

Perspective Check

Our emphasis with youth teams should be the process, not the outcome

By Jay Martin

An NSCAA member recently referred me to the website *NationaSocceRanking.com*. This site ranks any and all soccer teams at all levels from all over the country. The site declares that it is "Recognizing the Best in Youth Soccer" and has done so for more than six years.

The rankings begin at age 11 for both girls and boys. I was thrilled to see that a local team - Ohio FC Juventus of Dublin, Ohio - had moved into 21st in the boys U-11 national rankings. Even better, Ohio Premier Green of Columbus, Ohio, was third in the U-11 girls national ranking. I am sure that Ohio Premier Green is counting the days until the big showdown with No. 1-ranked SoCal Blues Lime of San Juan Capistrano, Calif. With some luck this match will be televised so the Dallas (Texas) Sting White 95, ranked a lowly 50th, will see what it takes to break into the top five ranking.

Here we go again. It seems that we, as soccer coaches and educators, must teach each new generation of youth coaches about the overemphasis on winning in this country. We are creating a nation of kids who can win but cannot play the game. One need not look farther than the U.S. Men's National Team. As we look back on the 2006 World Cup we can take pride in the fact that the squad we sent to Germany was the best ever. And we know that the national pool was the largest and deepest ever.

However, for a country the size of the United States, the national pool is too small. In fact, most soccer-playing countries much smaller than the U.S. have larger pools of better players. The reason is simple - we continue to eliminate youth players from our soccer culture, making the potential national team pool smaller.

Winning is important. The lessons learned by winning and losing in sports last a lifetime. However, the goal of every youth coach should be to help young soccer players understand and enjoy the *process* of participation and to teach the skill necessary to succeed. When the pressure to win begins too early, the passion and the love for the game can be lost.

The very nature of our soccer culture (and youth sports in general) produces more losers than winners. Emphasizing winning tournaments or leagues or being ranked first in the country sends a clear message: *the rewards of playing soccer are* extrinsic, not intrinsic. The players on the "losing teams" can suffer a loss of self-esteem. At the very least, the game no longer is fun. Youth soccer coaches must understand that the process is more important than the outcome and that the best outcome is not a Top 10 ranking at age 11.

A recent participation study by the Sporting Goods Manufacturers of America shows that between ages 11 and 12 more than 2.5 million youth players quit playing soccer. An even larger exodus occurs between ages 17 and 18, when more than 4.5 million young people stop playing soccer. Certainly there will be a natural attrition. As boys and girls grow older there are more activities to choose from and more distractions, but the loss of that many youth players suggests problems for the growth of soccer in this country: the elimination of youth players.

There are two ways we eliminate youth soccer players. The first is cutting players. Cutting includes either cutting the player from the sport totally or cutting the player from a "travel" team. Both suggest to the player that he or she is not good enough to play the game. This can cause a sense of rejection and questionable self-worth. It is true that, as players grow older and try to play the game at a higher level, cutting may be justified and even necessary. But there is no reason to cut a player from a youth team. The only reason we cut a player from a youth team is because the emphasis is on winning and the coach believes that player will not help the team win.

The second way we eliminate youth players is far more subtle. This is very serious because the coach often does not understand what is happening. This type of elimination takes place when children quit the game. It is important for the youth coach to understand how and why youth players quit. Dr. Tom Turner, Director of Coaching and Player Development for Ohio Youth Soccer Association-North, says the research is clear. Seventy percent of children quit sports by age 13 because:

- They are not being taught skill
- Adults are too critical of their mistakes and self-expression (creativity)
- Adults don't understand the needs of young people
- The children do not develop an ownership in the sport
- The children are not having FUN

When any of the above happens to young soccer players, they quit and are eliminated from playing the sport. How many "late bloomers" have been forced out of soccer because they were not having fun? How many potential national pool players quit the game because adults wanted to win? We never really will know, but we do know that young boys and girls are quitting the game.

What can be done about this problem? The following suggestions are not new or revolutionary. Many of you have heard some form of these for years, but for the new coaches who are fighting hard to make sure their U-11 team cracks the Top 10, here is some advice that is supported by research:

- **Emphasize skill development, not winning.** The LTAD Model for soccer coaching suggested by Istvan Balyi (National Coaching Institute, Canada) shows that competition should not be emphasized until ages 13-14 and training to win should not be emphasized until ages 17-18. Up until the age of 13 or 14, the emphasis is skill development.
- **Be sensitive to the reasons kids quit playing soccer.** Pay attention to what the kids are saying.
- **Rotate players so they play all positions.**
- **Recruit better coaches for the younger players.**
- **Maintain a balance between the number of games and the number of practices.**
- **Emphasize the big picture and the future for the players.**
- **Be patient with the mistakes players make.**
- **Build self-confidence.**
- **Play small-sided and multi-goal games.**

Perhaps U.S. Men's National Team captain Claudio Reyna says it best: "It's possible at any time during a player's career to get into top physical shape or to try to win every game! But you can't teach skills to an old player. Youth coaches should keep in mind that individual skills need to be nurtured at an early age. Players who haven't mastered the fundamental skills become frustrated because the game gets too difficult for them as they move into higher levels."

We know all this. It's time to put the words into action.