

Whose Light Is It Anyway?

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On June 20th, 2009 I was asked to speak at a young man's funeral. The young man was 12 years old and played in one of the local soccer clubs in Indianapolis. Although it was unfortunate and the worst of circumstances, I was honored to be asked by the parents to speak to the number of somber visitors at the church to remember a life that was cut too short.

Some of you may know the story of Chris Akunda, but here is a brief summary. In June of 2009, Chris was playing for the Fishers Soccer Club at a local tournament. Sadly, Chris collapsed and was taken to the hospital where he passed away later that evening. Just like that, a young man full of dreams and ambition and a love for the game of soccer was captured by God to play in heaven. The apparent cause of death was an undetected hereditary heart condition where a muscular part of the heart grows too big and gets in the way causing shortness of breath, chest pain, and syncope. Unfortunately, none of these signs was apparent in his life.

I first met Chris one evening when I ran a training session for his club. Following that session, I then invited him to come and play in the Indiana Olympic Development Program. His eyes lit up, and according to his father, he was very appreciative to receive the opportunity. Every time I saw Chris at an ODP session he used to seek me out to say hello. He was teaching me. This is one of the reasons why we all get into coaching and teaching, or at least we should. His smile alone would light up the sky on a cloudy day. He would also smile when he played, and it was infectious to all around him. He truly let his light shine on the field not by bragging or boasting but just playing the game.

"The Firefly's Light"

While preparing the words I would later speak for Chris, I came across the summary of a book, "The Parable of the Firefly's Light" by Jane Scoggins Bauld. This is a parable about a little firefly that is proud of his light but then gets into trouble when he shines it too much. I used this parable to remind all of us that sometimes we can get into trouble when we try and shine our light too much. As coaches, it is our job to make sure we see our players light shine when on the field. It isn't about us, it should be about them. As parents we want to be proud of our children's accomplishment on and off the field but in such a way, that we are not shining the light for them. Whenever I watch players on the field, I usually look for the player that shows me their "soul" or light. I do this because I know that they play soccer because they love it for what it is.... a beautiful game.

Perspective

As adults – coaches, parents, fans, it is easy for us to get caught up in the moment, carried away by momentum, but we must be mindful that the game belongs to those who are playing. The creativity, the risk, the outcome - the light.

I am reminded of the pivotal moment of the recent Super Bowl when the New Orleans Saints executed an onside kick to start off the second half. Some called it gutsy and lucky, but I began to think about Sean Peyton, the Saints coach, and his decision to try this in the biggest game of his coaching career. This was a coach that had faith in his players and made a decision which ultimately paid off. Momentum had swung in their favor. I mention this moment because I am fascinated by a coach, who in the most important game of his career, risked it all.

Compare that to what we see on the weekends at youth soccer games. I observe coaches screaming at players, worried about losing the ball to the other team, when they are trying to build out of the back. I observe fans yelling out instruction, criticism and “What are you doing?” when the kids are playing a simple league match & trying to have fun. The point is this, our players are not miniature pros, they are developing, and as adults, we must turn off our “light” to allow the players’ lights to shine much brighter.

Youth Soccer is not the Super Bowl or World Cup, let the children make decisions; quit screaming and let them try to do something “risky”, let them learn on their own. Always remember that it is about the children! Whose light is it anyway?

Tribute

During my speech at Chris’ memorial, I had a “smiley” face pin on my jacket. I announced that I would wear that pin whenever I work with children and adults as a reminder of what my role is - to make sure I see children shine their own light, and not mine.

When I travel to train players across the state, I hear comments from them that I am wearing a “smiley” face button. When they ask why, I tell them. I let them know that I want them to enjoy this game so much, that they should want to continue to play when I leave and are away from their coaches. It is also a reminder to me to keep it all in perspective. That success isn’t measured in wins, but rather the life lessons that we want our players to remember. Sure they will remember winning, but they also may

remember when they almost won or came back from a large deficit or the fun they shared with teammates or the respect that they learned on and off the field. I challenge you as coaches and parents to create your own “reminder” to keep things in perspective.

There is an adage in coaching “Teach-don’t talk”. Make your points, but do so in a way that will allow you to then sit back and watch your team play on Saturday. Then, you can see the light through the players' smiles brightening up a grey sky – just as Chris’ smile always did.