. Just as our national coaches cannot be working at the grass root level every day, the rest of us must identify where our abilities are best employed. Having spent the previous eighteen months observing Minnesota club development and its effects on our players, I’d like to offer the following observations.

Consider the players in three loose chronological categories: (i) U6-U10/U11; (ii) U11/U12-U14/U15 and (iii) U15-U19. What is the different emphasis a coach should have at each of these ages? How is determining where best to place a coach hampered by the lack of “qualified” coaches available to a club? What are we, as coaches, best suited to coach?

In the early stage of player development we need to have educators and facilitators who can foster a love of the game. Significant knowledge of soccer coupled with a playing background would be a plus. The reality is, however, that experience of that level is not available to clubs in the youngest programs. Coach/facilitators must be educated from within the club structure through the “Y” modules. If clubs can encourage adults not to fear their lack of personal soccer experience a wealth of fresh coaching blood can be found and employed. My challenge to all clubs with an in-house U6/U8/U10 program is to get adults to a “Y” module. If you do I believe we can train you scores more volunteers.

As players enter U11/U12 soccer their physical, mental and social abilities are progressing significantly. At these ages through U14/U15 I contend the potential of a soccer player, their associated skills and tactical vision can be clearly seen and enhanced. It is at these ages that the national coaches begin to identify talent. Consequently clubs need to put the best soccer coaching resources at these critical ages. Two-footedness, ability to run off the ball, ability to play two player combinations, 1vs1 skills has to be emphasized at these ages. A player not competent in the basics here will struggle to be an accomplished player entering high school and beyond. Sacrificing the development of individual competency in pursuit of team goals and victory does a tremendous disservice to players. Equally we do no favors for the coaches who inherit players who have been used to satisfy short-term goals and not tutored in the “soccer basics”. Further the disappointment players and parents experience at failure at the next level is very often a symptom of lack of vision in development at U11-U15.

No mistake one of the primary responsibilities of coaches at the older ages is team management. Dealing with the older teenager and the new demands, upon time and travel, that come with adolescence can be very testing. Coaching at this age requires fostering a player’s feeling of responsibility for them and their teammates. Individual ability is still a training priority, but begins to take a place behind developing team understanding and strategy. Patience is a necessary virtue along with soccer knowledge coaching this age. The most “qualified” coach is not always the most suited here when personal playing experiences can cloud our ability to understand the players’ motivation and dedication. If a club has only a handful of coaches I am increasingly coming to believe that appropriate placement of coaching resource is necessary.

In summary I look at the three “categories” and identify different primary skills for coaches: (i) educator/facilitator; (ii) “soccer teacher” and (iii) player manager and instructor. Obviously having coaches who demonstrate all these skill at an equally high level is ideal, the reality is different for most clubs.

If a coach does a great job with U12s why not have them coach that age every year? Some coaches graduate with their teams through numerous development stages spanning many years. Is this because they are best equipped to coach the team or is it because they have a child on the team? Parent coaches are essential to the growth of soccer in America. Is it possible to channel the experience of the parent coach and employ them in better ways? A great U6 coach might not be a “wiz” with U18s and visa versa.

Another consideration in player development must be what happens to the coaching of the second team. Too often competent coaches get assigned “dream teams” who seldom lose and win on superior physical and technical ability. Coaching a team that has few goals to achieve often requires minimal coaching from our best resources. What if you take the coach and place them with the second team instead? Not as glamorous for the coach, but...If the second team gets better the implication for the “dream team” is very significant. Either wait to get caught up and overtaken or strive to stay ahead of a new competition developed by a good coach. The same applies to placing coaches for Premier

or Classic play. If we make Classic III play better and devote coaching resource to that effort levels above will be encouraged to improve also. If we make our better players feel the need to improve by developing competition for them we will have succeeded as coaches in different ways than simply schooling the elite. We will also have done Messrs. Arena and DiCicco a huge favor in challenging and developing the future US stars.

A club which aspires to sponsor Premier teams and vie for regional and national success and which is not closely connected to an in-house youth program will ultimately not be successful. In the short-run recruitment, "buying" coaches and having the best uniforms will get a club by. In the long-run, however, a failure to attend to player development will leave us with volumes of players who are domestic, to Minnesota, "superstars", but who are unequipped to compete at a higher level. We need to share in an investment to player development from U6 to U19. No one coach can do this hands on, but failure to attend to where our players come from and where they are to go is a tragic mistake. It leaves coaches living vicariously through their players rather than coaching them as individuals, full of potential.

Some of the greatest energy in USSF and US Youth Soccer is being spent on development at the younger ages and more grass-roots level. Minnesota youth soccer will need to follow this lead and improve our vision of player development. The greater glory will be in contributing to something lasting rather than a win or two extra on any given year.

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