

# Until U-14, Inclusion is the Key

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I recently attended a meeting held by US Soccer for State Directors of Coaching (DOCs). The meeting focused on possibly overhauling our approach for youth players aged 6 to 12. Effectively, US Soccer has determined that there are three "zones" for youth players: Zone 1 – ages 6-12; Zone 2 – ages 13-18; and Zone 3 – above age 18.

Much thought has been given lately to increasing the efficiency of youth development, especially in light of the continuing difficulty our national teams have had at the highest levels. The backdrop for this discussion was the advent of the National Academy program for U-16s and U-18s, and proposals to extend it to U-14s.

## Understanding Development

We have come far in many respects. Now comes the hard part – getting to the root of what is holding us back. In my opinion, it is a lack of understanding of the substantive issues concerning development for ages 9 to 14. We also must deal with many of the procedural issues, such as numbers of games in a day, training-to-game ratios, substitution rules. We all agree that we should improve our players' training environments and our coaching techniques. However, if we do so to the exclusion of the reality of how players develop, we will continue to do no more than paint over a rusty shell. Until we deal with substance, i.e., become more inclusive, rather than selective, at these ages, we will remain on the plateau of being able to qualify out of CONCACAF, but still struggle to compete consistently at the world level.

The advent of a U-14 National Team and the proposition to establish a U-14 National Academy program is counterproductive to improving the development of players aged 9 through 14. The underlying rationale is flawed. It posits, erroneously, that we can spot future elite players at age 13, contrary to all research worldwide concerning athletes at these ages, as well as everything written by development experts. There has been much ado about creating "purposeful" training environments, and having players play in "meaningful" games. But at these ages, the "environment" must be improved for all players, not just those who adults think will be successful at the highest levels. (I won't even go into the well-recognized fallacy of this type of selection, where the success rate for picking even older players who ultimately play at the highest levels is less than 10 percent. This is true worldwide, as well as in the MLS.)

## Increase the "General Level" of Play, Not Select out "Elite" Players

Producing players who can play at the

highest levels means increasing the "general level" of play, and having the cream of the crop rise above this level. By doing so, many more players will have added to play, create, solve problems and experiment. This is where most of us have had it backward for so many years. The focus always has been from the top down, rather than the reverse. Since the 1970s, the main focus has been on finding and developing the elite player, rather than improving the general level of play. First, there was the State Select Program for the Olympic Sports Festivals in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which evolved into the Olympic Development Program (ODP). Travel or select leagues expanded to include younger and younger ages, in some areas including 7 and 8 year olds. What started in ODP for U-19s, expanded downward to U-16, then to U-14 and finally to U-13. We saw the development of the Super Y League, US Club Soccer, the Regional Leagues, the advent of the U-17 Residency Program, and, today the Academy Program.

Each new program has attempted to select the elite players for enhanced game environments and training. Strides in development have been made, in large part because of the coaching education programs of US Soccer and the NSCAA, but much of the improvement has been merely the result of increased numbers of youth players. Our national teams can compete fairly consistently regionally, but we still struggle on the world stage. An apt contrast is Brazil, a country that could field three national teams in the World Cup, with a good chance for all three to reach the second round. If we lose three key players on our National team, we are in danger not only of failing miserably at the World Cup, but also of not even qualifying. To be sure, Brazil's elite players are more skilled, but it is the general level of play for all players in Brazil that creates the depth for developing these elite players.

We have focused on stars like Ronaldinho, Messi and Ronaldo, but turn a blind eye to the youth environment of the vast majority of players in Brazil, Argentina and other Latin countries. The environment is one of street soccer and free play, and the general level of play is much greater than here or in Great Britain or many parts of Europe. It is in and from these types of environments that the vast majority of skillful South American players have arisen.

It is not possible to replicate the informal, pick-up neighborhood street soccer as it is played in Brazil, but that does not obviate the validity of its ultimate influence on the level of play of its ultimate stars. Rather than forming national programs that seek to find and develop the players we deem to be "elite" at too young an age, we should be seeking to find ways to increase the numbers of players

and general level of play. We need to create environments for our 9- through 13-year-olds, and even older, to have the freedom and encouragement to experiment, and to develop tight skills through playing smaller sides.

## "Elite" U-14 Programs Stifle Development

Why can't we get off this plateau? I believe it is because we ignore the forest for the trees. European and English professional clubs have signed more and more Latin players, in efforts to create better leagues. Then, they state that they must improve the level of play of the English and European youth players. In doing so, they ignore the natural environment in which players in Brazil and other Latin countries developed, and instead have created an adult-prescribed regimen for a select few young players. Their solution is that same as ours has been—to find elite players at younger and younger ages and get them into the "right" environments. We look at the harsh realities of what it takes to be a "pro," what it takes to play at the highest international levels, and then we try to reverse engineer the environment for the few players we think will have a chance to make it.

In our reverse engineering, we have focused on peripheral issues, but omitted many of the intangible ingredients that go into making world-class players. First, we know that it takes 10 or more years for a player to develop, but we have not fully considered what creates player development. We have taken our adult view of the game, and the lessons our senior players have learned in the international arena, and have tried to recreate the pro environment for our younger players. Our attempts to date have been to create high-quality, structured environments for our "elite players," where they train "purposefully" and play in "meaningful games." We automatically pursue these themes for all players, so that we continue to separate the "serious players" from the "recreational players" for travel play at younger and younger ages. The result, though unintended, is that we have created an environment where results are paramount because our focus is exclusively on how to become more efficient players.

This is why it is counterproductive to have a U-14 National Team and U-14 Academy programs. By nature, these programs require selecting "elite" players. This means that the focus for local and regional U-10 through U-13 programs who want to "succeed" will be to identify and prepare "pre-Academy" players. We already see this on the state level with travel programs that begin at U-9 and U-10 and State Cup at U-12. We now have special training programs and U-8 and U-7 for "pre-travel players." We have proceeded with the mistaken notion that development should be something different for the "serious player," than for the "recreational player." The result is that no one is interested in developing the "general" level of play. We ignore

the fact that no one at these ages before puberty is a "player." Each player is a 10-, 11- or 12-year-old, in various stages of mental, physical and social development. What we term "serious play" is predominantly the earlier manifestation of a particular stage of development in certain kids, nothing more.

Moving the National Academy Program down to the U-14 age group will end up being just a glorified version of what we have now with "travel leagues" at these ages. The same limited numbers of coaches will vie for the same small numbers of players, and the result still will be that we narrow the pool of potential players at ages when we need to increase the numbers playing. Essentially, it will be like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

### **Fitting Players into Our Concept of the Adult Game Rather than Letting Them Find the Game for Themselves**

What does this have to do with missing the forest for the trees, and the mistakes being made in Europe and England? We are looking at only one aspect of what it takes to be a "high-level player" and injecting it into our youth programs. This is the age-old approach of trying to fit players into the game as played and defined by adults. It ignores the fundamental facts of how youth develop, but also ignores the scope of the game itself.

The approach of the Europeans, English and Americans miss some fundamental building blocks – understanding how young players learn, and applying those concepts to the free-flowing, problem-solving nature of the game. Why is soccer the most popular sport in the world? It is the only team game that truly allows the culture of the players to come through because it requires the players themselves, individually and collectively, to solve the problems each game presents. The attributes that make a world-class player are not just physical and technical, but reflect the ability to create and solve problems in ways no one else has seen before. The environments that a young player experiences in those 10 years of development provide that player not only with many differing types of problems to solve and guidance for solving them, but also with the freedom to solve them. When we select "elite" players, we not only define all of the problems to solve and the methods of solving them, we also have limited the numbers and types of environments within which players experience the problems. The variety and freedom are as important as the "purposeful training" we adults devise.

This approach has implications for coaches considering how young players develop. First, players need to be exposed to multiple soccer situations and many different roles within their own team. It also means that they must be allowed to play with and against many different players, with different strengths and weaknesses, so that at times they are the dominant player on the team, and at others they are not, requiring them to solve different problems in many different ways.

By selecting "elite players" prematurely and seeking to make their environments more "meaningful" from an adult perspective,

we have dramatically reduced the variety of environments they experience. We also have reduced the number of roles they play, the types of problems they solve, and the freedom they have to solve those problems.

### **Consider How Players Develop – Physically, Mentally and Socially**

By selecting elite players before they are in their mid-teens, we narrow the pool of players based upon developmental differences that are non-uniform, but also woefully unpredictable. From a physical standpoint, youth, from the ages of 11 to 15 are going through the most significant changes in their lives, with great disparity in rates of growth, coordination and maturity. By selecting players at these ages, we are limiting not only those we omit but also those we choose.

The physical side includes the development of skill. Just as players need more opportunities to explore different physical ways of solving problems, they need more opportunities in "smaller free play sides" to hone their techniques and experiment with using these techniques to solve problems. If we doubt that players can develop skill in this way, all we have to do is go to any park in the evening and watch the multitude of young and old Hispanic players playing freely. While they may not have the tactical sophistication, they certainly exhibit the touch and quickness that even many of our best players lack. And they did not develop such skills in adult-designed "purposeful training."

Second, youth 11 to 15 are moving into the "formal operational stage" of thinking where they are just beginning to think abstractly. By putting them into a constant barrage of "meaningful environments," we direct their thinking, but retard their breadth and depth of growth in discovering their own ways to solve increasingly complex abstract problems.

Finally, from a social perspective, these ages are when the psyches of young people are most vulnerable as they strive to find their identities. At ages 11 to 15, these players are going through momentous physical, mental and social changes, at rates different from one another. They are experiencing dramatic changes in their self-esteem. They are beginning to recognize that ability may begin to play a more important role than effort is in determining success. The emphasis on selecting "elite" players at these ages unduly focuses on competition and success at the very time when they need inclusive environments that will not brand them as successful or unsuccessful by adults' arbitrary scales. Doing so stifles their willingness to explore and find success in many different ways, not just the efficient "meaningful" ways adults prescribe, which is exactly what we lack in our highest-level players.

### **Free Play/Non-Result Oriented Play are "Meaningful" and "Purposeful" Environments**

We have acknowledged the need for free play, but we most often relegate it to only very young players. We misunderstand what it is about free play that causes development. It is the process that is so important: that of playing with and against many different players in environments that have ramifications only for that particular game. It has nothing to do with a com-

petitive spirit. When we were younger, we played in neighborhood sports games. We competed as hard as we could; we tried to make the sides even so it would be fun and challenging. But no matter what the result was on a particular day, the next day brought a new game, new challenges, without the albatross of a season record determining how we would play the next day.

These are not "purposeless" environments. They are not "meaningless" games.

It is exactly the variety of environments that develop the creative players. In a subtle way, by seeking to put our young players in more "meaningful" environments, we have subtly made results more important than process. And for development, the process is the result.

### **Increase the General Level of Play for These Ages**

Ultimately, "elite" older players have to shift to more defined roles and structured environments. But, by lowering the age for this focus to U-14, we are hurting our younger players. Instead of maintaining and developing the numbers of players at age 13 that have been playing since age 8, we are seeking to narrow the focus to find the cream of a very immature crop. We must have a paradigm shift. For players at these ages, we must seek to raise the general level of play, not pare away at the numbers, taking the last player standing. The cream always will rise to the top by itself, but how high it rises depends on the crop itself. If the pond is small, it does not take much for a fish to become the biggest one there.

Back to those Hispanic players in the parks. The vast majority of them never became players at a high level. They represent the "general level" of play from their youth. Yet, they exhibit the tight skills and creativity that many of our best players lack. It is this "general level" of play that produced the highest-level players from their countries. This is what we must seek to increase, especially at ages 9 to 15 in this country. This is the "meaningful" environment that will produce players of the highest caliber.

To date, much of our focus above the age of 9 has been on important procedural issues. Now, we really have to address providing programs within our states that foster the inclusion of more, rather than fewer, players aged 9 to 15, in the better training and playing environments. We also need to focus on using our resources to hire better coaches to work with more coaches and players, even across club lines, rather than continue to have clubs compete for the same coaches and players. As a part of this shift of focus, on a national scale the focus needs to shift to supporting these environments and coaching education, and away from reaching down into younger ages for a national program to produce higher-caliber National Team players. Continuing on the path we have laid out will set us back even further by adding another layer of bureaucracy for us to fight to increase the numbers and develop environments more conducive to producing players who are truly creative and play at a higher level than today. Until we really address these issues, the only thing we are doing is moving certain Titanic deck chairs for a few to momentarily get more sun. 