

Developing a Coaching Philosophy as a Youth Soccer Coach
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Have you ever really thought about why you are a youth coach and what you want to achieve? You probably have read or heard about the following types of goals providing shape to a coaching philosophy:

1. Meaningful competition vs. winning and losing
2. Teaching skills, even though you are likely to lose games that rely on playing physically.
3. Player development vs. position development
4. Playing “soccer” vs. “kick & run.”

There are many lists. I have considered most of them over many years of coaching. Yet, over time, I have come to realize that while these and similar goals open the door to developing a philosophy, they only scratch the surface of the issues to consider. Unfortunately, many youth coaches simply adopt one or other of these notions without delving into the underlying premises and results of each.

I suggest that you start with some more thoughtful and far-reaching questions:

What is your vision for the development of your players? Does it include having the game be fun? Does it include development of their love for the game?

What is your vision for the development of the game in the US?

Does your vision drive you to want to learn more about the game itself, as well as how players truly learn and develop?

What is your daily goal as a coach? Is it to provide a strategy to win this week’s game?

Is it to provide an environment where the players make decisions for themselves, learn how to solve problems and experiment?

Have you considered the abilities of each of your players and thought about how you can help foster a passion for the game within each of them that goes beyond his or her playing days?

How will your players remember you 20 years from now?

Will you play a pivotal role in their development both as a player and as a person?

Or will their times with you merely have been stepping stones, either for them or you or both?

Why are answers to questions like these more pertinent and revealing than answers to the general questions about winning now vs. development? Perhaps it is because the latter, while important, are simply emblematic of something deeper, and not themselves original. The winning vs. development-type of questions reflect the *effect* of other, deeper-lying *causes* or *driving forces*. These causes are the foundations that guide

us in facing many differing situations. They also are the driving forces that guide us as coaches and players, and ultimately manifest themselves in our continued love for the game.

We often overlook fun and a *love of the game* as major factors. Even professional players continue to play primarily because they are having fun. Improvement of ability plays an important role in having fun. The sense of “getting better” provides confidence and a feeling of competence. We as coaches must understand this type of *driving force* before we can develop the core of our coaching philosophy. And it is only after establishing the core that we can be intellectually honest in answering the second-tier questions like winning vs. development. For example, a *second-tier* concept of competition focuses only on the opponent, the league, etc. The *driving force* or deeper issue concerning competition includes the competition against oneself, the inner drive to become better. Players experience a motivational boost when *they* recognize self-improvement. This intrinsic motivation is more significant than any extrinsic reward (winning record, medals, and trophies) for long term development. Our philosophies as coaches must have at their core this concept of encouraging each player’s intrinsic motivation to play.

The development of youth soccer in the US has both benefited and suffered from its own evolution. In many ways it has developed backwards in comparison to most youth sports. It has not grown from kids playing and experimenting in self-organized neighborhood or sandlot games. Although there have been ethnic-based youth playing in pockets for many years, youth club soccer, as a mainstream activity, did not really begin to burgeon here until the 1970s. It grew then in response to the restrictions and lack of quality play and coaching in the high schools. In order to compete with the traditional American sports path (i.e., through the school system) youth club soccer became highly organized even before there were youth players to fill the leagues. Therefore, from its inception, every aspect of its organization and growth has been prescribed by adults. This has tremendously affected the rate and type of growth of the game in the US, and, unfortunately, has hindered the development of players.¹

One of the casualties of this process has been many adults’ lack of consideration of the heart of the game itself: soccer is a game that constantly changes, with the ball always moving, and there are many contests, individual, group and team, all over the field. These myriad situations in each game require players to make adjustments. The real key to understanding what makes a player great is realizing that it lies in the unique adjustments and decisions he or she makes to solve the problems presented in a game. Some of the most crucial elements in the total development of a soccer player are the abilities to read the flow of the game, to adjust to individual opponents and teams, and to solve problems in ways no else anticipates. These are intangible traits that make great players rise above others, and that players only develop over a long period of time with experience and experimentation. Development in this area has become a casualty in the

¹ I wrote an entire article on this a number of years ago entitled “Stifling the Development of the American Youth Soccer Player” so I won’t expand on this issue here.

US because our whole focus as adults has been on *results* at each stage and not the *process*.

The main reason for this is understandable: As adults designing a youth program our focus has been on tangible concepts that we can categorize and measure. Unfortunately, it has created an environment than discourages young players from engaging in the very thing that will ultimately make them top-level players: their own messy and inefficient (from an adult perspective) problem-solving. Our need for order led us to identify the four pillars of the game that we could manipulate: technical, tactical, physical, and psychological. Unfortunately, what we have done is look at development strictly through this quadrangle lens, often stifling the creative growth of young players.

In addition, we often misapply these four concepts by emphasizing one or two virtually to the exclusion of the others. For example, many have stated that the *psychological* aspect is most important primarily for coaches of professional players. The concept is that professional coaches are mainly *man-managers*, with the unspoken, but inferred notion that youth coaches are not. The inference is that youth coaches should focus primarily on technical development and then later, tactical training. For youth, the *psychological* aspect is limited to game-specific types of situations, where the coach might contrive a game situation in practice (for example, telling players that they should imagine that there are five minutes left and their team is down 1 goal). The point many miss is that the *pillars* are concurrent, not consecutive. The free-flowing nature of the game requires players to play and maneuver in an environment where all four pillars are constantly feeding and limiting each other. They do not, indeed they cannot, exist in a vacuum. While the psychological aspects of being a player at age 14 may be different from those of a 23 year-old professional player, they are every bit as interwoven with each player's development, as is the development of a young player's love and passion for the game.

There are deep psychological roots present in youth sports. Kids are growing physically and mentally, but also emotionally and socially. We often hear stories of parents who deal with their kids the same way their parents dealt with them, even though they didn't want to be like their parents. Why does this happen? One reason is because as they grow emotionally and socially they learn how to cope with the world changing around them by watching, listening and absorbing the interaction of their parents. It is the same for young soccer players. They learn to be creative through their own experimentation, in environments that will not always punish their creativity. Again, it is the process that is important, not just the result. We adults, however, often believe that these players can only learn how to compete, accomplish, improve and create by being exposed to more what adults have determined are more *challenging* extrinsic environments, such as *elite* teams, *elite* leagues, *elite* tournaments, etc.

But we must always remember the essence of the game itself: it is free flowing and requires each player to make his or her own decisions based upon what is happening around him or her. The player can only learn to make those decisions effectively if he or

she has been faced with those types of decisions before and has been allowed to process and experiment with different responses. It is only the self-knowledge of one's accomplishments and ability to improve that leads to a sense of being in control. And the concept of learning one's identity and acceptance of oneself is a core issue for teenagers. Only when we allow players to make their own decisions will they will develop an ability to *control* their environment. In essence, this is what we have identified as the ultimate *psychological* aspect of the game – the part that we revere in professional players -- the issue of being in control no matter what situation arises.

So what does all of this have to do with a coaching philosophy? Most youth coaches simply adopt one of the standard goals cited above without really thinking about and deciding for themselves their own underlying values or the *driving forces* that will really help each of their player's development as athletes. These questions are even more important for ODP or academy coaches, because they are working with the supposedly *chosen few elite* players who have been *identified* as the future stars. Therefore, the whole societal focus for, and pressure on, these *elite* players is for immediate success. The coach feels the pressure to identify and train the *best* players, and on the players to always strive to excel. The problem is that this is most often predicated solely on extrinsic and immediate results: winning and outperforming others at every level. The fallacy of this type of barometer has been proven time and again by the extremely low percentage of *elite* teenaged players who ultimately play at higher levels later in life. The irony is that, outside of the soccer context, most adults recognize that teenagers are experiencing tremendous changes in their physical, mental, technical abilities, and are especially vulnerable and naïve in their psychological development.

The challenge for you as a youth coach is to carefully consider all of these issues in developing your coaching philosophy. Doing so may help you realize that your role is not to *manufacture* gifted and talented players through systematic training programs. Rather, it encompasses much more understanding of both the players and the game, and requires much more fortitude and integrity to withstand the onslaught of society's need to constantly have achievement markers at each level. As an ODP or academy coach, you will select and work with certain *elite* players, but the issue for you will be whether you can consistently provide practice and game environments that emphasize creativity and problem-solving over rote learning. Just as it is necessary for builders cut deep into the ground for foundations of tall buildings, so you are laying the groundwork for the future. No one looks in awe at the gaping hole that is dug, or ever even sees the concrete laid for a building's foundations once it is built, but in order for a beautiful and majestic building to rise, the solid, but unseen, foundation is necessary. If the game on the highest levels demands free-flowing and spontaneous decisions by the players, the question is what foundations are you laying?

This is why it is so important that the *driving forces* behind your coaching philosophy transcend the here and now. Doing so may cause some anxious moments as to immediate results in any given game, but it will develop the players themselves as decision-makers, and, more importantly, will cause them to value the game as their own, and provide for them the intrinsic motivation of accomplishment and being in control.

To do so as a coach requires the ability to withstand the constant pressure of parents and others trying to convince themselves that these players have already arrived as players.

Don't settle for only being a pragmatic coach whose main goal is to teach players how to *survive* at the next level. Never forget, however, that the players in your care are only at the beginning or middle of their playing careers – they are not anywhere near the final stages of development. If you focus primarily on immediate results, you often will close the door on the players' more innovative, yet currently inefficient (and many times unsuccessful at this stage) attempts to solve problems. Our youth coaching ranks are rife with ex run-of-the-mill pros who believe that it is only through learning the *professional* tricks of the trade that players can play at the next level. They often focus on minor side issues rather than really helping players develop their own repertoire of responses to the game. These coaches fail to provide opportunities for players to think about what is happening around them, and as a result, they also fail to guide players as they learn to make their own decisions.

For example, I once watched a coach who was well-known former player spend 15 minutes showing a forward how to suddenly stop and raise his elbow as he checked back for a ball so that the chasing covering opponent would run into it. Everyone involved believed that if the player learned to play “like a pro” he would have an edge – he wouldn't be fooled by more savvy older players. The coach made no attempt to help the player understand what problem he was solving by checking back in the first place, why checking at an angle provided more options than checking straight back, or, even more importantly, what the player himself saw when he checked back. If you truly want to develop players who excel far beyond what you accomplished as a player, you must provide environments that present problems, guide the players through questioning, and then, most importantly, allow them to determine how best to solve the problems. It is only when you do this that you will develop players who can answer the questions you cannot yet even think to ask.

Your coaching philosophy will determine whether you are willing to spend the time required, and whether you will be patient enough, to provide a decision-making environment for players that will allow them to gain the experience needed to overcome the unpredictable. It will ultimately determine whether your players have fun playing the game, and whether they develop their own love for the game. If your philosophy is not grounded in the *driving forces* of true development, it may only focus on immediate success, provide answers to immediate problems, and teach players the tricks to *survive* at the next level. Remember your players are at the beginning or middle of their development as players, not the end. What you provide will be a part of their growth experience– it will not be the final piece. Will you seek to build the foundations for each player's future, like the builder of a skyscraper, or will you be more concerned with seeking results now, like a builder who merely provides the roofs for single story houses whose walls already exist?

