

## **Are We Having Fun Yet** **Susan Boyd-US Youth Soccer**

Here's a tale of two games. In game one, the kids begin with a serious sit down session with the coach who critiques the last game and voices the expectations for this game. Warm-ups consist of precision drills under the coach's watchful eye. Any mistakes and the drills stop abruptly to make corrections and point out failures. When the game begins, the parents prowling the sidelines barking instructions at the players. The coach likewise paces the opposite sideline always yelling out some direction or disfavor, and occasionally engaging the referee about a call.

At half time the team gathers in the corner of the field for an intense coaching session. When the game restarts the team is scored against immediately and the floodgates of disapproval open with a vengeance. At the end of the game, having won by a goal, the players get reminded of their mental lapse early in the second half and how it nearly cost the team a win. The players cross the field to their parents with heads hung low. On the ride home, they get advice on how they could play better next week.

In game two the kids arrive and immediately begin shooting balls into the net. After a few minutes the coach gathers them for a jumping jack exercise where they chant "Up, down, don't frown." Parents set up on the sidelines and unfurl a banner reading "Go Tigers!" Each parent has a pom pom and wears a ribbon with their player's name and number. During the game the parents only cheer and all have a good laugh when one team member takes a hearty swipe at the ball in front of the goal, only to miss the ball completely and end up bottom-down in the box. The coach stands and occasionally reminds the team of their positions, and of how they should be passing. When a player comes out of the game, the coach gives a high five and a pat on the back. When a foul is called on a player, the coach says; "That's okay. Just remember not to push."

At half time, the team meets briefly and then returns to the field for some shooting and passing. At the end of the game, having lost by a goal, the coach congratulates them on a game well played, has them shake hands with the opposing team and the referees, and then sends them across the field running to their parents who greet them with cheers and a parent tunnel. During the trip home talk turns to ice cream and what they'll do in the afternoon.

As you might have guessed, these were opposing teams in the same game. In one case, the coach and parents set the wrong tone. I'm sure they meant well, still they fell into the trap of believing that intensity equals improvement. But consider this, if you found out that your son's or daughter's teacher spent most of the day just yelling at the kids about their poor performance or poor behavior, you'd be mortified. If those same teachers invited parents into the classroom once a week to stand over the kids and criticize them as they worked, you'd consider the teacher unprofessional. Yet somehow we've been brainwashed to believe that's the way sports should go. Coaches should be gruff and unforgiving and parents should be critical. Who learns like that? Imagine if Oscar the Grouch was the only character on Sesame Street. I doubt the show would have lasted 40 years. Kids need humor, fun, encouragement and support to learn, whether they're grasping the alphabet or dribbling.

Don't we all feel good when we can smile and laugh? These years of youth soccer should create some of your best memories. What you bring to the game dictates what you take from a game. If everything spills out negative you can't expect to have that warm fuzzy feeling later. You make a huge difference in how your child, and even how the team, views the sport. Encourage parents to find ways to make the practices and games fun. Kids should respect the work ethic of learning how to be better soccer players, but they can work and have fun. Even the seven dwarfs managed to whistle on their way down into the mine. Plan team surprises, nominate players to be the boy or girl of the match, reward good practices and attendance at practice, celebrate things together as a team such as birthdays, Columbus Day, first day of fall and spring, anniversary of the first college soccer game, and other events that will both entertain and educate. Organize a trip to a high school, college or professional game. Volunteer the team to be ball boys and girls for a local high school. Scrimmage parents vs. kids. Don't make it all about winning and losing. Let the kids know that you love soccer as much as they do and that your greatest joy is watching them play.

If soccer is life, remember that life is short. Relish every moment. If some of that good humor and positive energy spills into high school and college soccer, that would be awesome. Let the kids develop their intensity for the game over time, but on the sidelines and in your heart, leave some room for joy. Statistically kids laugh 500 times a day, but adults only 15 times. How cool would it be if statisticians had to add an asterisk to that fact: \*soccer parents laugh 40 times a day especially while watching practices and games. I'm challenging all of you to keep having fun, keep laughing and keep positive for as long as possible. Let's have people recognize soccer parents by their pronounced laugh lines!