

LET THEM PLAY!!

A GUIDE TO YOUTH SOCCER

Welcome to the exciting world of youth soccer!!

If you're a parent, I think you're going to like what the game has to offer your child. It can be very exciting to watch your child grow and develop as a soccer player. And if you're a volunteer coach, you'll have the chance to contribute to the growth and development of all the youngsters on your team. That can be even more exciting.

Soccer is easily the most popular team sport in the world, and for good reason. It's easy to learn, but it's also challenging. And it's fun! The game is relatively new to the United States; but ever since youth soccer arrived on the U.S. scene in the 1960's, it has been growing at an impressive rate. In this fairly short time we have created an organizational structure that has brought the game of soccer to youngsters throughout the country.

The United States is now trying to catch up with the rest of the world in soccer on the international level. Our youth players of today will be our international and Olympic soccer stars of tomorrow, and our hopes for them are high. In this catch-up mode, we tend to overlook some of the negative aspects of our youth programs. Sometimes we push too hard and put entirely too much emphasis on winning. Sometimes we over-structure the game to the point of taking the fun out of it. Children six, eight, and ten years old are not mini-professionals, and they should not be treated as such.

The majority of international soccer powers simply let children play by themselves in small groups until they are about twelve years old. These countries don't need to have organized teams with coaches to introduce the kids to the game. The kids are surrounded by the game practically from the time they're born because soccer is such an integral part of their culture. Everywhere they look, they see people playing soccer - their older brothers and sisters, their parents, other children, other adults. The game looks like fun, so they try to play it themselves. And they learn - just by playing.

It doesn't happen this way in the United States. Children in the U.S. have role models for baseball and football, but not for soccer. Without teams, coaches, leagues, and associations, most kids would never learn to play the game. But we need to begin to use our organizational and administrative talents to set up opportunities for our children to learn soccer in a more natural way. In short, we need to try to duplicate what happens automatically in other parts of the world. After we get our kids started and show them the basics of the

game, we should simply get out of their way and *let them play!!*

Something I saw one Sunday afternoon a few years ago made a lasting impression on me because it demonstrated so vividly the value of unrestricted free play in soccer development. A friend and I had attended a New York Cosmos game, and after the game he told me he wanted to take me to see some more soccer. He promised me it would be exciting. We drove to a suburb a few miles outside New York City and arrived at the field just as a huge crowd was filing into the enclosed playing area. The players and most of the spectators were Haitian. The men were warming up on the field, and something very interesting was taking place on the sidelines. All around the edges of the field were small squares outlined with shoes, paper plates, and T-shirts. In each square were eight or ten youngsters and one ball, and that was it. There were not coaches, no teams, no referees. The "game" was very simple. Each player tried to get the ball and keep it as long as possible. He would dribble until another player managed to steal the ball. Sometimes the player with the ball would trip and fall, but would immediately get up and try to get the ball back.

The game required stamina and agility, and it involved shielding, change of direction, and change of pace. Most important of all, it encouraged individual expression without any fear of failure. I'll never forget the happy face of one young boy as I handed him a ball that had rolled out of the playing area. He ran back to the group, where he held the ball for only a few seconds before he tripped and lost it. Still smiling, he jumped right back up and returned to the action.

When the men's game started, it quickly became obvious from their individual styles of play that their early training in the small squares had definitely molded this high-level, exciting soccer.

The point is that the game itself is the best teacher. If our children have fun playing soccer, they will keep on playing and they will learn. It's as simple as that.

A word to parents

One of the best things you can do to help your child learn to play soccer is to enjoy the game yourself. Even if you're not going to be involved in any sort of coaching role, you can be more supportive and understanding of your own child if you try to learn something about the game and the various skills involved. That's why this book is directed toward parents as well as coaches.

The conduct of parents and other spectators during youth soccer matches can be either a positive factor in the development of our young players or a very negative one. On some occasions, sadly, I have watched parents yell abusively at their children and generally

carry on in an absurd manner during a game. One reason for such behavior is an overemphasis on the competitive aspect of the game. There is simply no place for this *win, win, win* attitude when dealing with very young children. Another reason for objectionable conduct during games is the newness of the sport in this country. Parents and other spectators who have not played the game themselves don't appreciate its difficulties and subtleties. They yell because they feel the need to get involved in some way, but they don't really understand what they're yelling about.

At the risk of seeming negative, I'd like to spell out some important DON'T for parents:

DON'T expect perfection
DON'T accentuate negative play or mistakes
DON'T yell at the referee, your team's coach, the opponents, the opponent's coach, or the other spectators
DON'T try to direct the style of play of any player, your child or others. It will only confuse them.

The DO's are even more important:

DO enjoy seeing your son or daughter having fun.
DO support positive play, on either team.
DO watch and learn!!

You want your child to enjoy the soccer experience and keep coming back for more - that's how children develop into high-level players. So don't do anything that will spoil the fun of the game for your child. Your job is to provide support and encouragement.

A word to the coach

If this is your first experience as a coach, you may be afraid that someone will find out that you don't really know a lot about the game. Maybe you've never played soccer before in your whole life, much less coached. You may be an example of what I call the "imposed volunteer syndrome" - you have been pressed into coaching service to allow your own child to play. And you know that you don't know much more about soccer than any of the other parents who are simply spectators.

Well, you are a very special person, and my hat is off to you! What sets you apart from the spectators is that you are willing to get involved and give it a try. You are willing to take the risk of being thrown into a new situation without much background or training because you see the advantages that playing soccer offers our children.

My advice to you is this - RELAX. Have faith in your own abilities. Many youth soccer coaches today didn't have the opportunity to play soccer when they were growing up, but this doesn't necessarily limit their effectiveness as coaches. What really matters is *not* playing experience, *not* coaching experience, and not even knowledge of the game. What matters is *attitude*. The priorities are love, imagination, patience, and the desire to help young players have fun playing a great game. If you have this attitude, you can pick up enough knowledge to give your players a firm base for their development in the sport of soccer.

As you start to form your personal philosophy of coaching young players age six to ten, the first thing you should realize is the uniqueness of this group. They are not mini-athletes - they are little bundles of energy who simply love to move!! They may not even *begin* to appreciate a fine pass or an example of excellent ball control. They will, however, delight in the constant running, falling, rolling, kicking, and other unrestricted movement patterns of the game of soccer. You should take care not to over-structure your training sessions and lose the natural fun of the game. With youngsters in this age group, soccer should be more a vehicle for fun than a finished product.

To create the proper learning environment for you players, you must make decisions about the importance of winning and losing in relation to their overall soccer education. You must decide what you want your players to gain from the game, and then figure out how to implement those goals. Keep in mind that the personal development of your players, and the future of the game of soccer, are best served by providing soccer experiences that will make the kids want to come back year after year. If you overemphasize winning and take away the fun, you're defeating your purpose.

Currently, many of our youth leagues are set up in a way that makes ten percent of the players feel like winners and ninety percent feel like losers. Preoccupation with scores, wins, losses, standings, most valuable players, and so on, creates an atmosphere that is all too likely to have a negative effect on the children's soccer development.

For now, just remember that the early years of soccer should be filled with learning the skills and playing the game in an atmosphere of fun. Working with children up to the age of ten is entirely different from working with older players. As a coach of this age group, you must be more of a play director than anything else.