

Let kids develop before you start judging them | SOCCER COLUMN

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More kids stop playing youth sports all over the world by the age of 15. It is not uncommon when you think of factors that are consistent for teenagers at that stage of their life driving, dating, and high school. Soccer probably sees more drop-off than any other sport, and that has a lot to do with the structure of youth soccer in our country.

Growing up playing sports, I know that most of my best experiences were on a playground or in a backyard with other kids and no adults. I also played on organized teams in soccer, basketball and baseball, but my 8th grade basketball team was the first time that I had to "try out" for a team.

Think about that — age 14 was the first time that I was put into a situation where players were either being selected or "cut."

Why do school teams that pick or "cut" players normally only start doing so in those teenage years? The reality is that a child's athletic ability prior to puberty is an absolutely irrelevant indicator of a child's athletic ability post puberty. Where a player is at age 8 is not going to mean anything when they are at age 18.

Think about looking at two players in the same under-14 age group, with one who has hit puberty and one who has not — the 14-year-old who hit puberty looks like he is 16...and the 14 year old who has not looks 10. The one who has already hit puberty will grade out higher in most areas — motor skills, testosterone, coordination — but the real question is who will be better in 2, 4, or 10 years?

Alec Dufty was an all-conference goalkeeper at the University of Evansville and is now with the Columbus Crew of Major League Soccer (MLS). I coached him as a youth in North Carolina, and he didn't play for his 'A' team in his age group until he was 17.

Robby Lynch is an all-Midwest region midfielder here at the University of Evansville, and he didn't play for his 'A' team in his age group until he was 15.

Soccer America recently reported that U.S. national team standout Landon Donovan played at the AYSO (recreational level) through the age of 14.

Every summer, I see an 11-year-old or 12-year-old at our summer camp that is on the 'B' team in their age group, and we forecast them as eventually being one of the top players in their age group in a

year or two ... as long as they aren't too dejected from being "cut" from the 'A' team and continue their level of interest or enthusiasm for the game.

One of the real challenges we have in travel soccer is creating all-star or select teams at a very early age. Winning a league championship at age 10 is usually a lot more important to mom and dad than it is to their son or daughter. The problem with being too exclusive at too early an age is that you might have 'late-bloomers' that will never be identified. Many of the top clubs in the country try to 'collect' youth players at the younger age groups rather than minimize their player pool — knowing that the more players they pool together, if they have a healthy training environment to grow and develop, the better the chances of developing capable players once they hit puberty.

The reality is that until a player hits puberty, the true development of a player is hard to gauge. Key areas to develop prior to puberty have less to do with physical attributes and more to do with psychological attributes — fostering a passion and desire to play and compete are very hard to develop, but tend to be key components in all successful athletes. Encouraging your child to have an interest level in the game will make him or her want to practice, train and play more.

There is no question that a kid who plays 300 days a year at age 10 will be better than a kid who plays 20 days a year at age 10, but the more important question to ask is whether the kid playing 300 days a year at age 10 will still like the game at age 14?

While at one of my oldest daughter's earlier soccer experiences, I had a parent ask me what I thought of our 8-year old daughters as soccer players — I told the parent that at this age, kids aren't good or bad...and rather than worry about how 'good' their child is, to worry about how much their child enjoys playing.