

MAKING DEMANDS

By Jay Martin, Editor, *The Soccer Journal*

After a 1-0 loss to the LA Galaxy in a U.S. Open Cup game earlier this summer, Columbus Crew coach Sigi Schmid suggested to the press that some of the younger Crew players need to learn that soccer is played hard for 90 minutes. He was upset because the younger players, who had a chance to "show" in a Cup game, seemed to "go through the motions" during the second half. The work rate disappeared. This happened in our professional league.

The Blue Chip Showcase was played in Cincinnati in late April. Thirty-two of the best club teams in the country attended. Based on the number of college coaches there, it must have been 32 of the best teams in the country. Yet watching these games was like watching underwater soccer. There was no change of pace, no defending, no running and no movement off the ball. These were our best U-17s?

A very unofficial and unscientific e-mail survey of college coaches by this author suggests that the No. 1 problem with the incoming college freshmen each year is that the players don't know how to work hard over a period of time. Many coaches thought this was a result of poor fitness and a lack of understanding about the level of intensity needed to be successful on the field.

We have a problem.

The young players in this country do not understand the demands of the game of soccer. Or, if they do, they cannot translate that understanding on to the field.

Soccer is a game that is meant to be played when you are uncomfortable; when you are tired and when you are in pain. Good soccer players understand this and keep on playing. Bad soccer players stop playing. There are more bad soccer players than good ones!

But who is to blame for this uniquely American dilemma? The players? The coaches? Maybe both, but the real problem lies in the American soccer system.

➤ There are too many games in too short a period of time at all levels of soccer in this country. Youth, high school and college soccer all play two or three games (sometimes more) every week. Soccer is not meant to be played that often. Too many games means players "save themselves" for the next game; it means there is not enough time to prepare to play physically or mentally and it means that there is limited recovery time between these games. So, when the players get tired in these games they stop running.

➤ There are too many tournaments in youth soccer. Playing four, five or six games in a 36- to 48-hour period is a huge problem. By subjecting players to this type of schedule we are condoning and, in fact, teaching our young players that it is acceptable to "conserve your energy," "rest on defense" or "play underwater soccer." After playing in these tournaments over a period of time we train the players to play in an unrealistic manner.

➤ We have too many substitutions. When we play many games in a short period of

time, substitutions are necessary. We should have limited substitution *if* we can reduce the frequency of our games. By limiting games each week or mandating a recovery period between games, we can put fitness back into the game. The founders of the sport limited substitutions to make fitness a part of the game. Fitness is one of the "four pillars" of soccer that we all know from the coaching schools. Right now if a player gets tired he/she either stops running or puts the hand up to come out - there's no need to work hard.

➤ There is a lack in fitness and conditioning training in youth soccer (sports). There may have been a time when the players came to training sessions with some level of fitness. In those days young boys and girls actually played outside after school. They ran, jumped and played with peers on the streets. Times have changed. Those days are gone - long gone. Today kids don't play *until* they arrive at training. They don't engage in any physical activity unless it is organized. Coaches only have a little time for each training session. Fitness training takes away from technique and tactics. The fact is youth players are not fit and don't get fit. That means they stop running when they are tired - and they get tired very quickly.

➤ Special youth players receive special treatment. The exceptional young soccer players are not required to defend, or run, or maybe even train. They are allowed to rest until they get the ball.. .then they work.. .and then they rest again. When they reach a level where players are compatible and they are no longer a standout, they struggle because they are not fit. How good would these talented players be if they were fit? If they ran? If they defended? But these players never learn to play through pain or discomfort. They never learn how to play soccer.

So the fault lies not only with the players and coaches, but with our system. This problem does exist. Sigi Schmid sees this problem at the highest level. Each of you see the problem every day.

We, as coaches, know the demands of the game. It is our responsibility to teach our players what the demands of the game are, and more importantly, show players in training how to cope with these demands. Coaches must expect more from their players in training and in games. Coaches must insist that the players continue to play when they are tired and sore. Coaches must train players technically and tactically after fitness training so the player understands how to play when tired, how to perform when tired.

We, as coaches, must address this issue now.

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