

It's Wonderful To Win, But ...

by Mike Voitalla

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There's universal agreement that a results-driven approach to youth soccer is a detriment to player development. And although ignoring the scoreline is easier said than done - it's worth the effort.

As I sat down to write this article, in which I planned to deliver all sorts of advice on how to be a good youth coach, I was struck by a recollection of something I did while coaching 9-year-olds last Saturday.

It was halftime. The players chewed on orange wedges as if they hadn't been nourished in weeks. But a girl who had been goalkeeper for the last half of the first half spoke with the girl who was putting on the keeper's jersey for the start of the second half.

"I want to take the next goal kick, OK? Because I didn't get to take a goal kick when I was goalie," she said.

I piped in with, "No. It's better that the goalkeeper takes the goal kicks because then we have more players in the field."

Before the second-half whistle I realized how ridiculous I was being, but only now am I truly contemplating why I intervened and why I shouldn't have.

It's always a chore finding four volunteers for goalie in each game. Goal kicks were obviously one of the few things the girl enjoyed about being goalkeeper. She missed out on getting to take one, and here I was ruining a decent solution to her disappointment, and perhaps decreasing the chances that she would want to play goalkeeper in the future.

Moreover, the fact that two 9-year-olds were cooperating to make a decision on what they would do on the field displayed teamwork - only to be trounced by the coach.

Shame on me.

So why did I intervene? I'd like to think that I was giving them valuable soccer advice, but that's disingenuous. The truth is I was worried about giving up a goal, I was concerned with winning the game. I wanted the girl with the stronger shot to take the goal kick. I thought the other girl might kick it straight to an opponent.

But what if she did? She would have to try to make a tackle. Her defensive skills would be tested. If she failed to tackle, our keeper would have a chance to make a save, giving her some action. And if the other team did score, so what? The eager goal-kick taker may have learned something about how to aim her shot. And conceding a goal in

a U-10 game really isn't such a big deal, now is it?

This may not have been the most egregious example of overcoaching or overemphasizing results. But it does demonstrate that as coaches of young players, we must constantly restrain ourselves from letting our competitive instincts interfere with the children's soccer experience.

PERFORMANCE OVER RESULTS. I am well aware of the many reasons why coaching a youth team to get results - rather than to focus on their technical skills - is a detriment to the long-term development of players. Every time I talk to U.S. youth national team coaches they cite (in addition to youth soccer's high cost) the overemphasis on results as the biggest problem in the American youth game.

They stress that coaching a team of young children to win now is a different approach than coaching young players to be winners in the future.

The U.S. Soccer Federation's "Best Practices" guide, a must-read for youth coaches, says: "The value of matches is that they provide youngsters with an opportunity to showcase their newly acquired skill and creativity. It is always nice to win, however, that should not be your focus at the younger age groups (through 14 years). ...

"At the youth level, a competitive environment is not a results-oriented environment. The differences must be clear. A competitive environment at the youth level encourages decisions from player and coach alike that focus on performance rather than results. (Favoring ball skills and inventiveness as the means to find success within the rules and spirit of the game.)"

Tony Lepore, who heads the U.S. Soccer Development Academy scouting department, says it is crucial to remind youth coaches that players "making mistakes is a really important part of learning and growing at these ages." Discouraging risk-taking - instructing players to boot the ball upfield rather than dribbling out of danger, for example - prevents them from developing the skills they'll need at the higher levels.

It's not just an American issue. Sir Trevor Brooking, the English FA's director of football development, has called for a coaching revolution.

"Let's allow them to have fun, take away the importance of winning and stop the young players being afraid of making mistakes," he says.

The FA's 2008-09 handbook states: "U-7s or U-8s are not permitted to play in leagues where results are collected or published or winner trophies are presented. This is deemed to be detrimental to the development of the player and the game and will not be sanctioned." The FA also indicated that the guidelines may be adjusted to apply to older age groups.

Jose Ramon Alexanco, the director of Barcelona's successful youth program, told me

that, "We don't demand that the youth teams win. We demand that they play good soccer. We don't use the word, 'winning.'"

There are many ways to win games at the youth level that stifle development. Make an exceptionally athletic kid play goalkeeper all the time. Don't allow players to explore positions they're not yet adept at. Pack the defense. Keep the fastest tallest, kid at sweeper all the time. Man-mark the other team's best player. Introduce tactics at the developmental stage when children should be afforded freedom to learn from the game, and so on.

"A positive for us is when we see clubs looking at individuals first rather than the team results," says Lepore.

WHO'S KEEPING SCORE. Many youth leagues don't keep score at the youngest age levels. I've often heard adults say, "Oh, but the kids know the score." Of course, they do. That's missing the point. Children, it seems to me, are naturally competitive. I've seen little ones throw tantrums the first time they lost at Uno. They want to win and don't need extra encouragement from adults.

Not keeping score is an attempt to keep the adults from getting wrapped up in who wins and loses. But I don't think it works. Watch the sideline reactions to the success and failures on youth soccer fields. When 20 parents celebrate a goal, it's quite a ruckus. They are caught up in the drama of child's play and begin viewing it as if they were fans at a pro game.

How sweet it was when a bunch of 9-year-olds jumped for joy and hugged each other when they won, 3-2, on a last-minute goal. Then the next week, a series of little mistakes - ones that could have been prevented with some coaching maneuvers and perhaps a shout from the sideline - meant they gave up a tying goal in the last minute. But wasn't that experience just as valuable for the players as the happy ending?

That parents and coaches are overly enthusiastic at their children's soccer games isn't a result of bad intentions. Youth soccer games get exciting and dramatic. Parents want to see their children win and they don't want to see their children disappointed. But they need to restrain themselves. The same goes for coaches, who, of course, want to see their players enjoy a win.

Besides creating an environment that best enables children to enjoy and learn the game, when the match starts it's time for the adults to sit back and remind themselves that it's the children's game, and theirs alone.

Oh, and that goal kick? The goalie let the other girl take it. The ball went straight to a teammate. But it doesn't really matter where it went, does it?

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