

Player Development versus Team Performance

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Having been involved in youth soccer for the past several years at the club, state and regional levels it is becoming apparent that player development is taking a backseat to team performance, it seems that the rush to create a successful team has become more important for coaches than allowing players to improve within a team environment. We are producing teams full of role players who can perform efficiently within their present team structure but are fish out of water or worse still production line players who lack creativity and flair outside of that environment. A common question asked by youth coaches at coaching courses is "where do I hide my weaker players?" My answer to that is why do you feel the need to "hide" them when it is our job as coaches to develop them. If we never expose those players to situations that arise in games, how do we expect them to get better?

Why are we more concerned with team performance than player development? Our culture is one that thrives on winning and anything less is unacceptable and therefore if your team does not win the majority of its games it is deemed a failure in the eyes of the world and because no one likes to be associated with a failure the migratory instincts kick in and players move to the most successful team they can make or which will accept them. This equates to teams that do not fair well becoming extinct due to lack of available numbers, which is very unhealthy for the sport as a whole.

The answer is neither easy nor very palatable as it involves communication, education and sacrifice. Communication on the part of the coach, parents and players; beginning at the initial preseason team meeting where goals and objectives are laid out and commitments made by all parties. Communication is an ongoing process and the coach should be open to parent and player meetings either by appointment or predetermined times through the season. Parents have to be sensitive to the role of the coach and should avoid confrontations at practices and games when emotions can be running hot. Players must feel they are able to approach the coach at any time with any questions or concerns about what is required of them during games and practices. The coach must be prepared to go through coaching education courses to best serve the needs of the players in their charge. It is through these courses the coach will learn how to conduct equalization practices that provide challenges for the wide array of talent that he may encounter within his team and will help EVERY player to develop. Coaches also discover the need for a strong technical foundation and the activities required to enhance these techniques and how to create practices with a repetitious theme/topic using different activities to bring out the skill.

Finally the most difficult aspect of player development comes in the form of sacrifice. Coaches must be prepared to accept that by giving ALL of their players an opportunity to participate that the outcome of the game will become less important than achieving the goals set out for each player during the game. The players must be prepared to accept that although they should set out to win every game, that their personal performance and overcoming the challenges of an opponent or attempting a new skill can be just as rewarding as the outcome of the game. Parents must be prepared to accept that it takes time to develop and for some children it will happen much quicker than others and that the coach is doing everything they can to help their child get there.

Creating this environment of communication, education and sacrifice is much easier from the initial stages of involvement and the sooner this structure is in place the easier it is to implement and the less problems will arise as the players evolve. To attempt to create this for an established group of parents and players, whilst not being an easy task initially should prove fruitful in the long run. "Sow the seeds now and reap the benefits later" has to become the credo for the youth soccer community to give the players a chance to develop and the game as a whole.