

Jeff Pill's blog post "Issues Impacting Player Development"

by Jeff Pill

www.jeffpillsoccer.com

There are many factors that influence the developmental process in youth sports today. It seems that with every passing year, more and more pressure is placed on young athletes that are trying to compete at the highest levels. The promise of an academic scholarship to a college or university or the possibility of making a living in sport fuels the passions of those trying to get ahead. Consequently, young players are hurried in their development and are pressured to make life decisions at an early age when they should be experimenting with the game and laying the necessary foundation that will enable them to participate at a high level over a sustained period of time.

Pressure on these young athletes comes from many sources. It comes from parents as they are faced with the economic realities of high college tuitions, and as they live their lives through the accomplishments of their children. Pressures come from youth coaches whose "win at all cost" mentality lead them to taking shortcuts in player development practices in order to achieve a result. Often, these same coaches, who tout "excellence", are in an environment where they must win in order to keep the parents and players content, to prevent them from joining the rival club across town, and to ensure that the tuition dollars flow steadily in. Finally, pressure comes from society as young people are bombarded with messages from the media that say, "Second place is just being the first loser" or "Winning is everything; losing is unacceptable".

Some pressure is good. Competition, in its proper place, provides that good pressure. It is a great motivator. The game teaches players what their weaknesses are in an environment of fun. It is satisfying to compete because it allows the athlete to test himself against an opponent. In order to develop, he must challenge himself when it counts. Playing with and against the best players, under the guidance of a good coach, is the best way for an athlete to improve. The quality of the competitive environment has a direct impact on how good a player will be at the end of the competition. The S.A.I.D (Specific Adaptations to Imposed Demands) principle certainly rings true when considering the maximization of the developmental process. Players, when placed under the stress of a competitive environment, will adapt to meet those needs. The greater the demand placed on them, the more they need to learn and produce in order to match or exceed the demands.

So, where is the balance? How competitive should the environment be? How much should players be challenged? What are some guidelines to adhere to when making player development decisions? At what age should this process start? What should be required of the players along each stage of their development? Are there certain methodologies of training that will produce positive outcomes? Are there organizational considerations to be made in regards to playing environment and rules of competition?

There are many considerations.

This paper will attempt to answer these questions and to explain the recommendations of US Soccer, our national governing body of the sport for those working with youth soccer programs. U.S. Soccer has developed a model for producing quality players and maximizing individual player development that takes into consideration all of these questions.

Definition of terms

Outcome based programming places its main focus and attention on the results of the competition. The standard for defining excellence is the "outcome" of the competition so success is measured by the score. Simply stated, the goal of participation is to win. If a win is achieved, the preparation and training methodologies that were employed during the process are considered to be successful and worthy. Players are motivated by focusing on the external rewards of winning the competition in order to obtain the prize.

Developmental based programming places its main focus and attention on the learning process. The standard for defining excellence is the "improvement" the player makes. If the player is acquiring new skills, perfecting behaviors, or increasing understanding, then the program has been a success. Players are motivated by focusing on the acquisition and mastery of necessary skills. The coach, who develops an environment that focuses on skill development, defines success by efforts and improvement rather

than outcomes.

A Proper Balance

Both outcome- based and developmental-based programming have merit. There is a danger in focusing solely on one model of programming. According to Naylor (2006),

It is clear that through an athlete's early adolescence to adulthood, coaches must wisely balance "coaching to win" with "coaching for learning" Ideally, coaches are teachers first and foremost, putting efforts, focus, and good strategy before the outcomes of games. From a developmental perspective this is always the best side to err; however, the competitive nature of sport and growth of athletes makes "playing to win" a necessity at certain levels, during certain times of the season, and at certain periods of player development. A wise coach balances these factors to ensure long-term athletic success and team successes. An unbalanced approach to competitive decisions has consequences in the development of champions.

While it is generally accepted that focusing on each athlete's development yields positive results, ignoring totally the outcomes of competition has its limitations as well. By itself, process oriented feedback is not sufficient as a teaching strategy (Schmidt and Toung, 1991). Consideration of outcomes in competitive situations is an overt goal of sport. While competing in any sport, it is assumed that part of that participation is the consideration of keeping a score in order to measure oneself against an opponent. Keeping score is a valuable learning process as it allows for a certain amount of accountability. One is rarely able to "win" an event without some degree of preparation. It also provides a degree of immediate feedback. While performing in an environment that focuses solely on the developmental process, the athlete's feedback comes almost exclusively from the coach. Thus, the athlete often will not develop a feeling of autonomy (Hollemeak and Amorose, 2005). Focusing on the results of a contest can offer a valuable resource for providing feedback for the athlete and the athlete's perceptions of his own skill level.

At the same time, sole reliance on the outcome of the competition to provide feedback is detrimental, particularly so when youth sports are involved. Here, due to the complex nature of the competition, particularly in the sport of soccer where outcomes are not always attributed to the relative superiority of one team over the other, results are at times determined by factors outside of the individual player's control. Thus, the athlete who focuses on the extrinsic rewards of competition may become overly discouraged. He may feel that he is not having an impact on the results. This could then affect his level of confidence and effort, his subsequent enjoyment of the sport and ultimately could lead him to quit the sport altogether. Similarly, focusing strictly on outcomes may produce a false sense of accomplishment. Often, an athlete or team may perform poorly, but still manage to win the contest. Should the athlete be content with this win, and feel that they have achieved a high level as a result?

Coaches who develop environments that focus on skill acquisition and development, and thereby determine "success" by effort and improvement rather than by wins and losses, have a greater likelihood of impacting athletes to become autonomous, self-governed and motivated individuals. They use the competitive arena as a way of providing valuable feedback to the athletes, and not as an end in and of itself. This healthy balance has been found to enhance the players' development and advancement in the sport.

Protecting the competitive and training environments

Recommended game forms:

Once the proper approach to competition has been established in the coach's mind, it is imperative that he give careful consideration to the form that the game should take in order to maximize development potential. Should he adapt the sport to make it more commensurate with the age and size of the athlete or play full field? Players need to be placed in an environment that is appropriate to their developmental level: cognitively, socially, and physically. To expect young players to function and thrive in a game form that is designed around adult abilities and comprehensions is unrealistic and contrary to their needs. As a result, small sided games and modified rules should be adopted for play at the U12 level and below.

The Georgia Youth Soccer Association recently completed a study comparing game forms for U12 players. Players were charted in an 11v11 game played on a full size field. The same players were then placed in an 8v8 game, whose field dimensions were modified to meet current USYS guidelines. It was found that in the 8v8 format, players made more touches on the ball during the course of the game, and they were under pressure from an opponent more often as well. These two significant factors would indicate that the small sided format is better for player development as it provides repetitive learning activities that are significant contributors to improvement.

The following is a summary chart of the recommended playing forms for U6-18 age groups.

Game Duration Substitution Offsides? GK Status Field Size Ball Size

3v3 4×8' Free No None 30-35×20-25 3

4v4 2x20' Free No None 45×30 3

7v7 2×25' Free No Players rotate 60×40 4

9v9 2×30' Free Yes Share time in order of priority 100×50 4

11v11 2×35' No re-entry in half Yes Share time in order of priority 110×60(min) 5

11v11 2×40/45' No re-entry in half Yes Chosen based on ability 115×70 5

Age of Competitive Play:

Then too, there needs to be a proper balance between game and training ratios. Too often, in the United States, schedules are heavily laden with games, and not enough time is designated to the training environment. In addition, there seems to be an infatuation with tournament play and a desire to accumulate trophies. At the younger ages, there should be two to three training opportunities for every game played. Players should be limited in the amount of games that they play in any given year. Playing more than 25 games a year has been shown to cause burn out and often leads to injuries.

At the U10 age and below, players should not be placed in a playing environment where league or group standings are kept. There should be no published results of game statistics. Instead of tournament play, a festival format should be used. Festivals feature a set number of games with no elimination or ultimate winner declared. When participating in festivals or tournaments, the amount of playing time per day needs to be limited. When multiple games need to be played on any given day, or during the course of several days, shortened halves should be used. This will decrease the likelihood of injury and burnout.

Playing Up

The majority of clubs, leagues and district, state or regional Olympic Development Programs in the United States allow talented, younger players to compete on teams with and against older players. This occurs as a natural part of the development process and is consistent throughout the world. Currently, there are isolated instances where rules or policies have been imposed that restrict the exceptional player from "playing up". There is a great variety of rules in regards to this principle in the various soccer organizations throughout the country. Some absolutely will not allow it. Others establish team or age-group quotas. The most lenient organizations review the issue on a case-by-case basis.

Associations that create rules restricting an individual player's option to play at the appropriate competitive level are in effect impeding that player's opportunity for growth. For development to occur, all players must be exposed to levels of competition commensurate with their skills, and they must be challenged constantly in training and in games, in order for them to aspire to higher levels of play and thus maintain their interest and passion for the game.

When it is appropriate for his development, the exceptional player must be given the opportunity to play with older players. If there is a concern regarding the individual situation, the decision must be carefully evaluated by coaches and administrators familiar with the particular player. When faced with making the decision whether the player ought to play up, adult leadership must be prepared with sound rationale to support their decision. Under no circumstance should coaches exploit the situation by holding players back in their quest for winning team championships, nor should parents push their child in an attempt to accelerate his ascension to the top of the soccer pyramid. In addition, playing up under the appropriate circumstances should not preclude a player from playing in his or her own age group when it is evaluated to be in the best interest of the player's development.

Club registration versus team registration:

Registering players to a club rather than a team provides for fluid movement between teams and levels based upon the needs and abilities of the player. It also increases the opportunities for players to gain experience and playing time as determined by the club's director of coaching. Club registration embraces the concept of playing up and positively influences the player by providing easy access to an increased level of competition. It also gives smaller clubs the added flexibility needed to ensure that minimum roster requirements are met and that competition is able to be provided for more players as a result.

Players should be allowed to register directly to a club. Club player passes rather than team player passes are issued in that case. Players would be restricted from playing down in competitions that are below their own age. Tournaments or cup competitions may freeze rosters prior to the start of the

competition in order to prevent changes in the roster during the actual competition period. Players would be limited to playing only one game per day regardless of the age grouping.

The club's director of coaching would oversee technical decisions relative to player development in order to ensure that these decisions are being made in the best long-term interest of the players' growth and development. Team coaches would not be able to hold players back when it is in their best interest to play up.

The impact of coaching methodology on player development

The level of play in this country has been improving steadily over the past several decades particularly with the women's game. Our winning mentality and raw athleticism have served as the foundation for our success. Now the task is two-fold: maintaining our superiority in those areas of the games and developing those areas that remain our weaknesses – our technical proficiency and our “soccer savvy”, sometimes referred to as our “soccer brain” or tactical effectiveness. In short, there is a lack of creative, problem-solving players who are willing and competent to face the tactical demands of the game. How can coaches develop players into independent, critical thinkers?

The coach's methodology directly affects the type of players he produces. A coach needs to match the evolving needs of modern players with evolving methodology that addresses these needs. As a group, we need to ask ourselves what type of player we want to produce. Do we want players that are structured or instinctive; dependent on the coach or independent; obedient to instructions or able to solve problems; focused on the coach or on the game? There is a huge need to develop players who are instinctive and creative, who take initiative, who express their individuality, who are able to think independently, who understand options, solve problems, who own the game.

There are times during the game when player movements and patterns need to be highly structured and disciplined — for example, attacking and defending restarts. However, even in these cases, the players who succeed are often the ones who are able to improvise or do the unexpected. And because so much of this sport is unstructured and constantly changing, players have to be creative problem solvers during free play moments. The coach's methodology needs to reflect this element of the sport.

In coach-centered methodology, coaches often find themselves putting players through drills that require certain prescribed responses and solutions to problems. Here, the focus is on the coach. The coach not only creates exercises and directs the session, but also provides solutions and tells or shows the players how to think. Players thus learn primarily from feedback given by the coach. The focus is the coach's expectations, and players execute the coach's directions.

In contrast, the player-centered or game-centered coach quickly gets players into game situations that challenge them to arrive at a technical and tactical solution. The focus is on the player. The coach creates a challenging game environment, and provides options for solutions to solving the problem that the game demands. The coach asks players what they think. The coach's main goal is to develop independent, critical thinkers on the soccer field. Players learn primarily from feedback given by the game. So the focus is also on playing the game and solving soccer problems on the field.

Coaching techniques

Toolkit

The coach has five basic methods available for imparting information to players. These methods are often referred to as the “coach's toolkit”.

- Allow the conditions of the game to coach the themes. Let the conditions of the game bring out a certain aspect or solution.
- Coach the individual within the flow of the game. Provide suggestions as play continues, or pull the player aside (e.g. “Sarah, can you get wider to give yourself more space?”).
- Coach the team as the game continues (e.g. “Can we step together to keep them under pressure? They're locked in their own end!”).
- Coach at natural stoppages.
- Coach using the “freeze” method.

These tools are listed in order of increasing intrusiveness. It is up to the coach to determine which method to employ in each coaching situation. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses. Using the “freeze” method is effective in that it is able to clearly show situations that arise in the course of the game, and the skilled coach can assist the player in recognizing subsequent occurrences. It is good at “painting the picture” for the player. However, used in excess, it disrupts the rhythm of the session. It interrupts the competitive moment, and adversely affects fitness gains that are attributed to continuous play. If used in

excess, it may place the problem solving initiative on the coach, instead of the player. Thus, it needs to be used sparingly, and only as a last resort. If the player, when faced with similar situations, still does not solve the problem, then perhaps the play should be “frozen” at an appropriate time, and solutions discussed and shown.

Similarly, just allowing the conditions of the game to teach will not totally yield the desired effect of players progressing in an efficient manner. There are those learners that require a little more guidance than the rest of the class in a regular classroom setting. It is the same thing out on the soccer field. Some players need a little “extra help”. Letting them alone, to solve the problem on their own does not account for this difference. True, coaches must be patient, and account for periods of uninterrupted playing time. But, many players feel abandoned if left totally by themselves. Like the classroom, they may never arrive at a solution to the problem, unless guided thru the process. It is during these times that the coach must step in to offer the needed guidance.

Lastly, coaching in the flow of the game has its strengths and weaknesses. True, this method is great at imparting information without disrupting the flow of the activity. It gives immediate feedback and often offers solutions in “real time”. Similar to the other methods, it can be used inappropriately and in excess. It is a real danger that the coach will end up making the decisions for the player, and end up “joy sticking” the players around the field, taking the joy of the competition totally out of the hands of the players. Also, players often have a difficult time focusing on the complex demands of the game as it takes place. Having the coach’s input to think about in addition, often overloads the player and results in an inability to meet the demands of the game.

Games vs. drills

Game-centered training implies that the primary training environment is the game as opposed to drill-type environments. Practice games are what players actually face during competition. They are 100% realistic. Therefore, players become better at transferring what they have learned in training to the game itself. The game experience takes up 100% of training time.

Many drills are not realistic, so players find it difficult to transfer what they learn in drill environments to the game itself. This is not to say that drills that closely replicate one aspect of the game should not be used in training. Dynamic, demanding drill environments used at the beginning of a practice session often prepare players to play the game by breaking down the complicated picture that the game presents into manageable pieces.

Continuous play

Continuous play in training reflects the real game. It also demands rhythm. Players cannot go all-out for an entire 90-minute stretch. They need to know how to control the rhythm of the game so they can last the entire time. Continuous play also demands focus. During training, players must stay focused for long periods of time, just as they do during the game. To provide continuous play during training, coaches must coach “in the flow” of the game and not interrupt play with stoppages to make coaching points. Feedback on the field provides players with immediate guidance. This feedback applies to the real game and is therefore directly beneficial to players

This approach allows the players to solve and “fix” their own problems. If the coach allows for continuous play, players are able to have practice regaining the game when things have broken down. They become better at being able to get from “plan-C” back to “plan-A”. If the coach is constantly “freezing” the action when things break down during play, the players never get the chance to practice this vital game skill, that of “fixing problems” when things have gone wrong.

The balanced approach

The above methods must be balanced and constantly evaluated with the end result in mind: What type of player are we trying to develop? Each of these methods has its place in helping to develop young players. No single method should be used to the exclusion of the other. Therefore, the most effective developmental model for young players includes a balanced approach that employs direction — for the purpose of clarity (demonstration), structure (rules) and discipline (behavior) — within an environment that also allows players to experience the game (repetition) and encourages experimentation (discovery) and trial and error (lessons). Information and guidance from a knowledgeable coach, delivered at appropriate times during practice and matches as well as off the field, can play a vital role in a player’s development. When providing guidance to players, the coach needs to keep the following points in mind:

- There should not be so much information that players get overloaded, nor should there be so little that players lack the necessary purpose to make decisions.

- Instructions should make sense in terms of what's happening on the field and should be based on the principles of soccer.
- Players should be allowed some room to think for themselves, based on what's happening on the field.

When teaching technique to younger players (U10 and U12), it can be beneficial to give them some amount of directed repetition, especially at the beginning of the session. The coach gives instructions throughout the repetitions of the different techniques and can provide specific examples of how to execute these techniques, through demonstrations and by allowing the players repeated opportunities to practice. This can be done in structured but active exercises involving lots of small groups and lots of movement — no lines or lectures. As the coach moves into the second half of the session, players should then be given freedom to practice these techniques in a free-flowing game.

The above approach to coaching and training will protect the integrity of the process and ensure that players have the opportunity to continue to develop appropriately. Being able to meet the demands of the game and developing skill in the sport directly impacts player satisfaction. This approach not only gives players opportunity to do both, but provides the player with a feeling of autonomy. They are free to expend whatever effort they deem necessary to achieve their goals. It provides the correct environment in order for them to progress.

Summary

There are many factors that influence player development. Having a clearly defined philosophy that balances outcome and process based programming, protects the infrastructure of the sport and customizes the training environment, assures that the player has the greatest chance of improvement. It should be every coach's responsibility to maximize player development. The model provided by our national governing body is balanced and effective because it gives careful and calculated consideration to all aspects of the players' growth and development.

Sources.

Arthur-Banning, Skye, Mary Sara Wells, Birgitta L. Baker, and Ryan Hegreiness. (2009): "Parents behaving badly? The relationship between the sportsmanship behaviors of adults and athletes in youth basketball games." *Journal of Sport Behavior* 32.1

Butcher, Janice, Lindner, Koenraad J., Johns, David P., "Withdrawal from Competitive Youth Sport: A Retrospective Ten-year Study." *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 01627341, 20020601, Vol. 25, Issue 2

Gendron, D. (2003). "Coaching hockey successfully". Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics

Heinrichs, April. (2007) "You Were Hired To: Win NOW or Win Consistently." *Olympic Coach* 18, no. 4

Hollembeak, J., and Amorose, A.J. (2005). "Perceived coaching behaviors and college athletes' intrinsic motivation: A test of self-determination theory." *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17, 20-36

Naylor, Adam H. (2006): "The Coach's Dilemma: Balancing Playing to Win and Player Development." *Journal of Education* 187, no. 1 31-48. Academic Search Premier,

NSCAA Soccer Journal, Various Articles.

Schmidt, R.A., and Young, D.E. (1991). "Methodology for motor learning: A paradigm for kinematic feedback". *Journal of Motor Behavior*, 23, 13-24.

US Soccer National Staff coaches. "Best practice for Coaching Soccer in the United States: Player Development Guidelines" http://images.ussoccer.com/Documents/cms/ussf/Best_Practices.pdf

US Soccer National Staff coaches. "Soccer : How to Play the Game" US Soccer, 2002

US Soccer Women's National Staff Coaches, "Position Statements", US Soccer, 2008

Wein, Horst. (2007)"Winning vs. player development." *Success in Soccer* 10, no. 1 (41-43.)