



SoccerAmerica's Youth Soccer Insider

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Refocusing the Player Development Model

By Brad Partridge

Having been involved in soccer in the USA since 1967, I have had the pleasure of seeing it grow beyond anyone's expectations. The sheer number of players is staggering to say the least. FIFA stats indicate that the USA now leads the world in registered youth players.

So why haven't we been able to develop more technically elite field players? The answer to this question lies in the developmental paradigms that have emerged in the USA.

Instead of focusing on the development of individual players, we have focused on team development. We are measuring our success based on team results rather than on individual results. For our youth players the structured game has become the developmental paradigm. Many youth teams, U-14 and under, are playing more than 50 structured games per year while some players play 75 to 100 games.

Structured games are games played in leagues and tournaments with results and or standing acknowledged. With this being the norm our youth players now engage in practice activities that are geared toward game preparation and results instead of individual player development.

The environment of these structured games has counteracted the original intended purpose of having the game be the best teacher and helping young players develop. Players are not getting adequate touches on the ball and players at an early age are being pigeon-holed in specific positions.

In addition, undue pressure to win is being created because of published standings and results. Finally, we are seeing players at a very early age becoming disenchanted and burned out because they do not have the technical skills to adequately compete at the highest levels. When players do survive these conditions, we quite frequently see that their technical skills, creativity and decision-making techniques are underdeveloped.

The style of play at this point is most commonly seen as very direct vertical soccer. So we find our youth development programs stuck in a results-centered process that produces technically deficient players.

It is now necessary to refocus our training procedures. The U.S. Soccer Federation quite clearly states, "The most fundamental skill in soccer is individual mastery of the ball and the creativity that comes with it. This should be a priority in training and games, especially in the early years. As this skill is mastered, the rest of the



game becomes easier -- both to teach and learn. Practices should be built around facilitating the development of the skills necessary to move and control the ball well."

This message is clear and concise, that is, youth players should be encouraged, motivated and coached to develop individual ball skills. Refocusing the paradigm requires a new emphasis on individual skills. We know that effective skills development comes from constant repetitive activities and that it takes years of deliberate practice to develop an elite athlete.

We also know that athletes respond to and are more motivated by immediate objective feedback and measurable goals than any other form of coaching.

But when player development isn't judged by game results, how does a coach ensure that the players (and their parents, who constantly seek reassurance that their children are progressing) receive the feedback that inspires them to improve their game? The answer is to use technology.

Our society's use of advanced communication technology offers some very valuable tools to help coaches refocus on a player's development. Coaches can now use the Internet and specialized programs that will give coaches and players immediate objective feedback on soccer skills and techniques.

These programs focus on objective activities for individual players. The results are captured in the program and can be reproduced and distributed immediately to the players. Thus, giving players a clear picture of their basic strengths and weaknesses. Now, as coaches help players become more technically sound through activities that focus on individual skills the results can be easily tracked and measured.

Coaches can also use objective activities such as dribbling courses, shooting and passing contests, and juggling contests to help players develop technical competency. The results of these objective activities also allow players to quickly set and measure objective goals. These objective goals help motivate players to work on developing advanced skills on their own.

By refocusing our player development paradigm we will start to see our players become more comfortable and creative with the ball. This will lead to more self-confidence and give our players the opportunity to become world-class elite players.

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