

The Coaching Hierarchy
Part V: Final thoughts
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In the previous articles in this series, it was proposed that soccer is best taught in the form of small-sided games that match the developmental level of the players. The range of possible games is seen as a continuum starting at 1v1 and ending at 11v11. The technical and tactical experience of the participants would determine the upper limit of any game-form, and whether the practice teams were even or uneven in number. The appropriateness of any game would be judged on whether players had adequate time and space, relative to ability, to pass, dribble or shoot at their discretion. This pedagogical approach is based on the street soccer philosophy that the game itself can be a wonderful teacher and that young players need to become soccer problem-solvers as they grow with the sport. Skill development is seen as a natural by-product of play, providing the number of players and the availability of space afford them many opportunities for repetition of techniques.

The coaching hierarchy screams out for adults to be patient in their eagerness to develop large group tactical understanding in young players. It is not outrageous to view ages five to twelve as the years for developing and honing basic skills, and for age thirteen as the time to begin building team players. Only after players have developed a basic feel for the ball and begun to understand how and when to support teammates, should the coaching focus on defining roles within large groups (above 6v6). Mobility, support, vision, changing the rhythm of play, ball circulation, and winning the ball back are seen as the fundamental tactical concepts young players must begin to understand during their formative years. Around the ages of 10 to 12, combination play begins to evolve through the natural movement of supporting players within small-sided games. Once the experience and skill level of the players suggests numbers past 5v5 or 6v6 are warranted, organizing a modified midfield line for play will become necessary. This also begins to emerge around the ages of 10 and 12, and it is only at this point that the introduction of some basic positional responsibilities within and between lines (defense, midfield, forward) will become relevant.

In a sound player development environment, young children with five or six years playing experience arrive on the doorstep of teenhood with a wide array of techniques firmly established. They have also developed a working understanding of the basic tactical concepts of how to attack and defend in small and medium sized groups. These players can read the game quickly and can possess the ball as individuals and in small groups. They understand the game has a rhythm that changes relative to the amount of resistance confronted in going forward, and they have derived soccer fitness from playing soccer, not from running laps or sprints. While it has been said that we are a relatively young soccer country and that progress takes time, perhaps we have just been misguided into believing that we can manufacture players through drills while the real artists learn through play.

A soccer friend recently made the comparison between American soccer players and European basketball players who, apparently, also do not experience enough free play growing up and who also tend to look rather mechanical and pedestrian in their play. The Soviets tried to manufacture world-class soccer players in the 50's and 60's, but failed, and it is significant that the Nigerians and Ghanaians have been amongst the most successful countries in FIFA Youth World Cups over the past two decades; the bulk of these players developed their soccer foundation in unstructured games on bad fields. The abundance of talented Central and South American players whose youth was spent playing soccer on sand or waste ground also cannot be ignored. The Dutch player revolution which began in the early 1960's was the result of a calculated return to the ideals of street soccer. Two World Cup seconds, a fourth, and a European Championship win suggest that they have much to offer another Western country seeking to elevate its talent pool.

It is from this sense of “wrong direction” that the notion of a coaching hierarchy has evolved. By working one community and one league at a time, it is hoped that Ohio-North can take the major steps towards cultivating a more sophisticated “average” player and therefore a more sophisticated crop of high achievers. It is a frustrating observation that after nearly 30 years of coaching and player development programs, we still have members of Olympic Development Program (ODP) state and regional teams, and even youth national teams, with noticeable technical and tactical limitations. Our player-numbers continue to rise steadily each year and our coaching schools at both state and national levels are filled to capacity. With all the money, all the players, all the games, all the policies and rules, all the tournaments, all the facilities, and all the coaching licenses, why is our average player still very average in comparison to many of their cohorts from around the world? Certainly not all the answers are readily obvious, but some of the more contentious issues are discussed briefly below.

- **The Drill Mentality.** Young players need to understand the context in which they play. We have a goal, they have a goal; score, or win the ball back. We have mistakenly used drills to teach skill on the flawed assumption that kids cannot play without technique. In reality, if the space and numbers are correctly arranged, even very young players can enjoy “playing” soccer. Drills refine and expand existing techniques and are most suited to players with experience and motivation. The drill approach is seen as confusing and boring by most young players and is particularly counterproductive to the goal of providing a positive initial experience for beginning players. Simply, players engaged in challenging (balanced) games where they can score goals will experience higher motivation and have more fun than those standing in line waiting their turn to make another mistake.
- **Competitive Recreation Programs.** Young players need to be left alone to enjoy small-sided games. Too often, the environment they find themselves in has too many players on the field, young referees trying to avoid abuse from the sidelines, parents screaming encouragement and advice to their young prodigies, and “parent-coaches” acting like professional coaches working hard for a victory.

Rather than safe and supportive entrees, recreational soccer programs can be frightening scenes to observe; certainly these settings are often quite traumatic as a young child's first sport experience. With little or no opportunity to play with the toy (ball) and build even basic levels of confidence and experience, is it a surprise that many youngsters quit early in their careers or end up with few well-developed skills as teenagers?

- **Expectations for Recreation Coaches.** What can recreation level coaches without a soccer background do well? Because their kids are usually on the team, they can be relied on to be at practice and games. They can observe players for success in scoring goals or experiencing goal-scoring opportunities. They can set up appropriate small-sided games in appropriate spaces. They can organize “fun” games related to technical development. They can be enthusiastic. They can participate in games with very young children and keep them moving in the right direction. They can encourage older kids to spread out and to help each other attack and defend. They can change game-forms to encourage different skills to emerge, such as kicking or dribbling. They can balance teams with weaker and stronger players to ensure a competitive and challenging practice. They can, in effect, successfully complete all the tasks one would expect of a recreation level coach whose goal is, or should be, to help kids learn to enjoy soccer and stay in the game.
- **Inappropriate Coaching Education?** There are coaches and there are facilitators. Typically, parent-coaches have little or no background in soccer and are intimidated by the expectation that they teach skills and positions. For most, this is an impossible goal that puts unrealistic pressure on inexperienced volunteers. Perhaps it is time to look at “facilitator-level” certification for inexperienced volunteers, and a restructuring of existing coaching education programs for those with the background to teach skills and tactics to players in an appropriate way and at the appropriate times.
- **Substitution and Roster Size.** Competitive teenage players must learn to play the game in the way it was intended, with teams of 11 players plus replacements competing over an extended period of time. There is no reason why the United States should buck the rest of the world with a reentry policy that teaches kids to rest off the field when tired. International “friendlies” allow up to 18 players to participate with no re-entry, while international tournaments, such as the World Cup, and all national leagues, allow for up to three replacements per game. In reality, do we actually need 18 players on a roster when players are actively involved for only 61% of the game – and that only if the coach rotates players equally? When players compete in shifts, there is no possibility of understanding the nuances of surviving 2x45 minute halves as adults. The mental and physical stamina necessary to play an entire match is developed from youth, not in college and not in the pros. The psychological battles that face “starters” are a mystery to the typical American teenager and I have often mused that a player like the Brazilian, Romario, would never have become an international star under our

substitution rules because he is, by and large, a lazy player until his moment of inspiration unfolds. He would probably have been on the bench when his chance came and his genius would never have been recognized!

- **Winning versus Development at the Travel and Premier Levels.** The Dutch are guided by the philosophy that the years before age 12 are for the development of basic skills and tactical insight and the years after age 12 are for learning to win! The French view the development of “positional” players as important only after age 15, once the task of molding multi-faceted personalities has been completed. In England, the 36 youth academies play a schedule of “friendlies” between U-9 and U-16 to lessen the pressure to win at the expense of development. Generally, all professional soccer environments worldwide reflect some form of these approaches. For players under the age of 12, it is generally accepted that a developmentally appropriate soccer environment includes practicing under a good teacher, with other good players, and with a balance between practice time and playing age-appropriate small-sided or medium-sided games for competition. The players are taught to refine technique and develop their fitness and insight in realistic soccer situations. Three, or more likely four practices each week separate the one competitive match held weekly on Saturdays or Sundays. Do we have this backwards? Are we so interested in winning at our youngest competitive levels that we neglect to take advantage of the most important years in a young player’s development? Is this one reason why our average player continues to have difficulty with basic techniques?
- **Training versus Playing.** A regular observation of American soccer is that we play too much and train too little. Even very good coaches can’t “fix” habitual problems during games, and they have even less impact on long-term performance during tournaments where staving off the effects of attrition is often a key to victory. Coaching is about building good habits under pressure, with clean technique as the foundation of the game. Recognizing spaces; recognizing the timing of runs; recognizing openings and moments to combine; attacking and defending offside space; and understanding positioning and movement relative to teammates, the ball and opponents, are all examples of issues that must be taught and reinforced day after week after month after year. Nothing comes easy to most players and we all resort to habit under excessive pressure. To encapsulate coaching, it could be said that the first 12 years are for the development of basic techniques and tactics, and the rest of the competitive years are for refining techniques and making play as fast as possible under control. We seem to have arrived at a mentality where endless games and tournaments are seen as “good,” and practice time is seen as “expendable.” From my perspective, we again have this backwards, possibly at the expense of another generation of players.
- **Age versus Ability Grouping.** If a young student shows promise in, for example, dance or mathematics, they are quickly assessed and placed in the most appropriate program, regardless of age. This situation should be normal for gifted and advanced soccer players as well. Because schools tend to group by age, we

have adopted similar practices in soccer; with the tendency being to hold back gifted players while lamenting competitive mismatches. Incidentally, the youngest player to compete in a World Cup was only 16 years of age. Her name was Ife Chienjene and she played for Nigeria in last summer's USA-99. The youngest males were both 17 years old. Norman Whiteside played in Spain '82 for Northern Ireland, and Edson Arantes do Nascimento, better known as Pele, played for Brazil in 1958 and scored two goals in the final against Sweden. In too many leagues and communities, the decision to play up has become an administrative one rather than a soccer one; sadly at the expense of the players.

- **Serving Multiple Masters: the issue of multiple carding.** A final thought relates to the training rhythm. There is a dangerous notion in our society that if a little is good then more is better. This attitude has quickly found its way into established operating practices at the competitive levels in soccer where players can be registered for a community team and a travel team and a premier team and a high school team, all in the same year! In reality, it is not unusual for players to be carded for more than one team in the same season. The result of this madness is predictable: games replace practices; games conflict with each other; players run from one event to the next without the opportunity to rest and recover, and without the opportunity to reflect on the experience. The anticipation of the next match is tempered by the realization that the emotional and physical toll is really not that much fun and, inevitably, soccer becomes a grind. There are too many players who burn out and quit, never to return, at ages when they should be making significant emotional leaps in soccer - around age 12, during high school, and during and after college. Many compete for 12 months of the year, playing between 80 and 150 games in that time, year after year without a significant break. Many suffer from overuse injuries, such as stress fractures, tendonitis, chronic back pain, and joint instability as a result of incomplete rehabilitation. Most damning are the vast numbers of players who fail to develop even basic skills and tactical concepts by the time they choose to leave the game. Our young players compete in more soccer games per year than any peer group on the planet. Given that the adult standard for world competition is a game every three to four days and, professionally, playing three games in a week and 60 games over a ten-month season are considered excessive, isn't it time to ask whether more is indeed better?

As I read through the five parts of this series, it occurs to me that since writing Part I in April, the concept of a coaching hierarchy has evolved to include structural and administrative issues that connect recreation levels to national youth teams. Many of the failings observed on the field have their origins in the structure and administration of the game away from it. Change is a slow process, but I am a dreamer at heart. I dream soccer will become America's sport and our men will emulate our women on the worlds' stage. In 2022 (men) or 2023 (women) will we have a young player from Ohio wearing the stars and stripes because of steps we took around the turn of the century to help our everyday player? I wonder.... And hope!