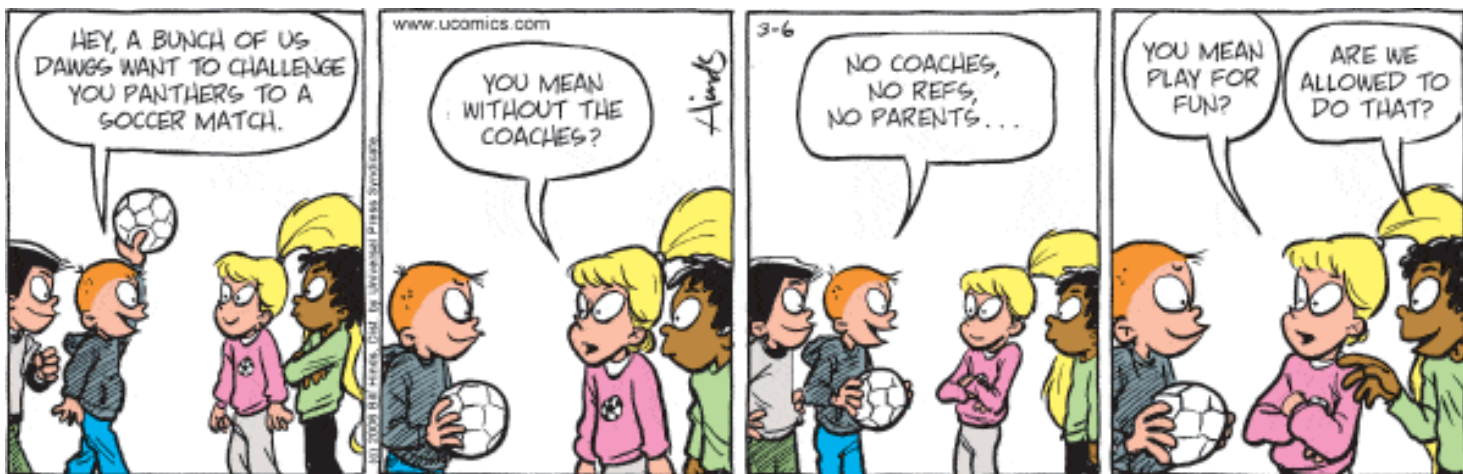


Academy?



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“Giving Back The Game”

Starting in the fall of 2007, all U9 Travel Soccer started to play in an “Academy” format for league play in Indiana Youth Soccer. This was different from the regular travel format that was been offered in the past for this age group. The impetus for this change was to mainly to provide a fun and more positive playing environment as these children transition into their first years of the travel soccer experience.

Introduction

Recently the United States Soccer Federation released a document entitled “Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States.” In the 10-14 year old section of this document they have a section that is called the “Academy Level.” The age groups in that Academy Level are the U10 and U12 age groups.

There is a discussion about winning and losing within this section of the “Best Practices” document about the environment that U.S. Soccer feels is appropriate for the youth (6-12) player. The emphasis in this section is on development over results with these age groups. To create a better environment for our players, coaches, adult spectators, and referees, the transition from having U9 “Travel” teams to U9 “Academies” must be achieved.

What are Academies?

An Academy is when a club/association keeps a collection of players within an age group as opposed to placing them on individual teams. Some Academies do not “cut” or “tryout” younger players, and all children that want to play are accepted. In the Indiana Youth Soccer model, clubs will retain the option to select players, but the no-cut policy is recommended. The Academy is an idea that is being used in many areas of the country and around the world. There are no “A, B, and C” teams in these Academies, as players stay in pools and can be moved back and forth according to their progress and development throughout the seasonal year. The emphasis is on developing players and **FUN!**

The Academy approach embraces the idea that young players still have a lot of learning and growing to do in the game. The Academy approach also recognizes it is more developmentally appropriate to place the young players in an environment where they receive more training than matches. This approach would allow clubs to keep players in a pool, foster development over winning and let these young players play freely. Each club’s Developmental Academy would play non-results-oriented competition against other club Academies organized by the various Indiana Youth Soccer travel leagues.

Objectives

The four major objectives of the Academy format are to create a better environment (**FUN**) for player development, coaching education, parent education and referee development.

Player Development

- Success is a by-product of player development. There is a saying that without technique, there’s no tactics. With the Academy approach, the focus is on improving the individual

player's technique. Since players are in an environment where they don't have to constantly worry making a wrong decision during the match, the players begin to develop a "feel" for the game, to play instinctively. Young players are allowed to show their abilities in an environment of competition without the "fear" of losing a match. At the same time, players learn to make decisions in a match-like setting while getting more touches on the ball, thereby improving technical development. If clubs are going to produce better teams in the future, then clubs must first produce players who are better technically.

- In Indiana, travel clubs presently have players between the ages of 7-9 years of age "tryout" to make a club team. We put these youngest of players through the psychological rigors of making a club travel team when they are so young. There is absolutely no way that anyone can predict how good a nine/ten year old player is going to be. How many players get missed when we have them "tryout"? How many young players get discouraged when they don't make the "A" team? How many parents get upset? How many times have we seen late bloomers? The Developmental Academy will foster an entire first travel experience where players will look to be more creative, take risks, become better with the ball and have more fun.
- Young players are dropping out of the sport of soccer by the time they are 13 or 14 years of age. Research has shown that 70% of all kids drop out of sports. Why do players drop out? The pressure to win at the youngest ages is problematic. The current model in Indiana is results-based. The novelty of playing matches also wears off when they become a teenager when they have played so many games at such young ages. **The main reason soccer is no longer fun is due to pressure to win and/or an unhealthy emphasis on results over development and FUN.** The Academy format reduces the stress and pressures of the system.

Adult (Coaches and Parents) Development

- Sideline behaviors on both sides of the field are a contributing factor to player, coach and referee drop-out. The pressure to win takes over when the challenge of taking risks, trying new ideas on the field should prevail. The Academy format reduces this pressure on coaches, parents and referees, as well.
- Success is a byproduct of player development. Does it really matter who wins at 8 or 9 years of age? Yet we put adult coaches in a situation where winning is the focus as they are under pressure from parents who may become disgruntled and take their child to another club. As a result, coaches resort to "winning strategies" such as: planting players (cherry picking) in order to increase scoring or sitting players for longer than a half of a match because they don't want to risk losing. Instead of winning and losing, coaches should be focusing on player development, enthusiasm and love of the game. The Academy format allow coaches to focus on development over winning.
- Often coaches and parents begin to feel that their whole sense of self-worth is manifested through the younger players on the field. All too often adults (coaches and parents) berate the officials (young teenagers) and lose their composure. In the Academy format, the change in focus helps everyone remember that the kids are the reason for the game.
- The perception to some adults is that we now want to make U9 "Recreational," but that isn't the case. The Academy is a bridge between Recreation/Rec-Plus and Travel. It is geared for players that aspire someday to play at a high level. Players would still represent a club but instead of being put onto teams, the players would be put into each club's Academy. The players can benefit from the club's entire coaching staff, experience competition by playing against other club's Academies and develop a club pride and sense of belonging. This is a healthy benefit for the players, parents and coaches.

- The Academy format will also provide for improved coaching development; club directors of coaching can “mentor” a new/young coach in this low-pressure environment. Take away the emphasis of “results” and now these young coaches will be able to teach these young players what they know. We are seeing more young people who are familiar with the game and have an interest in coaching, but they simply don’t want to coach in a travel environment due to time and commitment. In an Academy model, we can get young coaches that have played the game at a higher level to teach without the fear of losing.
- This Academy approach is “Player-Centered” and not “Coach Controlled.” Soccer is a player-centered game isn’t it? With the Academy approach, young players will be in an environment where they are challenged at their own pace. More players can be included as opposed to excluded in the younger age groups which helps clubs in building a larger base for future players.

Referee Development

- According to our State Youth Referee Administrator, Indiana currently has a 38% turnover rate with young referees. One of the big reasons referees drop out is due to verbal abuse by adults that simply isn’t worth the payment and/or free soda from the concession stand.
- In the Academy approach young referees will gain invaluable experience in calling a match and not worry about the outcome. Younger referees who are often called upon to call U9 matches can now be “mentored” in an environment that is developmentally-appropriate for them, as well.
- Referees are necessary and in order to develop these younger referees we need to provide an environment for them to learn while managing a quality match. The need to retain future referees is vital. No referees=no game!

A Final Thought

“When we place children in travel soccer too soon the emphasis is subtly being placed on the team result and winning the game, rather than on the individual player’s performance. If the team doesn’t win, then it doesn’t get to play in this league or that division or in this particular tournament. Thus, coaches feel the pressure and start recruiting bigger, stronger kids that can help secure the victory-now. They start playing more of a long ball game and placing the emphasis on direct play. They want the ball out of their end as quickly as possible. What the coaches should be doing is, building out of the back, keeping possession of the ball, encouraging risk takers and flair and placing the emphasis on the individual’s technical abilities. Are the coaches allowing an environment to flourish that allows the players to make mistakes because they know long term development is what they are really after? The answer is no, because there is too much pressure to succeed at every step along the way. If this coach loses too many games then he risks losing his players to a more “successful” team. The parents will want to move their child to a “winner,” or get rid of him and bring in (in some cases hire) another coach. Thus, the environment becomes individually stifling and the player’s creativity takes a back seat to the winning mentality”. - Gordon Miller, *Too Much Too Soon*
<http://www.vysa.com>

TOO MUCH, TOO SOON!

By Gordon Miller, VYSA Technical Director

We must be careful about throwing our youngsters into the cauldron of the overly competitive travel soccer environment too soon, because it is becoming clear that it is more and more of a detriment and less and less of an impetus to the success of the young player. When the gauge of that success is measured by either players competing at a higher level or continuing to play when they get older, we fail on both counts. There is absolutely no data that supports that particular theory. If starting travel soccer this young were the right way to go then the rest of the world would be copying our model, but it doesn't. In fact other countries are in the exact opposite direction with their soccer philosophies and programs. For example, the French, Germans, Dutch and Spanish believe that it is important to keep young players (under the age of 12) playing within their own communities, with their friends, and, with educated coaches. They profess that it is critical for a player's development that the youngsters spend more time on the training field, in a less result oriented environment, learning the intricacies, nuances and techniques of the game.

So why are we are putting our young 7 and 8 year olds through tryouts and player selection processes that narrows the scope too soon? How many players do we end up missing when we make these hasty decisions? How many youngsters feel that they have lost their chance to make it and therefore lose interest and their desire and motivation to continue on in the game gets tempered? Developing soccer talent is not an exact science. There are a lot of factors that go into the mix and even then you can never predict with certainty whether a particular player will turn out or not. Yet, by the nature of our setup, we continue to do what we think is right and pick the best at eight years of age while discarding, or at best slighting, the rest. Yet, all sports are littered with plenty of # 1 draft pick stories that were, "can't miss prospects", that ended up some how missing. And these players are 19, 20 and 21 year olds.

A lot of questions must be asked: Why is it so important to us to place kids in a competitive environment before they are mentally and physically ready? Do we think that because a child is playing competitive soccer at 8 and 9, it will equate into success at 17 and 18? In fact, the opposite is more likely to occur, as we are finding that there are a lot more kids dropping out of soccer because the pressure to succeed has been placed on them at too young an age and they are no longer in the sport by the time they graduate from high school.

How are these players being selected for U9 & U8 travel soccer anyway? What criteria are the evaluators using to select the players? Who is doing the selecting and what is their background, not only in the game, but in child development as well? Are the players being selected on their technical abilities or are they being selected because of their physical maturity? In many cases we are seeing players that are picked because they can kick the ball farther and run faster than their counterparts at this age. Quite simply, our kids are placed under tremendous pressure to be the best as early as possible.

When we place children in travel soccer too soon the emphasis is subtly being placed on the team result and winning the game, rather than on the individual player's performance. If the team doesn't win, then it doesn't get to play in this league or that division or in this particular tournament. Thus, coaches feel the pressure and start recruiting bigger, stronger kids that can help secure the victory-now. They start playing more of a long ball game and placing the emphasis on direct play. They want the ball out of their end as quickly as possible. What the coaches should be doing is, building out of the back, keeping possession of the ball, encouraging risk takers and flair and placing the emphasis on the individual's technical abilities. Are the coaches allowing an environment to flourish that allows the players to make mistakes because they know long term development is what they are really

after? The answer is no, because there is too much pressure to succeed at every step along the way. If this coach loses too many games then he risks losing his players to a more “successful” team. The parents will want to move their child to a “winner,” or get rid of him and bring in (in some cases hire) another coach. Thus, the environment becomes individually stifling and the player’s creativity takes a back seat to the winning mentality.

It’s not necessarily the fault of the coach either (although they are definitely not without blame). The coach is reacting to the environment that has been created and fostered by the leagues. The leagues set their own parameters; determine their own entry criteria, determine their own promotional and relegation criteria and determine their own definition of what a winner is. The largest number of kids playing is in the youngest age groups. Therefore, some leagues feel that they will lose out on that revenue if they don’t entice them into the fold, and stop them from going to the competitor. Thus, the aura of travel soccer perpetuates itself.

This process also spawns an incredible amount of recruiting. Coaches feel pressure to succeed so they actively solicit the services of the next great superstar. Therefore, we now have young players being told that they are great and tremendous athletes and that they are indispensable to the success of a particular team, all before they have reached the age of 10. The parents are being asked to drive their young star miles and miles to practice and play games. And they justify it in their own mind because it’s the thing to do and there is no real alternative.

What’s the answer? Instead of shutting off the spigot to a drip at U9 and U10 we need to increase the player pool and give more youngsters the opportunity to develop. Organizations should increase the quality and number of training sessions and decrease the destructive notion and insatiable need to travel and attend tournaments. There needs to be a viable and comprehensive option that does a better job for our players. We need a bridge between recreation and travel soccer that allows more players the opportunity to develop and flourish. Instead of identifying the so-called stars at a young age, we should keep more players training and playing in a less stressful environment. If a child wants the extra training, as well as the additional competition (games), then the organization makes it available to them. But, it should be a fluid mechanism that kids can move in and out of if they so desire. And, this mechanism must have educated coaches that are able to teach the players properly in the fundamentals of the game in a less result oriented environment. There is a competition component to it but it is not life or death if they win or lose. The environment that has been created is conducive to risk taking and trying new things out without being the threat of being “punished.” Player creativity is rewarded and encouraged. The pressure is then off the coaches because they don’t feel that their jobs are on the line every time they set foot on the field. And, the result is that more players being developed better, in a less pressurized environment, and more are staying in the game longer.

Gordon Miller is the Technical Director of the VYSA. He is an “A” license coach, a form

Youth Soccer Coach Wanted: Only Those with Patience and Perseverance Need Apply

By Gary R. Allen

Virginia Youth Soccer Association Director of Coaching Education

Following are excerpts from an article in The Scientific American by Phillip E. Ross, dated July 24, 2006, entitled The Expert Mind. The article focused upon studies of the mental processes of chess grandmasters and clues to how people become experts in other fields as well. These excerpts can help us address some important points concerning the development of young soccer players in America.

"Simon coined a psychological law of his own, the 10-year rule, which states that it takes approximately a decade of heavy labor to master any field."

The 10-year rule, or 10,000 hours rule, can be applied as easily to soccer as to chess. Each soccer game involves myriad of decisions, technical and physical challenges in an ever-changing environment, among and against other players of varying abilities, and in different stages of physical exhaustion. More than any other team sport, the game takes on the characteristics of those playing it, and requires development in all of the areas above: mental, physical, technical and social.

Kids develop at different rates in all of these areas. Both the game and the players themselves are complex. To help them fully develop their potential as players, we must allow them to unlock in numerous stages the many aspects of the game. As philosophers and numerous experts studying human development throughout many generations have discovered, experiencing, doing, is necessary for perceptual change to occur (Jean Jacques Rousseau—1712-1778), and learning and growth and development owe their efficiency to slow and inefficient experiencing that has gone on before (Dr. John Lawther).

It is the "slow and inefficient experiencing" that is captured by the 10-year rule concept. When one combines this truth with the complexity (continual decisions in a constantly changing environment) of a soccer game, it becomes apparent that we must allow and provide players time and opportunity to experiment over a long period of time, rather than seeking to accelerate their play by focusing primarily on the outcome of their games.

"Teachers in sports, music and other fields tend to believe that talent matters and that they know it when they see it. In fact, they appear to be confusing ability with precocity."

Sports history is rife with stories of the experts overlooking players who later, by sheer dint of their own will, became great athletes. In basketball, Michael Jordan was dropped from his high school basketball team as a sophomore. In soccer, Johan Cruyff did not draw attention until after his teen years. In fact, across the board, those trying to predict who will be the future stars have a dismal record. For example, studies in England have shown that less than eight percent of the players picked by the experts to play professional soccer, even at age 18, ever made the grade as day-to-day professional players. With this kind of record, it is important that we recognize that we must pour our time, resources and efforts into a much larger pool of players, and not restrict our focus to those we think have "talent" at the early ages.

The various stages of technical, mental, physical and social development do not necessarily coincide within one individual, let alone in a team of individuals. Thus, while certain physically precocious 12 or 13 year olds might be able to outrun others and win games because of their speed, it would be a mistake to attempt to predict future success in the sport based upon this one aspect and stage of development. Worse, it would be foolish to try to define what successful soccer players look like, or try to select "elite" players, based upon their ability to win games because of their precocious development in one or a few areas.

Yet, this is precisely what we do in the United States. Instead of allowing more players to play in environments that require more varied ways than just speed or size to solve game-like problems, we tend to select out those players we deem to be "elite" at too young an age, and then reinforce the use of the precocious attributes they may possess, by putting them on teams with other players who also may have one or a few precocious attributes.

What the 10-year rule should teach us is that more, rather than selected fewer, young players should be exposed to training and playing together. They should be encouraged through smaller field sizes and smaller numbers per side to develop more varied ways to solve the problems the game presents, as well as to develop better technical ability by touching the ball more in game-like situations.

"Ericsson argues that what matters is not experience per se but "effortful study," which entails continually tackling challenges that lie just beyond one's competence. It is interesting to note that time spent playing chess, even in tournaments, appears to contribute less than such study to a player's progress; the main training value of such games is to point up weaknesses for future study."

This confirms the point that it is primarily through training that players learn, not in match or tournament play. Yet, how many youth coaches, as a "training tool" across the country, load up their schedules with pre-season and mid-season tournaments and multiple scrimmages.

Players must be given plenty of opportunities to experiment and fail; to creatively solve problems in ways that are uniquely suited to their temperaments and abilities. They can only do this to a very limited extent in games. The consequences of a failed experiment in a game cause most players to do only what they think will succeed. If they do experiment and fail, there is a great likelihood that they will be sitting on the bench and not playing. As coaches and parents, we must allow time and opportunity for this experimentation to take place. We cannot be guided by wins and losses that really only provide a snapshot at a particular moment, and do not constitute purposeful training. Games, thus, are not the ends in themselves for younger players, they mainly show the weaknesses at that moment, and provide a guide as to what is needed in training. It is the training environment that should constitute most of exposure players have to the game: training and free play, without the specter of winning or losing affecting a season-long record. Consequently, a much larger percentage of our time should be spent in the training environment, rather than loading up the season with extra tournaments and scrimmages.

In today's youth soccer, there is virtually no nonadult organized free play. Kids don't play pick-up soccer the way many of us played various pickup sports in the neighborhood growing up. We may not realize it, but these types of games provide an integral ingredient to the development of top-class athletes. One of the things most of us forget about the neighborhood games we played growing up is that they were, indeed, competitive. Competing to win each day was extremely important, but once today was over, tomorrow was another day, with a new chance to compete, but without the accumulation of a record and standings in a division. This is predominantly what the 10-year environment must be. Opportunities to experiment, to succeed, to fail, to play and to compete.

Another key aspect to the freedom to experiment present in the neighborhood pickup games that we lack in organized youth soccer today is the challenge of playing with and against many different levels and types of players. As kids, when we picked up teams we did not just take the best five and play against the worst five. It wouldn't have been any fun. Instead, we always tried to create even teams, and if one team was winning handily, we would have mid-game drafts to create more even teams. This gave each of us the opportunity to play with and against different players all the time, and we had to adjust, both individually and collectively, as to how we solved the problems of the game depending on who was on our team and against whom we were playing.

This ability to adjust and change the rhythm of play is something we lack in soccer played in the US. This development is all but lost in youth soccer today because the adults controlling youth soccer currently do exactly the opposite from kids playing pickup games. We try to put all the "best" players on one team so that we can win the division, etc. It is the result, not the development, that is paramount.

One of the key aspects to effective training is to continually provide players with different types of challenges that are just beyond their grasp. Because of the varied and free-flowing nature of the game of soccer, doing so in an efficient way requires constant innovation, but also a huge amount of time on the ball in game-like situations for the players. It is mainly through inefficient experimentation that players learn intrinsically and efficiently, and develop the instincts for the game that are activated once they are engaged in full play.

"They had to work things out for themselves, as did Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, and if they fall below today's masters in technique, they tower above them in creative power. The same comparison can be made between Newton and the typical newly minted Ph.D. in physics."

Of major interest for all soccer fans, and really fans of any sport, is to watch an incredibly talented player solve problems in ways no one else has tried before. Highlight reels are loaded with heretofore-unseen feats.

It is interesting to note that some of the greatest players of all time: Pele, Maradona, Cruyff, Platini, Bobby Charlton, etc. were not especially tall players, but each of them was electrifying to watch. Yet, because we tend to focus on the results of games, and selecting future stars out so early, our attention most often turns not to the player with a spark of something unique, but to the physical attributes of the precocious "early bloomers." While this may seem to reinforce collective efficiency at a given time, because of the nature of development, it ends up placing a premium on being bigger, faster and stronger, and eschewing the creative methods that less physically precocious athletes use to solve the problems of the game. In addition to bypassing many future potential stars, this focus also causes the "selected" players, in these very crucial years of their development, to learn to be successful by using a very rudimentary, direct style of play.

Soccer is a game played on a relatively large field. Arguments for years have centered on trying to make the field and the numbers per side smaller. Unfortunately, even though strides have been made in these areas, fields generally tend to be too large for younger players. This often results in footraces to balls driven into spaces that are mostly won by the bigger, stronger and faster players. Thus, in the formative years when they could be put in smaller environments that require them to solve problems by developing many different tools, these players are rewarded for relying almost exclusively on their precocious attributes. Thus, they learn to be efficient, direct players, but don't develop the creativity to work out different problems of the game for themselves.

"Motivation appears to be a more important factor than innate ability in the development of expertise."

This statement is immensely important, because it affects both the type of players we develop, as well as whom we develop. First, as to the type of players we develop, by placing such importance on the physically precocious player, we motivate those players to perpetuate the physical and direct style and method of play. The premium placed on winning games and having successful seasons actually diminishes any motivation for players to experiment, or try to solve a problem through guile or indirect and crafty play, because of the penalty for failure.

Two crucial aspects of the game at the higher levels are patience and concentration. Because success based upon physical prowess often results in promoting direct play, players up through the mid-teen years often have never developed the patience or the concentration to hold possession of the ball beyond three or four passes, and certainly do not have the foresight to use the ball to draw opponents into certain parts of the field so that they can exploit the spaces they create. This sort of patience, concentration, guile, and using the ball as the ultimate decoy are not even considerations for most teenaged players. Most of it is due directly to what has been the reason they have been "selected" and the continual motivation throughout their earlier years: success through physical, direct and efficient play

The second issue of motivation is "who" is motivated to continue to play. It is well-known that in youth sports generally, approximately 70% of all athletes at age 12 stop playing sports altogether by age 13. Why? Most of it comes back to intrinsic motivation. Players entering their teen years are like all teenagers, they are beginning to search for their identities, and they also start to realize that they do have choices about how to spend their time. Why is there such a rise in "extreme" sports in this country? Could it be that these sports provide teens with a way to express themselves and solve problems in unique ways, without the constant prodding from adults to do things in certain, prescribed ways?

Another fact, of which many are unaware is that almost 75% of physically precocious athletes only develop into mediocre athletes. By focusing all of our "special" attention at ages 9-14 primarily on these players, we are missing many players, who, though they are not precocious, could ultimately be the great athletes when they mature. Yet, currently, we provide them with very little motivation to continue, focusing most off our attention on those we deem to be "serious" players.

A 13 year old searching for affirmation as he or she begins to go through tremendous changes physically, mentally and emotionally, is generally not going to be motivated to continue in an area where he or she may not be successful because he or she has not grown enough yet, or may have grown too much too quickly and is temporarily awkward. Yet, instead of focusing on providing intrinsic motivation for more and more young teens to play, we adults do just the opposite, seek to select out those we perceive to be "elite" for success.

"A 1999 study of professional soccer players from several countries showed that they were much more likely than the general population to have been born at a time of year that would have dictated their enrollment in youth soccer leagues at ages older than the average. In their early years, these children would have enjoyed a substantial advantage in size and strength when playing soccer with their teammates."

The study referenced above showed that the vast majority of successful players were born in the first half of the year. Since we place such a premium on physical prowess between the ages of 9 and 14, this makes sense. It is at these ages that there is the greatest diversity in development. For a 14 year old, six months can make a huge difference in physical development. Every parent can relate to the fact that at these ages they have to constantly buy larger clothes and shoes. Most kids born in the second half of the calendar year, therefore, are at a distinct disadvantage having to compete with players born in the first half of the year.

Our current push to select Olympic Development Program players at younger ages exacerbates this problem. While we are legitimately searching for ways to increase our ultimate level of play, our efforts in this instance, hurt us more than helps us. We have decided that the solution lies in finding and identifying players at younger and younger ages. There is a Under-14 National Team, for which players must be chosen from Under-12 Regional teams. Thus, at the very ages when we should be expanding the pool of players for development, we are shrinking it, based upon the faulty premise that we can identify the future stars at 13 years old.

The issues for youth soccer development in this country are huge, but not insurmountable. To be sure, the solutions will require nothing less than a paradigm shift. All of the modern organization and viewpoints notwithstanding, the nature of how kids learn has not changed. If we truly want to develop players who can play on a world level, and a society that enjoys the game as much as the rest of the world, we have to recognize, embrace and utilize these truths. Otherwise, we will perpetually be pushing the rock up the same hill, only to have it roll back down again.

Times.co.uk: The answer for our kids is still jumpers for goalposts

Sportsmail's recent investigation into the state of our youth academies triggered a massive response from managers, coaches and players. Here, TOM STATHAM, who has coached for the last 13 years at Manchester United's academy and is director of football at Repton School, gives his personal view on where we are going wrong...

Sir Trevor Brooking says we must start getting things right with the youngest children if we are to produce players who are not lagging behind the other major European countries when it comes to technique and skill levels.

I agree, but the question is — how do we do it?

The heart of the problem is that adults run kids' football in this country and they bring with them adult ideas, rules, values, tactics and pressures.

Many children only experience football at an official club training session where enthusiastic, well-meaning coaches deliver complicated drills, instructions and team talks. These look and sound great, and impress parents, yet they leave kids confused, frustrated, bored and asking: 'When can we play a game?'

Conventional coaches and coaching are appropriate much later in a child's development.

Our youngest kids need facilitators and helpers to guide and support their progress. Why do I hold such views?

Firstly, I have researched what some of the great players did up to the age of 11 and found that, without exception, these early years were free of adult intervention, formal coaching and structured matches.

Skilful, exciting, creative players like Matthews, Puskas, Pele, Best, Maradona and Zidane developed on the streets, parks and waste grounds close to where they lived.

They played with older and younger kids, with balls of various shapes and sizes, many home made. They played on their own, one against one, three on three, 10 v seven — anything. They just played for hour after hour, day after day.

Secondly, by watching and interacting with kids for many years, I have developed ideas about how they learn and have fun. They copy, pretend, experiment, take responsibility and risks, make decisions and mistakes, use their imagination and dream.

They don't need to be put under pressure, or told what to do and what not to do. Children need to be free to play! The key to developing happy, active, healthy, stimulated children — and the answer to the problem of technically poor players — is free-play.

This produced great players in the past and is still happening in Brazil, Portugal, Nigeria and Ivory Coast, where many of today's most technically and physically able players come from.

Sadly, free-play, where children design and adapt games to fit their age and environment, away from the influence of adults, is virtually dead in modern Britain.

The real issue and greatest challenge today for all football lovers involved with kids is: how can we get our children to play football freely, without adult interference, for hours and hours every week?

When some of the country's best under-10 footballers come to me at Manchester United, they bring an enthusiasm and a love for the game that is pure and very precious. If I harm this in any way, I have failed.

So I give them what they want.

I set up — or give them responsibility to create — games and challenges where they can dribble, turn, run, shoot, tackle, score, have fun, get lots of ball contact and, importantly, compete.

So what do I do? I cheer, encourage, congratulate, laugh and enjoy watching fantastic football played by happy, motivated children. I also give them firm boundaries regarding standards of effort and behaviour.

Within these boundaries they can express themselves in a safe, secure, positive environment where they are not penalised or criticised for failing.

They reward me by playing high risk, attacking football. They do incredible things, not because they have been coached and told how, but because they have never been told they can't.

They have never been told they are incapable and they have never been told they are not allowed.

Each child is at the centre of their learning — not me, the 'coach'. Their natural instincts are far greater and more powerful than anything I can tell them.

It has taken me many years to reach this point and it is not an easy thing for a competitive adult like me to do, but I would recommend it unreservedly.

Leave your ego behind, chill out, back off and let the kids play!

HOW I LEARNED TO PLAY...

RONALDINHO

"I spent a lot of time training at Gremio. After training I went to play futsal. After that I'd play with my friends in the streets and when I got home I played with my brother. My life is football and always has been."

ZINEDINE ZIDANE

"Everything I have achieved in football is due to playing in the streets with my friends."

DIEGO MARADONA

"I guess we were potrero (waste ground) children more than anything. If our parents were looking for us, they knew where to find us. We would always be there on the potrero, running after the ball."

RONALDO

"Every time I went away, I was deceiving my mum. I'd tell her I was going to school, but I'd be out on the street playing football. I always had a ball at my feet. In Brazil, every kid starts playing street football very early. It's in our blood."

STANLEY MATTHEWS

"I'd make for a piece of waste ground opposite our house, where the boys from the neighbourhood gathered for a kick-about. Coats would be piled for posts and the game would get under way.

"In fine weather it would be as many as 20 a side, in bad weather a hardened dozen or so made six a side.

"We didn't need a referee. We accepted the rules of the game and stuck by them. It taught us that you can't go about doing what you want and if you don't stick to the rules, you spoil it for everyone else. Those games prepared us for life.

"When I wasn't playing football with my pals, I'd play by myself. I had a rubber ball I spent hours kicking against the backyard wall."

FERENC PUSKAS

"I am grateful to my father for all the coaching he did not give me."

CRISTIANO RONALDO

"It's all down to street football."

Basic Coaching Concepts for Player Under the Age of Eleven

Ohio Youth Soccer Association-North Director of Coaching and Player Development October 2001

When young soccer players reach the age of eight, nine or ten, they have generally accumulated four or five years experience with the sport and have developed some basic skills and ideas about the game. Before age eight, the main goal of coaching is to provide an enjoyable entrée into soccer and ensure enjoyment and fun. In short, the role of the coach is to facilitate games for the enjoyment of the participants. For many players, reaching eight, or nine, or ten (every child is a little different) means new priorities and a new appreciation for their personal responsibility to the game. For the first time, these players begin to realize that winning and losing are tied to ability, not effort, and that skills must be refined for improvement to be noted. The role of the U-9/10 coach is therefore critical in shaping the technical range and tactical insights of the players; the role of the coach is that of a teacher.

The period around eight or nine is considered the beginning of the “Golden Age” for skill learning for a number of reasons. Players will listen to and comprehend more complicated directions. Players will carry out repetitive “drill” activities and appreciate their purpose. Players will spend time working on their skills alone, if they are motivated. Players will appreciate the importance and thrill of learning new skills and refining existing techniques. Players will begin to identify with national or international heroes and begin to emulate their skills and personalities. Players love to compete and strive to win. Players begin to equate fun with improvement. Players begin to equate their personal identity and self-esteem with their perceived ability and feedback from significant others, including peers, parents and coaches.

Coaching nine and ten year-olds is a formidable task that requires a number of skills on the part of the adult. These skills include practical soccer knowledge, the ability to demonstrate and inspire by example, some basic understanding of child psychology, an appreciation of purpose relative to the age and ability of the players, and the ability to teach for long-term growth. With that said, the elements outlined below are all within the technical and tactical range of nine and ten year olds players in Ohio, although it should be acknowledged that in some parts of the world, and some parts of the United States, players of the same age might be more or less advanced. Our goal, as coaches in Ohio, is to develop basic skills and ideas about the game at an age when players are highly receptive to instruction and highly motivated to learn.

The following elements represent a checklist for assessing the performance of individual players. Some players will be quite advanced in some areas and not others. Some players will be capable of executing some skills against one level of opponent, but not another. Some players will be able to execute techniques in a drill, but fail to apply them as skill when under pressure from live opponents. Some players will be competent, but not outstanding. Some players will be technical, but not skillful, while others will be skillful, but not technical. When viewed as a developmental continuum, all players will score high in some areas and low in others. Coaching “well” means assessing players’ abilities and insights and slowly moving them towards the “ideal” of the top level in the time available to us.

Individual Technical and Tactical Issues for U-9's and U-10's

Contacting the Ball

How many ways can the player kick or dribble or control the ball? There are six surfaces (inside, outside, instep, sole, toe and heel) used for kicking, dribbling or controlling a soccer ball. The ball can also be driven, chipped, volleyed, half-volleyed, side-volleyed, curled and lofted. The U-9/10 player should be challenged to expand their range of surfaces and textures (weights and spins) in an ongoing process of technical refinement.

Is the player two footed? Juggling and dribbling practice should always involve the use of both feet and young players must be encouraged to experiment with all six contact surfaces. For the more motivated players, juggling, kicking and Coerver's* are essential "homework" activities for developing a comfort level with the ball.

*Coerver's are individual dribbling moves named after the Dutchman, Wiel Coerver, who created the training program.

Passing

Does the player purposely pass the ball towards teammates? Players should be asked to control the ball and look for teammates rather than simply kicking the ball forward or to safety; it is often necessary to remind young players that the goalkeeper is always the most open player on the team when they are under pressure or no obvious forward passing options are available. At this age, the "thinking" behind a passing decision is often more telling than the outcome, and young players must be encouraged to attempt to maintain possession by passing (or dribbling) even as their limited range of techniques fail them.

How far can the player kick the ball accurately? Players should be encouraged to pass within their technical range. Technique, physical strength and the size and weight of the ball all impact kicking distance and accuracy. In the small-sided games environment, shorter passes should be expected and encouraged, with aimless "boots" to safety, or to the opposition regarded as wasted possessions.

Does the player use disguise and deception when passing? Encouraging more frequent passing (and dribbling) with the outside of the foot will help improve the level of subtlety in young players. The use of the hips to deceive opponents can also become a feature of play for nine and ten year olds.

Shooting

Does the player shoot, when possible? A player's first thought in possession should always be "Can I score a goal from here?" Goals in practice should be wide and high enough to encourage shots from various distances and angles and young players should be reminded that the objective of the game is to score more goals than the opponent in the time provided. Shots can be placed, driven, chipped, curled, volleyed, half-volleyed, side-volleyed, or improvised using any other legal body part.

Ball Control

How many touches does the player take to control the ball? The earlier a player decides what to do with the ball, the faster they will play; however, many U-9 and U-10 players will not look up before they have secured possession because their skill level will not allow them to concentrate on two things (the ball and the next action) at once. Time, space, vision of the field, and a comfort level with the ball are the most important elements in reducing the number of touches necessary to control the ball.

Does the player understand their tactical options before the ball is controlled? Vision for "What next?" is a key element in the positive use of the "first touch," and coaches should challenge players to appreciate their immediate tactical situation as early as possible during play. Coaching should attempt to develop "pre-control" vision whenever possible by asking players to assess the availability of space around them before receiving a pass.

Does the player open their body when possible when controlling the ball? Players who open their body towards the opponent's goal before receiving the ball take fewer touches and play faster. Players should only

open their bodies when they have space to do so. This skill begins to emerge at the U-10 level, although some younger players can grasp the concept.

Dribbling

Does the player have the skill to dribble out of pressure, or past an opponent? Dribbling practice should include basic moves to turn away from pressure and also ideas on how to use changes in pace and direction to maintain possession or beat an opponent. As the most artistic aspect of soccer, young players must not be discouraged from learning to dribble the ball through early and repeated failures. At this age, repetition in practicing dribbling moves in isolation and in live tactical contexts is critical for developing touch and creativity.

Does the player run into open space with the ball? Running forward with the ball is important for making defenders commit to the ball, for shortening passing distances, for changing the rhythm of play and for creating shooting possibilities. Players must be encouraged to quickly dribble the ball into open space and also encouraged to use the outside surface of the foot when “speed dribbling.”

Does the player dribble with their head down and rarely look to pass or shoot? While it is important to encourage young players to quickly dribble the ball into open space, players must also be aware of their passing and shooting options. Given that the ball can travel faster when kicked, it is important to encourage dribbling players to look up during those moments when they are in open space and not touching the ball, and when they are momentarily clear of opponents.

Does the player use disguise and deception when dribbling? The most difficult opponents are “wrigglers” who are unpredictable in their dribbling. Players should be encouraged to combine dribbling moves and become comfortable making multiple, abrupt changes in direction.

Heading

Does the player head the ball? Heading becomes more common by ages nine and ten and practicing and playing with lighter balls will help overcome any initial fears of performing this difficult skill. It should also be stressed that there is NO medical evidence supporting the claim that heading a soccer ball is dangerous to the participants.

Support

Does the player move with the game or do they pass and stand still? Young players should not be restricted in their movements on the field and moving “with the game” should become a natural extension of passing. Passing sequences involving two and three players should be encouraged and can be expected at this age. These beginning attempts at combination play will become essential elements of mature play. At the U-9 and U-10 levels, an increase in the speed of ball circulation, coupled with a more controlled rhythm of play can be expected from competent players.

Does the player move into open spaces when not in possession? Players should be encouraged to “find” new supporting positions away from teammates rather than be told where and when to move. By age ten, some children have started to think more abstractly about the use of space away from the ball; however many others do not yet demonstrate this spatial awareness, making large-group positional instruction irrelevant for the vast majority of nine and ten year-olds. More advanced nine and ten year-olds will often appreciate supporting positions to the side of the field (width) while failing to demonstrate the importance of creating space downfield and ahead of the ball (depth).

Is the player more comfortable when facing the opponent’s goal than when playing with their back to the opponent’s goal? Some players are uncomfortable checking and receiving the ball with their back to goal. While older players will ultimately be selected to positions based on this skill, all young players should regularly experience this challenge as a natural part of their soccer education. Before the ability to play effectively with “back to goal” develops, young children must first learn to find passing lanes, judge when and how to run for the ball, learn how to control and turn with the ball, and learn how to disguise their movements.

Because of the reduced technical and tactical demands, small-sided games create the only natural environments that provide repeated experiences in learning this difficult aspect of soccer.

Defending

Does the player try to recover the ball when possession is lost? “Defending” at this age should be no more complicated than encouraging young players to try and win the ball back when lost. The better players can grasp the concept of “marking” an opponent and “picking up” opponents when not in possession, and they will recover behind the ball as a group. However, in deference to the technical difficulties associated with attacking play for most nine and ten year-olds, any concentrated emphasis on “team” defending should be delayed until at least U-11.

Does the player simply kick at the ball when an opponent is in possession? Tackling for the ball can and should include efforts to regain possession. The player who routinely kicks the ball away should be encouraged to use their body and the open space away from the opponent to attempt to win the ball back.

Transition

Does the player mentally transition after a change in possession? When the ball turns over from the attacker to the defender or from the defender to the attacker, the game offers chances to demonstrate awareness of two very important concepts: immediate recovery of the ball and immediate counter-attack to goal. Players should be assessed on how well they understand these concepts and encouraged to react as quickly as possible to any change in possession. By extension, the players immediately in support of the ball can also be assessed on how well they react to help their teammates.

Does the player improvise when solving tactical problems? Those players who use non-standard techniques to solve tactical problems are demonstrating signs of creativity. A “good” pass gets to its target at a pace that can be controlled, regardless of the technique used in the delivered; similarly, a goal is a goal, regardless of how it was propelled into the net. Young players who improvise should be encouraged, not scolded, and it must be remembered that for young players, the “thought” behind an action is generally more telling than the outcome, which is often limited by experience and technical range. Three elements impact creativity. The first is technique, the second is tactical awareness, and the third is confidence. Players who have the audacity to think and act out of the ordinary may be future stars of the game, and, while their techniques will be refined over time, their willingness to take risks must be nurtured at every level. Creative players are not always the easiest individuals to coach.

The Youth Soccer Coach

Mike Berticelli

You donate your time for the good of our youth,
But you scream and you yell and are often uncouth.

The ref is just twelve and still learning the game,
But you call him a jerk and say he's not sane.

The parents are screaming and follow your lead,
As you sprint up the sideline at uncontrollable speed.

You jump as you yell—"Pass, pass the ball!"
You turn red as you bellow—"Ref, make the darn call!"

"You're the left back, get in your position,
If you don't we might lose and ruin our tradition!"

Positions are needed so we look like a team,
'Cause they're miniature pros, or so it does seem.

The fullback is bored, he picks at his nose,
While the others run wild and kick with their toes.

You scream for a goal, no matter how it goes in,
The skill doesn't matter, just as long as we win!

The parents go crazy as the ball nears the goal,
Their advice and instructions will soon take their toll.

You see, "Junior" feels pressure, he's not having much fun,
We tell him to pass, when to shoot, and to run.

He came here to play and to use his own mind,
'Cause soccer's the most creative game that you'll find.

Imagination is needed on the part of each child,
Solving problems on the field is what makes them go wild.

A week of long practice, while just standing in line,
Waiting to shoot, just using one ball at a time.

This just doesn't cut it, and for some it is too late,
Make your practices fun, don't be the coach that they hate.

They come to "play" soccer, not to work at the game,
Their excitement is something we don't want to tame.

Maradona had moves that are beyond comprehension,
No coach taught those moves while threatening detention!

He learned from his friends, and tried copying others,
While playing in games, without coaches and mothers.

Soccer is different, not like baseball at all,
We don't need positions, just give them the ball.

They, first must learn skill, it's the meat of the game,
If they can't dribble or shoot, then who should we blame?

Skill must be learned through repeated trials,
If motivation is present you will see them run miles.

"Fun games" are the answer to encourage repetition,
They laugh and they scream and enjoy competition.

Without the skill to dribble past an opponent at will,
Your players may win, but their growth will stand still.

I dream of the day when the parents just cheer,
And losing the game doesn't bring out a tear.

When practice is fun, not dull and so boring,
And playing the game means more than just scoring.

I know you mean well, and you donate your time,
But bury your ego, and try something sublime.

Call all the parents, and ask for their aid,
You're teaching their kids and not getting paid.

Your goal's to develop a youngster with skill,
Not a team that must win, or some fancy new drill!

You see players are not judged by their wins and their losses,
Instead they are judged by their shots, heads, or crosses!

Scholarships are given to players with great names,
Not to those who played on youth teams who never lost games.

A pro player gets paid 'cause his skills are real fine,
Not because his team never lost when he was nine.

It's time to bring soccer to new heights in this nation,
The future's in players, not a coaching citation!

Let's start to say "dribble" and stop yelling "Pass!"
You'll then see players go to the head of the class.

I hope you're concerned, but not really offended,
It's the need for more skill that I have defended.

You're giving your all, from the good of your heart,
Why not make sure the kids get the right start?

This poem was written by Mike Berticelli. Former Notre Dame soccer coach, NSCAA Director of Coaching, mentor and good friend. As he now rests peacefully in heaven, his vision and goals are shared by many who believe that American youth soccer can go to a new level.

