

Saturday, July 23, 2011

Keeping faith in the volunteer coach (Q&A: AYSO's George Kuntz)

Interview by Mike Voitalla

In an era when playing youth soccer has become ridiculously expensive, AYSO continues to provide low-cost ball for American children thanks to its use of volunteer coaches. Scores of U.S. stars, from **Landon Donovan** and **Julie Foudy**, to **Alejandro Bedoya** and **Alex Morgan**, spent their early years in AYSO. We spoke to **George Kuntz**, who was recently named AYSO's Player Development Technical Advisor, about the challenges of creating a soccer environment that suits recreational players and those who have the potential for excelling at the highest levels.

NOTE: AYSO (American Youth Soccer Organization) is a volunteer parent coach soccer program comparable with Impact United Recreation program under US Youth Soccer Recreation affiliation.

SOCCKER AMERICA: The message American parents seem to be getting nowadays is that if their children aren't getting professional coaching -- if they're not paying a lot for coaching -- they won't become great players. ...

GEORGE KUNTZ: It seems to be the American way that if it costs more, it's better. It's not true in this case.

If you can create good environments, even as a parent coach, you'll have kids who are excited about the game. They'll be motivated to play more soccer, to watch more soccer. And that's the key -- creating an environment in which they enjoy soccer so much they'll want to play more.

SA: Obviously club coaches have a vested interest when they argue for the importance of professional coaching. But can a legitimate case be made that experienced coaching is crucial at the introductory stages?

GEORGE KUNTZ: If we have all our "best" coaches coaching these players in AYSO, U-5, U-6, would that be the answer? I really don't know. In fact, it might go the opposite direction, because they could be forcing our kids to do things they really don't want to do. It could be too regimented and the children wouldn't want to play.

A lot of coaches without much or any soccer experience do a great job. They do their homework, do research, take our courses. They get everyone involved at practice, lots of touches. They're engaged in making their kids better. ...

And my sense is there are a larger number of parent-coaches who have played. ...

Are [paid coaches] really giving them something better? I've been to their practices. It just depends on who you get.

SA: Coaches with a soccer background can overcoach, but volunteer coaches who are new to the sport might be especially prone to overcoaching because they know traditional American sports in which coaches play a larger role. ...

GEORGE KUNTZ: We overcoach. We know we overcoach. We have for the most part well-educated parents who are coaching our kids and they want to give them as much information as possible.

But they're saying things on the sidelines that have no application or cannot be understood during that millisecond when a player has to make a decision on the ball. It makes no sense to yell out things when the kids are supposed to be making decisions on their own.

Figuring out how to make the best decisions comes from reacting to where their teammates are, where the opponents are – and requires improvisation. That only comes in playing. The coaching part comes in training at practice.

SA: How do you address that in coaching education?

GEORGE KUNTZ: When I do all these coaching education courses -- and I do a lot of licensing -- I stress that if they set up a 4-v-4, or 2-v-2 game, they're doing the right thing. Just let them play. Create an environment -- you don't even have to be the referee -- just monitor that environment and let them play. Create small-sided games.

We tend to want get elaborate. We tend to want to do more. We tend to want to have the newest exercise. But it's not that. It's getting kids to want to play. Setting up separate play dates and those types of thing.

Play dates, jamborees, whatever you want to call them. There has to be a way for a coach to set up another day or one of their practice days where the kids are just playing. No rules, no conditions, no restrictions -- just set up little games. Not 11 vs. 11. Not 10 vs. 10. Small games next to each other, 3 vs. 3 or whatever. Not in a structured environment.

At the same time, we educate coaches on how to incorporate age-appropriate technical exercises. We all know how important individual technique is.

SA: One of the toughest decisions parents are faced with is when to move their child from recreational soccer to club ball. When is the right time?

GEORGE KUNTZ: I've gotten that question so many times. I've been on both sides because I've also been involved in the club thing for a long time.

It is a complicated answer, because every player grows differently.

I tell parents, You know your child better than I do. Are they mature enough? How do they handle criticism? How do they handle success and failure?

For some kids, it's very difficult to handle success and failure. Do they just enjoy playing? Sometimes they're really close to their friends and don't like to play with outside groups who aren't their friends.

Some kids are very independent. They want to play on the best team possible. The parents know those types of things. When they don't, I say they need to spend more time with their children.

There are a lot of factors. Physical development. Mentally, are they more mature? If they're not physically or mentally prepared, they could be stepping into a storm, because the club environment can be very difficult.

Maybe they need to spend another year or two developing and having fun with their friends and then they decide.

SA: What impact do you aim to make at AYSO?

GEORGE KUNTZ: The main focus is better educating the coaches so we can get better training for the kids. And to keep them having fun. Being challenged and having fun keeps them in the game. There are too many kids who have just stopped playing for various reasons.

SA: Can you leave us with some thoughts on how coaches can do a better job?

GEORGE KUNTZ: I don't think we encourage kids to really try things. That's where creativity comes from.

We tend to hold the kids back. As coaches, we should allow kids to do more. We should expect that they can do more. Because they're intelligent.

We keep telling kids they can't do this or that. Allow kids to make mistakes. Tell them you don't care if they make mistakes.

Kids can pick up things really quickly. Instead of holding kids back saying they can't -- encourage them. If they struggle, you can always scale it back to a simpler form.

(George Kuntz, [AYSO's Player Development Technical Advisor](#), is also head coach of [UC Irvine's men's team](#), where he's been at the helm since 1994. He previously coached the women's team at Pepperdine after starting his college coaching career at California Lutheran University in 1988. Kuntz served as the Director of Coaching for the California Youth Soccer Association-South for eight years and also served as Hawaii Youth Soccer Association Director of Coaching.)

(Mike Woitalla, the executive editor of Soccer America, coaches youth soccer for [East Bay United](#) in Oakland, Calif. His youth soccer articles are archived at [YouthSoccerFun.com](#).)