

How can I be sure that my club provides quality training, raises the level of an individual's play and provides the same opportunities as the clubs and training centers recruiting my players?

I am still a firm believer that individual clubs, no matter what their size, can have the same impact as the larger clubs, academies, and for profit training centers who claim they have all the answers for players and parents alike. The promises of academy type programs and the prohibitive costs to participate should be examined by parents and club administrators.

Rarely are the promises of college scholarships or opportunities to play professionally accurately portrayed. In fact the success of many of the top players in the world, recent past and present, did not have academies or professional training attached to their portfolio until in their teens. Zinedine Zidane, Didier Drogba, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo came from poor or congested areas where soccer was played constantly with little or no supervision. Frank Lampard did not play in the West Ham Academy until 16. Samuel Eto'o was signed by Real Madrid after their scouts saw him playing with his club team in Cameroon at age 15. Fernando Torres signed with Atletico Madrid at age 15. There are exceptions. Xavi signed with Barcelona at age 11, Andres Iniesta signed with Barcelona at age 12. Steven Gerrard signed with Liverpool at age 9. The one huge difference for the players identified before 12, as opposed to our youth academies, is each player did not pay for training and they were trained by professional full time coaches with the intent of them playing for the full team in the future. All of these great professionals did not play with players their own age in their developmental years, travel with their parents to training sites or seek out over paid trainers with little or no credibility. Almost all were from lower income families, where education was not a major priority and there was a source of local boys who only wanted the opportunity to play. In addition to seeking the opportunity to play, they unknowingly adhered to Macolm Gladwell's 10,000 hour rule of practice from *Outliers: The Story of Success*.

How do I know if I am providing what is best for my child?

There are a few questions parents should be asking themselves before they commit their child to the full spectrum of clubs and academies anxious to have your child and the profits attached to training:

Am I pushing my child into soccer because I have a need for my child to meet success because I never realized my athletic goals?

Is my child over training and playing in too many games?

Are the paid trainers qualified? Do they have National Licenses from US Soccer or equivalent licensing?

Does my child's training interfere with academics?

Am I providing my child exposure to other sports and various fields within the arts?

Does my child have the opportunity to have free or down time, and experience social activities with peers?

Do I recognize the extraordinary odds of playing professional soccer and how a strong performance academically provides more opportunities for my child in the future?

Is my decision to utilize paid trainers and finding new clubs based on the comments of others or traditional beliefs pervasive within soccer entrepreneurs intent on making money?

Can I provide to my child quality soccer training at the foundation years without costing an exorbitant amount of money, not affecting academic and social growth, limiting travel and allowing my child to play within their community and with their peers?

Does it make sense to have individuals make decisions about children eight and nine years of age to be excluded from training programs? Children grow and mature in different patterns and to have coaches speculate on a child's ability level and future ability level is unfair at best.

If clubs throughout Eastern Pennsylvania were to follow a few basic steps in their training of players, reexamine their philosophy of travel play and see their club as a more valuable resource to their families and parents; their club can compete with academies and for profit training facilities at a fraction of the cost. They can identify the players who may have a chance to play professionally and not inhibit their development but actually enhance development at the younger ages.

Coaching Education

Education of coaches within your club is a very valuable tool and yet many clubs do not take advantage of the opportunities provided by their state association. Coaches who coach at the U 6 to U9 level, no matter if they have little or no playing experience, can take the four to six hour courses that will address development, technique, methods and objectives for these ages. This course is a huge confidence builder for new coaches and pays long term dividends for the players.

A few clubs have made this course part of their schedule, as coaches of the teams and their players participate in the course on the opening day of the season. This assures full participation. All the parents of the players would also have a sense of confidence in their club because they prepare their coaches before undertaking the role of coach.

As you move from the youth levels, your state association provides an E License for coaches training players from nine to twelve years of age playing eight a side. This course deals primarily with technique and small group tactics and again, it is not necessary to have played the game. The course provides a coach confidence in training, quality progression in their sessions, team management skills and stronger understanding of the game. Training sessions with their coaching peers are evaluated and suggestions provided. To pass this course a coach needs to attend all the sessions. The E Course is 18 hours and we attempt to make it convenient to coaches by only taking one weekend to complete.

Your state association also provides a D License after successful completion of the E License. This course is 38 hours long and provides model training sessions by state education instructors, lectures in training eleven a side soccer, large group and team tactics, advanced training methodology, fitness and injury prevention. The most important aspect is each candidate leads three training sessions with various topics. Two are practice training sessions with suggestions provided by the instructor and the other candidates. The final session is evaluated by state instructors and a decision on the level of the D is determined the coach's performance.

Many clubs are requiring travel coaches to have at least an E License and many states have actually mandated coaching licenses for various age groups.

Surprisingly, there are academy programs and training only academy programs, which have trainers who have no credentials other than they once played soccer. If each club were to take a more educational approach they could assure all children are provided quality training.

Ideally, each club no matter what their size should have a master coach who goes on for National Licensing in order to instruct coaches and provide training to players. The club can retain coaches going on to National Licensing by paying for coaching costs or added monetary incentives.

Quality training for all young players and the role of the master coach

You can be certain of quality training when there are curriculums for each age group and all players within each age group are taught the same skills. This can be accomplished by having each team, within each age group in the recreation program, training on the same night at the same location.

The master coach takes one team and demonstrates an exercise or activity in front of the other coaches and their teams. The recreation coaches take their team and perform the same exercise as the master coach demonstrated. In the next exercise the master coach demonstrates another exercise with another team and the same procedure follows.

There should be two or three exercises and the last twenty to thirty minutes should be scrimmaging among the teams. Less training time and fewer exercises should be completed with the younger players.

Some clubs have taken the approach of not forming teams but putting all the players in assorted groups or teams for each training session and for all matches. This procedure makes sure that a few teams do not dominate competition.

An important note to trainers of younger players: children at young ages enjoy repetition, and do not become easily bored. Repetition of proper technique at young ages assures strong habits later.

Older teams and the master coach

The master coach also plays a vital role with travel teams. Every coach should still be following the club curriculum but the travel coaches should have the opportunity to use various exercises of their own selection. The master coach's role becomes one of observing training session and making suggestions to the coaches and even stepping in for various exercises. He should take various teams for training and allow the other club coaches to observe various girls and boys teams within the club.

At this time the master coach should also be examining stand-out players in each age and determine who may have the ability to play up within the club and have an impact that places him or her among the top five players on the older team because of their ability. The master coach should also be involved with tournament selection for his or her club. Tournaments should be challenging, worthwhile, provide meaningful exposure and eliminate the expensive long distance tournaments that have no apparent value. The multi-match tournaments spread over two days that may cause over use injury should be avoided.

The master coach, along with club administrators, should look to keep costs to a minimum especially with the younger players. Each club should have a clear budget with expenses described to each parent before the season begins.

The value of a club pass

When attempting to move a player up an age group within a club many considerations should be examined besides ability. These are only a few:

Does the child want to leave his or her team to play up?

How will the child handle the pressure and notoriety of playing up?

Do the parents want their child to play up?

Could playing up impede development due to a coach who may not be as strong as the younger age coach?

What are the player's goals and will the change infringe upon other areas?

A club pass eliminates many of the previous questions and many states are moving in that direction. The advantages are many. If the move does work poorly, a player simply goes back to their original team. Also with a club pass the player could develop a sense of comfort with the new team over a period of time. Time also provides a clearer evaluation for coaches and the master coach, to see if the move is meeting success in the development of the player and the accomplishments of the new team. If you find you have that one exceptional player, you could actually have that player move up two ages at a tournament or an insignificant match. Even without a club pass, the outstanding young players should have the opportunity to play up as a guest player within their club in at least one or two tournaments.

At this time, high school soccer provides the only opportunity to play up and experience playing with faster, stronger players consistently. There may be up to three years difference and in most instances there is little adverse effect but more importantly a positive effect on confidence and speed of play.

How can a club replicate free play and provide the opportunity for gifted young players to compete against older more gifted players?

Is it possible to replicate the formula that Zidane, Drogba, Rooney, and Ronaldo grew up with in their childhood? The answer is probably no but a club can come up with program that may approximate those conditions and provide players who show promise of possible professional play.

It is rare to see children or adults playing pick up soccer in the suburbs but this is not exclusive to soccer. Basketball courts and baseball fields remain empty unless there is an adult to organize or the children participating are part of an organized league. Children have to be shown that it is OK to play without adults directing or supervising. The bottom line appears to be that kids today have no idea how to use their imagination to play any type of game involving a ball; either individually or in small groups or even with enough children to field two full teams. Initially it may mean you have to demonstrate to children in your club the games they can play individually or with others, without adult supervision. It could also mean that to get things started, you expect them to play these games by themselves outside of practice. It will not take long to find the soccer enthusiast who is constantly utilizing the games you introduced to become a better player. They realize that a television or computers are not alternatives if they want to achieve success in soccer.

You may not find a kick board near fields (a common occurrence 15 years ago) but there are walls in every community that have no windows that are dying to have a young player bang a tattered ball against it. Full volleys with both feet, a strong first touch, collecting air balls or bouncing balls, and dead ball serves can be practiced until it becomes second nature. Bring another player and you can play simple games. One player drives a ball against the wall and the other player has to get the ball back to the wall in two touches, one touch or only with their weak foot. A player drives the ball against the wall and the other player has to return it with various foot surfaces called out by the server. When a player does not reach the wall during play he or she receives a point or a letter much like horse in basketball. When horse is spelled out or a player hits five points, that player bends over at the wall and the winning player has the opportunity to hit the ball from twelve yards away. The target should be obvious. If the player hits the target he or she goes again. Once the player misses the human target the game begins again. You could actually play these games with a wall with up to four players.

If players have access to a goal why not one v one play, the same way you would play one v one in basketball. The defender checks with a pass at the top of the eighteen and play begins. With three players, you could play the soccer form of hustle. Two defenders check the ball and the attacker goes against the two defenders. If a defender wins the ball he goes on attack. You play to 15 with each time a player gets to five or ten he or she has the opportunity to take three penalty shots against one designated keeper. If the player taking the penalty shot makes three in a row he or she regains possession of the ball. Each made penalty shot also counts one point. Chipping balls against the cross bar or into a barrel or trash can from various distances improves serving flighted balls. Keepers should work on goal kicks in front of batting cages or back up netting to soccer or lacrosse goals.

There is no reason why kids can not play one v one, or two v two to pugs, cones or t-shirts. At looking at children today, especially those raised in the suburbs, creativity and imaginative play are at a minimum. It may be necessary to demonstrate the activities to your players and offer them the opportunity to even make up their own games at a training session. Coaches, feel an obligation to offer free play sessions, where the players set up their own matches or training games. The coaches provide equipment and silent supervision.

Probably the most valuable tool clubs could provide to replicate free play is to provide field space to any player interested in playing. The serious player or players will show up when given the opportunity to play against older more experienced players, even adults. This could take place on Sunday mornings or Saturday evenings to ease any conflicts or a scheduled one to three nights each month. Also, utilizing a gym in your school district for futsal, before the school day actually begins or late in the evening during the winter months, could attract youth players and even adults.

Conclusion

Parents and clubs should be aware of what opportunities are available to their children in regard to playing professionally and the availability of college soccer scholarship opportunities. Educate yourself by going to the NCAA web site and scan scholarships by sport; taking into consideration the number of scholarships for a team is determined over four years. Observe salary data and rosters of Major League Soccer and Women's Professional Soccer. The odds of playing soccer are long but if a player is special they should be aimed towards the right direction. Utilize resources that have no monetary incentive or self serving attachment. Finally, ask yourself, am I acting in the best interest of my child and his or her future and will I regret the time, money and commitment to a dream that was only in my mind and no one else, not even my child's. Children do not have to be taken from their own club until at least age for training or playing with a perceived higher club to meet success. When a child and his or her parents decide to play for an academy or more competitive club cost should be minimal or free. The best case scenario would be examining the academy format where the clubs from the MLS and WPS direct the academies at no cost to the players and their families. The formula today eliminates more than 20% of children in this country from playing soccer at a competitive level. Adults, who are in their thirties, forties or fifties and played soccer when they were young, ask yourself if you could have actually played soccer, if you were faced with the prohibitive costs created by youth soccer today.