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Is winning everything?

Soccer-expert.com

Winning is everything... There's no prize for coming second... If winning isn't important, why do we keep score?

Heard these clichés? Of course. But, in the context of youth development, how important is winning a game?

Clearly, if you are going to play a game, there is little point in not trying to win it. However, the problem with much of youth football today is that winning has become too important and the development of players has been sacrificed for the result.

In England, as elsewhere, we have many youth leagues. Success is easily and invariably measured by results each week and the league standings. But if the emphasis is predominantly on results what mindset does this put the coach and the players in? Training, tactics and team selection will be based around the next game. Long-term development of players is sacrificed for the 'quick fix'. Ask yourself these questions in relation to your team:

1. Does everyone get equal time?
2. Does the coach encourage players to express themselves and learn in a game?
3. Does the team selection and tactic revolve around a few more physically able/mature players?
4. Does the coach invariably bench perceived weaker players even when the team is winning?

If your coach were doing these things then I would challenge his/her emphasis. Players need to learn a variety of positions. They need to be encouraged to express themselves and make decisions without fear - fear of being criticised or fear of losing.

Coaches, parents and players must think in the long-term. Training, development programmes and matches must be based around a long-term development programme that works on every aspect of player development and caters for individual needs. Chances are your coach doesn't have such a plan and just 'lives' for the next game. But in any other educational activity there is a syllabus or plan to work too.

- We're not saying winning isn't important. It most definitely is but it should not override player development and be raised to a status it doesn't deserve to be at. Over-emphasis on league standings and the attitude of some of those running soccer is the problem. There are excellent coaches, administrators and parents who have a great approach to youth development, but not enough.

In youth development we must get the balance right. In my view the basis for this is the following:

1. Coaches to have relevant qualifications.
2. Matches each year to be shared between 'friendlies' and league. More 'friendlies' at the younger age groups.
3. Small-sided games to be played at the young age groups. 4-v-4 until U9 and 8-v-8 until Under-11.
4. Coaches to work to a long-term development programme and stick to it.
5. Parents to be educated where possible in the importance of a long-term youth strategy.
6. Coaching programme to be continually evaluated and up dated to suit the needs of the individual children as well as the team.

When your son or daughter comes home from soccer what question do you ask? Is it, 'Did you win'? If so, try changing it to, 'How did you play?'

An individual, and a team, can play well and lose. Also the second question focuses the child's mind on performance not always being measured by the result alone. The result is just one indicator of performance and, at youth levels, not the most important one.

Children want to make their parents happy. If a parent over-emphasises the result, so will the child. Don't say winning isn't important, just don't make it the most important thing.

Winning a game as part of youth development does become more significant as children get into their teenage years and the importance of winning a game is more important. This is an area I will explore in future articles.

- **Derek Broadley** of the soccer-expert.com team recently moved to the USA and reports back that he faces the over-emphasis on winning every day.

He says: 'The structure here in the US takes players from one league to the next and from tournament to tournament.'

The coaches are looked upon by their 'winning record' and are recruited by that alone. He continues: 'Soccer is a game of chance here in the US, it depends on which coach you are assigned to as to how far a player can go.'

It is difficult for development to take place because the games get in the way. The only way for coaches to move forward regardless of where they live is to plan the whole season, allowing for a development stage and a winning stage that have equal standing.

Derek is currently taking the staff at the Berks Soccer Academy in Pennsylvania through this process and he has found that the coaching staff are opening up to the idea.

The focus for all coaches should be to strive for winning consistently rather than winning at all cost, and Derek believes that coaches have to be brave and stand by their principles rather than bow to the need for self-achievement and the pressure put on by parents, who are not knowledgeable in the development process but insist on success in the short-term without a thought for the years to come.

What is winning for a young player? Who can remember the Under-10/U-11 champions? We all know who makes pro, wins Premier and MLS leagues, World Cups but how many of these players only had to win at all cost in the younger years?

In many cases these players never grew up with competitive leagues or tournaments or even coaches, the competition was close to home in the next street or neighbourhood. The coach was the older kid who already could master the skills needed to play the game.

Maybe the modern coach should look at this process in the same way as the soccer-expert.com team, who have developed a game-related practise style that allows for development to take place. Winning has to be defined by each individual who puts their boots on - playing for fun, playing with friends, playing to stay in shape, playing for a career. All of those people around that individual have to support that goal.

If you want to discuss the issues raised in this article register on the soccer-expert.com website and use our message board or email questions@soccer-expert.com.

We have also started to introduce age-related development programmes that can be downloaded by subscribers from the site.

You may also find an [article from thepitch.org](http://www.thepitch.org) interesting that explores children's concepts of winning at different ages. <http://www.thepitch.org/text/hf1.htm>