Developing A Youth Coaching Philosophy
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Developing a Philosophy

Have you ever really thought about why you are a youth coach and what you want to achieve? You probably have read or heard about the following types of goals providing shape to a coaching philosophy:

1. Meaningful competition vs. winning and losing
2. Teaching skills, even though you are likely to lose games that rely on playing physically.
3. Player development vs. position development

As a long-time coach, I have come to realize that while having such goals can open the door to developing a coaching philosophy, they only scratch the surface of the issues you should really be considering. Unfortunately, many youth coaches simply adopt one or other of these notions without delving into the underlying premises and results of each.

Questions to Ask

I suggest that you start with some more thoughtful and far-reaching questions:

What is your vision for player development? Does it include the game being fun? Does it include development of their love for the game?
What is your vision for soccer’s development in the US?
Does your vision drive you to want to learn more about the game itself, as well as how players truly learn and develop?
Do you have a daily goal as a coach? Or are you focused on a strategy to win this week’s game? Do you provide an environment where the players make decisions for themselves, learn how to solve problems and experiment?
Have you considered the abilities of each of your players? Or thought about how you can help foster a passion for the game within each of them that goes beyond his or her playing days?
How do you think your players will remember you 20 years from now?
Will you have played a pivotal role in their development both as a player and as a person?
Or will their time with you on the field merely have been a stepping stone, either for them or you or both?
Driving Forces

The answers to questions like these are more revealing than answers to general questions about winning now vs. player development? Winning vs. developmental questions reflect the effect of deeper-lying causes or driving forces. These beliefs are the foundations that guide us in facing many differing situations, and ultimately are manifested in our love for the game.

Fun and a love of the game should be bedrocks of any coaching philosophy. Even professional players continue to play primarily because they are having fun. Improving ability plays an important role in having fun. The sense of “getting better” provides confidence and a feeling of competence. It is important to understand this type of driving force before developing the core of our coaching philosophies. By understanding these forces we can be intellectually honest in answering the second-tier questions like winning vs. development. For example, a second-tier concept of competition focuses only on the opponent, league standings, etc. The deeper issue includes competition against oneself, to prove oneself, the inner drive to become better. Players experience a motivational boost when they recognize self-improvement. This intrinsic motivation is more significant than any extrinsic reward (winning record, medals, and trophies) for long term development. Our philosophies as coaches must have at their core this concept of encouraging each player’s intrinsic motivation to play.

Understanding Youth Player development

Youth soccer development in the US has both benefited and suffered from its own evolution. It has not grown primarily from kids playing and experimenting in self-organized neighborhood or sandlot games. Although there have been ethnic-based youth playing in urban neighborhoods for many years, youth club soccer, as a mainstream activity, did not really begin to burgeon here until the 1970s. To compete with the traditional American sports path (i.e., through the school system) youth club soccer became highly organized even before there were youth players to fill the leagues. From its inception almost every aspect of American youth soccer’s organization and growth has been prescribed by adults. This has, in my opinion, retarded the growth and development of players and the game in the US.

One of the casualties of this process has been a failure to focus on the heart of the game itself: a game that constantly changes, the ball is always moving, with many contests, individual, group and team, all over the field. These myriad situations in each game require players to make adjustments, through decisions, to solve the problems presented in a game. Crucial elements in player development include the ability to read the game, the flow, and to adjust to unique situations. These intangible traits help great players rise above others, and are only developed over a long period of time with experience and experimentation. Player decision-making has become a casualty in the US because our focus as adults has generally been on results at each stage and not the process.
**Team Organization vs. Problem Solving**

Our adult-designed youth programs have primarily focused on tangible concepts that we can categorize and measure. Unfortunately, it has created an environment that discourages young players from engaging in the very thing that will ultimately make them top-level players: their own rudimentary problem-solving. We have identified four pillars of the game that we can neatly manipulate: technical, tactical, physical, and psychological. But, by looking at development strictly through this quadrangle lens, we often stifle the creative growth of young players.

In addition, we often even misapply these four concepts by emphasizing one or two virtually to the exclusion of the others. For example, many have stated that the *psychological* aspect is most important primarily for coaches of professional players, who mainly function as *man-managers*. There is an unspoken, but inferred, notion that youth coaches are not so concerned with the psychological component of player development. Youth coaches, they say, should focus primarily on technical development and then later, tactical training. Coaches often miss the point that the *pillars* are not consecutive, they are concurrent. They provide a whole description of the player, no part of which is ever missing. The free-flowing nature of the game requires players to play and maneuver in an environment where all four pillars are constantly feeding and limiting each other. They do not, indeed they cannot, exist in a vacuum. While the psychological aspects of being a player at age 14 may be different from those of a 23-year-old professional player, they are every bit as interwoven with each player’s development, as is the development of a young player’s love and passion for the game.

**Youth Sports**

There are deep psychological roots in youth sports. Kids grow physically and mentally, but also emotionally and socially. We often hear stories of parents who relate to their children the same way their parents related to with them, even though they didn’t want to be like their parents. Why does this happen? As kids grow emotionally and socially, they learn how to cope with the world changing around them by watching, listening and absorbing the interaction of their parents.

Young soccer players also learn to be creative through their own experimentation. It is crucial that they be allowed to do so in environments that will not always punish their creativity. In essence, the process is significantly more important than the immediate results. Adults, however, often tie measurement of success with extrinsic results. Therefore, many adults believe that players can only learn how to compete and accomplish in soccer by being exposed to what adults have determined are more challenging extrinsic environments -- *elite* teams, *elite* leagues, and *elite* tournaments. While these environments often produce efficient players able to function predictably, they rarely produce creative, exciting players who solve problems in unpredictable ways and who are not afraid to experiment.
**Soccer’s Essence**

Soccer is free flowing, requiring each player to make his or her own decisions based upon the situation. Players learn to make those types of decisions only from being allowed to process and experiment with different responses. Self-knowledge of one’s accomplishments and ability to improve leads to a sense of being in control. And learning one’s identity and acceptance of oneself are core issues for teenagers. Allowing players to make their own decisions will enable them to develop the ability to control their environment. In essence, this is the ultimate psychological aspect of the game – what we revere in professional players -- being in control no matter the situation.

**Finding a Coaching Philosophy**

Most youth coaches simply adopt a standard goal without really thinking about the *driving forces* that will really help each of their player’s development as athletes. These questions are even more important for ODP or academy coaches, who are working with *chosen* players who have been *identified* as the future stars. Society focuses on immediate success. Coaches are pressured to identify and train the *best* players. The players strive to excel. The problem is the focus itself: extrinsic and immediate results -- winning and outperforming others. The fallacy of this type of barometer has been proven time and again by the extremely low percentage of *elite* teenaged players who ultimately play at higher levels later in life. Outside of the soccer context, most adults recognize that teenagers are experiencing tremendous changes in their physical, mental, technical abilities, and are especially vulnerable and naïve in their psychological development.

Youth coaches should carefully consider all of these issues in developing a coaching philosophy. Our roles are not to *manufacture* gifted and talented players through systematic training programs, but encompass a deeper understanding of both the players and the game. This requires fortitude and integrity to withstand the onslaught of society’s need to constantly have achievement markers to identify the elite player at each level.

Even for ODP and academy coaches, the issue should be whether they can consistently provide practice and game environments that emphasize creativity and problem-solving over rote learning. Just as it is necessary for builders cut deep into the ground for foundations of tall buildings, youth coaches lay the groundwork for the future. No one looks in awe at the gaping hole that builders dig, and rarely even sees the concrete laid for a building’s foundations once it is built. But, for a beautiful and majestic building to rise there must be a solid, deep, even though unseen, foundation.

The *driving forces* behind our coaching philosophies must transcend the here and now. Doing so may cause some questions about results in any given game, but it will develop the players themselves as decision-makers. More importantly, it will cause them to value the game as their own, and provide for them the intrinsic motivation of accomplishment and being in control for many years to come. We must withstand the
constant pressure of parents and others trying to convince themselves that these players are, indeed, elite, and that our only aims should be those we can achieve immediately.

**Getting Beyond “Survival”**

Youth coaches must not settle merely for teaching players how to *survive* at the next level. Youth players are usually at the beginning or middle of their playing careers – they are not anywhere near the final stages of development. Focusing on immediate results often closes the door on players’ more innovative, yet currently inefficient and, at times, unsuccessful attempts to solve problems. Youth coaching ranks are rife with ex run-of-the-mill former pros who believe that it is only through learning the *professional* tricks of the trade that players can play at the next level. They often focus on minor side issues rather than helping players develop their own repertoire of responses to the game. These coaches fail to provide opportunities for players to think about what is happening around them, and as a result, they also fail to guide players as they learn to make their own decisions.

For example, I remember watching a coach, a well-known former player, spend 15 minutes showing a forward how to suddenly stop and raise his elbow as he checked back for a ball so that the chasing covering opponent would run into it. All of those involved believed that learning such tactics would enable the player to “survive” in the “real world” of higher level soccer. Despite the questionable ethics and violation of the laws of the game, the pragmatic view was that if the player learned to play “like a pro” he would have an edge – he wouldn’t be fooled by more savvy older players. The coach made no attempt to help the player understand what problem he was solving by checking back in the first place, why checking at an angle provided more options than checking straight back, or, even more importantly, what the player himself saw when he checked back. Coaches must provide environments that present problems, allowing players themselves to determine how best to solve the problems presented. This is the only way we will develop players who will not only survive, but who will be able to answer the questions we cannot yet even think to ask.

**What Will You Do?**

Your coaching philosophy can determine whether you are willing to spend the time required, and have the patience to provide a decision-making environment for players, allowing them to gain the experience needed to overcome unpredictable game situations. It will ultimately determine whether your players have fun playing the game, and whether they develop their own love for the game. If your philosophy is not grounded in the *driving forces* of true development, it may only focus on immediate success, provide answers to immediate problems, and teach players the tricks to *survive* at the next level. Remember your players are at the beginning or middle of their development as players, not the end. What you provide will be a part of their growth experience – it will not be the final piece. Are you a builder who seeks to build the foundations for future skyscrapers, or are you more concerned with building the roofs for single story houses whose walls already exist?