



Winning vs. player development

A better approach to coaching youth soccer

by Horst Wein, German university lecturer and coach in different countries



The most important thing in sports is to take part and play! Unfortunately, that sentiment has long been forgotten in most soccer clubs, whose coaches use their young players primarily as a means of climbing the social and professional ladder.

The culture of winning in children's sports causes damage on a daily basis, not just to children, but also to the clubs where they play. The clubs affected are those whose

quality of training is determined by the fact that they stop at nothing to win, regardless of whether their players are young adults or beginners.

Only a few clubs measure the quality of their training by the number of players who are capable of joining the A-team after years of carefully planned and executed training. In those clubs, instead of playing to win, the coaches concentrate on playing to learn and thus become winners in the long run.

No player steps onto the field to lose a game intentionally, so let the kids play!

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Development vs. winning

Before they begin training young people, youth coaches have to choose between two very different approaches:

- Trying to lead their teams to victory in the short term — at any cost.

- Gradually introducing their players to the complexity of soccer, using age-oriented methods and focusing on long-term goals.

If a coach or club is only interested in winning, player development suffers from the following disadvantages:

- Players' size and physical strength are frequently deciding factors in winning a game. Instead of coaching ball skills, it's much easier to rely on size. Size becomes less influential later on when players are older, but the skills, not having been worked on, are by then fatally lacking.

- Coaches show a tendency to overemphasize tactics. But the absence of ball skills limits their options, and the only tactics that have any hope of success are inevitably negative and defensive.

- The physical factor of soccer is the easiest and quickest to develop. Therefore youth coaches are encouraged to focus mainly on physical aspects and on coaching styles that facilitate winning rather than skill development.

- Coaches plan and supervise practice sessions that are exclusively soccer-oriented, neglecting speed, power, endurance and fundamental movement skills.

- Ignoring long-term goals during the early stages of development increases players' chance of injury. Children trained in this way are more likely to give up playing soccer than those who have had the advantage of training in different sports (requiring basic skills eventually leading to high achievement).

The best youth coach is not the one who holds a great win-loss record, but the one who accomplishes two things: First, he



FIG. 1 WINNING VS. DEVELOPMENT: OBJECTIVES

Objective: To win	Objective: To promote development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Usually the players chosen are physically more advanced (stronger, taller). Their efforts to improve, their attendance at practice and their behavior as team members are seen as less important than their performance on the pitch, which can guarantee a win. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everyone plays, not just the strongest. The coach prefers intelligent players with a feel for the ball, who understand how to maintain possession. Players are selected according to their behavior both on and off the pitch. Making an effort is also important.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is little room for younger, less skilled or underdeveloped players. The game is undemocratic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everyone has the same right to play, regardless of physique and ability. The game is democratic.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tactics are overemphasized, starting around the age of eight. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Matches highlight players' skills and allow them to gain tactical experience gradually.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Players rely mainly on long passes and play faster than their skill level allows. The goalkeeper clears the ball with his foot. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All players touch the ball. They tend to make short passes and dribbling runs. The goalkeeper usually throws the ball in order to build the next attack.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little thought is given to building the attack. Usually the ball goes directly to the forwards via long passes instead of passing through the midfield. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ball generally advances from defenders to midfielders, with the game based on communication and cooperation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When attacking there are few changes of direction (switches from left to right). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The point of attack is changed frequently, with an eye toward creating spaces for penetration.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The point of training is to win the match and the championship. Players have to obey the coach, who gives orders from the sidelines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The coach's aim is to improve the performance of each individual player and of the team as a whole. Players rely on their own perception and judgment to decide what their next move will be, rather than the coach deciding for them.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In order to win, players are taught to be disloyal, create traps and deceive opponents and the referee. The end justifies the means. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Players are taught the values of sportsmanship, honesty, respect for rules and loyalty to the team.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The game plan has been thought out by the coach, as in adult soccer. There is no time or room for flair. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals are allowed to introduce their flair, skill and imagination.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Players specialize in particular roles prematurely. Play is always the same, and substitutes rarely get an opportunity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everyone gets the opportunity to experience different positions on the team during match play. Everyone plays, regardless of ability.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people are prematurely exposed to adult competition instead of age-appropriate competition, which would make for more efficient learning. It takes many years of setbacks and delays for children to develop the sort of habits that adults display in 11 v. 11 soccer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the interest of learning the complex game of soccer more efficiently, competition is adapted to players' physical and intellectual abilities at each stage of their growth. Fun and self-esteem are guaranteed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical skill and working out are overemphasized because these factors get results most quickly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through exposure to a variety of competitions each season, players gain coordination and the ability to play under different conditions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the interest of winning, training relies primarily on traditional methods of teaching. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the interest of understanding the game and making fewer mistakes, training emphasizes the discovery of skills and capacities in simplified games.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everything connected with soccer is valued over the individual. Dubious behavior to achieve a good result is frequently accepted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Priority is given to personal development through sports. Sports are regarded as "training for life."

knows to instill a real passion for the game in his young players, inspiring them to improve on their skills outside of training — a novel concept for some! Second, he prepares his players to succeed at the next level or category in youth soccer. That might mean preparing to play successful 7 v. 7 soccer at the U12 level or making the jump from U18 to the senior club team. Notice that nowhere in that definition did we mention winning.

Development is winning

We need to change the structure of youth competitions. If competitions were multilateral, coaches would adopt more diverse

training programs because competitive play would demand it. To produce creative and skillful players, competitions have to foster fundamental movement skills as well as soccer-specific skills.

Guidelines for development-oriented soccer

1. No more 11 v. 11!

The standard 11 v. 11 format must be replaced with other formats: 8 v. 8 for ages 12 to 13, 7 v. 7 for ages 10 to 11, and small-sided games for younger players.

2. Practice less; play more.

Youth coaches tend to place far too much em-

phasis on drills. Instead of "practice makes perfect," our new slogan ought to be "playing makes perfect!"

3. Let the players play.

Players need to have plenty of opportunities to play, without always having to learn something specific. Corrections from the coach are comparatively unimportant.

4. Teach all positions.

Players between the ages of seven and 13 need to play a variety of positions, becoming familiar with each one's characteristic role or function. The ability to play different positions stimulates creativity.

5. You can't be creative unless you're having fun.



Children need a variety of play each day—not just soccer. And when they play, they should be having fun!

6. Let players create their own games and rules.

Instead of always using some simplified version of soccer to teach your training topic or objectives, try encouraging your players to create their own games, or their own alternate rules for the games you assign.

7. Teach players to take risks and improvise without worrying about consequences.

Players need lots of opportunities to fall in love with the game. Such players are often more creative than players who simply follow the coach's directions. To make real progress toward creative soccer, players need to become less obedient! They need to play and practice more on their own, without the coach around.

8. Don't be afraid to try "right brain soccer."

School, as we all know, mostly stimulates the left hemisphere of the brain, which is devoted



Kids have enough stress in school! Soccer should be a relief valve for them.

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ed to analytical thinking: language, numbers, logic. However, to cultivate creativity, we need to stimulate the right hemisphere of the brain, which is primarily responsible for spatial orientation, artistic ability, face recognition and body awareness. Therefore, soccer training should include more activities (exercises and games) that stimulate the right brain by allowing for multiple solutions.

9. More creative coaches = more creative players.

If we want to see more creative players on our soccer fields in the future — players who are able to go beyond the usual solutions to find

TABLE 1 PROPOSAL FOR STRUCTURING AN INTERNAL 3 V. 3 LEAGUE AT THE U10 LEVEL

To ensure stimulation of game intelligence, the rules of play are modified each month to make play progressively more difficult and complex:

1st month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teams play 3 v. 3 on two goals each. • One defender must stay inside a marked shooting zone.
2nd month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teams play 3 v. 3 on two goals each with official rules. • 2nd weekend: For a goal to count, all attacking-team players must touch the ball after recovering it. • 3rd weekend: Players must shoot on the ground. • 4th weekend: For a goal to count, all attacking-team players must be within the opposition's half.
3rd month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ball must be carried across the goal line (six yards wide). • 2nd weekend: Players must display acrobatic skill in crossing the goal line. • 3rd weekend: For a goal to count, one attacking-team player must remain in his own half to cover.
4th month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teams play 3 v. 3 on two diagonally opposed goals each. • 1st and 2nd weekends: Players must shoot from inside a marked shooting zone. • 3rd weekend: Players must carry the ball across the goal line to score. • 4th weekend: The positioning of the goals is modified.
5th month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The attacking team must maintain possession for six seconds before shooting, and one attacking-team player must stay behind.
6th month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players can attack on any of the four goals. • 1st weekend: Players must shoot from inside a marked shooting zone. • 2nd weekend: Players must carry the ball across the goal line to score. • 3rd weekend: Players must carry the ball across the goal line to score, and one opponent must be at least five yards away. • 4th weekend: The positioning of the goals is modified.
7th month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attacking-team players must pass out of the midfield to a front runner. • 2nd weekend: When the ball arrives in the shooting zone, everybody can move up to support. • 3rd weekend: Players must play flighted balls to the front runner. • 4th weekend: The front runner is not allowed to score.
8th month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attacking-team players can only score on long-range shots from the midfield. • 1st and 2nd weekends: A fourth player shows for the ball on the other side of the goal. • 3rd and 4th weekends: A fourth player defends both goals from a position in front of them.
9th month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teams play 3 v. 3 on two goals each with a goalkeeper and a substitute.

new and different ones — then we coaches need to change the way we think as well. We have to take a broadly play-oriented approach, learning to value creative play and creating a nonjudgmental atmosphere where it's okay to make mistakes.

10. Youth players need a creativity-friendly environment.

In the interest of keeping things under control and functioning according to plan, we al-

low practice to become far too structured, which keeps players from taking the initiative. Too many coaches think for their players instead of encouraging them to think for themselves!