



# The Coerver Minute

*"Let's Get Better"*

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**"Once selection to teams starts, most player development stops."**

**Simon Whitehead,  
Director  
Coerver Minnesota**



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## **Chelo's Minute: Early Selection - So What's Wrong With That?**

Recent weeks have seen more tryouts in Colorado for 8 and 9 year olds. The club called them "clinics", but their purpose was to evaluate players and put the "best" of them together on spring teams. That's a tryout. And that's certainly what parents were calling it.

So what's wrong with that?

For openers, Colorado Youth Soccer has rules against "stacking" teams of players this age, and it's always troubling when youth sports organizations bend – or break - the rules. Kids aren't stupid, and they quickly pick up on this. It becomes a challenge for parents: how do you promote one set of standards around the dinner table while living with a different set on the athletic field? The standard *apologia* is, of course, "Everyone else is doing it". While sadly too true, it's no more a valid excuse here than when it's used as part of a child's plea to see *that* movie or buy the latest edition of Grand Theft Auto.

Character issues aside, what everyone should know is this: *early identification and early selection (before puberty) just doesn't work*. If anything, it appears to be counterproductive in terms of the development of top level players.

In the most recent issue of the *NSCAA Soccer Journal*, Gary Allen of U.S. Youth Soccer took issue with the very premise of early selection: *"The underlying rationale is flawed. It posits, erroneously, that we can spot future elite players (by age) 13, contrary to all research worldwide concerning athletes at these ages, as well as everything written by development experts."* (Entire article [here](#).) That research applies to most endeavors, not just to sport, and there are countless examples of "late bloomers" who would find far fewer opportunities in today's hurry up culture. The bottom line is this: you just don't know at the younger ages, and anyone who tells you different is either blowing smoke, woefully ignorant, or both.  
*(continued on next page)*

## **Think Summer with our 10% Early Enrollment Discount**

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## **Would Your Team Like Coerver Training?**

Coerver Colorado offers [training for teams](#). Most teams choose to do 4 or 5 bi-weekly sessions. We begin these sessions in early March.

Sessions follow a detailed written curriculum and feature footwork exercises, 1v1 games, technical work on striking the ball, and more. Coaches get copies of the curriculum so that they can continue Coerver training with their teams.

Our spring schedule is already halfway filled. If you're interested in getting your team on it, please contact us at [coervercolo@msn.com](mailto:coervercolo@msn.com) or 720-255-4911.

## So What's Wrong With That? (continued)

Next, consider the flaws of the typical selection process. The selectors think they are identifying superior "athletes" or (less commonly) based on technique or tactical insight; instead they are mostly selecting birth days, especially so at the younger ages. (Rarely does the selection process focus on the personal qualities of the athlete, which are by far the best predictors of future success.) It's like trying to figure out who should be in a "King of the Hill" game in seven or eight years.

Selection is followed by exclusion. Those not selected lose the challenge provided by those "moved up" and typically get progressively less and less in terms of coaching and other opportunities. Of course they fall behind. Three years later, the "best" teams are still populated by the chosen players. The selectors see that as vindication of their brilliant choices. All they've really done is to manage a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We have no problem with enrichment activities for younger players, so long as there are opportunities for any interested player willing to make that extra effort. But that's not what we're seeing. We're seeing practices that promote exclusion. In the "King of the Hill" analogy, most of the potential players are being told to go home long before the game is to start.

Through age 13 or 14, every effort must be made to encourage *inclusion*, providing quality instruction and coaching to *all* players, raising the general level of play, letting, in Allen's words, "the cream of the crop rise above that level" as it surely will.

The most visible outcome of early selection that we observe is how it seems to discourage effective player development programs and, consequently, good soccer. We provided a [prime example](#) an earlier issue of the *Coerver Minute*. As our friend Simon Whitehead of Coerver Minnesota lamented recently, "Once selection to teams starts, most player development stops."

That's largely because the most concrete measure of success is winning. It's easiest (but superficial) to judge the quality of coaching by the won-loss record, and there are tremendous pressures on coaches to win at younger and younger ages. Much of it is supplied by parents but as least as much comes from organizational leaderships seeking to tout winning percentages as a measure of "why you should play for us".

There's little room for the patience and perseverance needed to cultivate skillful, fundamentally sound players. When I'm expected to win again in six days, I'm going to be training the team much differently than I would if training players to be able to succeed consistently in six years.

Game-to-game coaching easily leads to the trap of what North Carolina coach Anson Dorrance calls "*winning today (at the sacrifice of tomorrow.)*" Here you see training that prioritizes team organization over player development, tactics over skill, pigeon-holing players in prescribed roles on the field - limiting their decision making and control of *their* game, and play that emphasizes athleticism far more than (and sometimes to the exclusion of) game smarts. Team environments in this scenario often create a fear of mistakes – because "mistakes make you lose" – which stifles boldness and creativity. At its worst, an excessive concern about the scoreboard promotes over-training scenarios, substituting quantity for quality in ways that too often put players' progress at risk, if not in reverse (e.g. the two 10 year olds who, their parents reported, had 20 and 22 days of formal soccer activity last year, in the month of February!)

In the end it's those "best" players who suffer most, because it is precisely those environments that will inhibit their becoming players who are not only skillful but creative, confident and fearless – the very qualities that can take their play to higher levels and provide maximum enjoyment. While at the same time – in an ironic twist - *they* are now the ones being deprived of the challenges that "late bloomers" would have provided had they not been pushed aside early on.

Our Coerver Colorado programs have always sought to provide quality instruction for all players without regard to their current level of expertise or athletic ability. What's been changing is how much we're having to do to "break the chains", with programs and activities designed around a "climate of fearlessness". Here mistakes and failures are actually welcomed as a natural consequence of taking it to the limit, then stepping beyond. As Coach Wooden has told us: "*The team that makes the most mistakes usually wins the game. Doers make mistakes.*" Mistakes should make you *better*.

That's what *we* can do, but it does not begin to address the larger issue. We'll do that in a future *Minute*, starting with ways to create a culture of youth soccer that provides better training and playing environments for more players, rather than fewer.

We welcome your comments ([coervercolo@msn.com](mailto:coervercolo@msn.com).)

*Chelo*