

Champion coach Albertin Montoya puts winning in perspective
Mike Voitalla

By Mike Voitalla

On a sunny September Sunday, Coach **Albertin Montoya** watched his Gold Pride players, including the magnificent Brazilian **Marta** and U.S. world champion **Tiffeny Milbrett**, celebrate the WPS championship after a 4-0 win over Philadelphia.

The dominating final performance followed a regular season in which the Gold Pride averaged nearly two goals per game and played such entertaining and effective soccer that longtime reporter on the women's game, [Scott French](#), declared it the best women's club team ever.

Thanks much to Marta, the Gold Pride played soccer worth paying to watch. So as Montoya, out of the corner of his eye, watched his players bask in the glory, I asked him why the USA isn't producing Martas. After all, this country has more girls playing and more resources dedicated to female soccer than any other nation. Shouldn't we be seeing many more highly skillful, exciting players?

"We'll need to talk about youth soccer," said Montoya.

Montoya is also a longtime Northern California youth coach for girls and boys. He and his wife, **Erin**, a former collegiate star and pro player, run the Montoya Soccer Academy and coach at Mountain View Los Altos SC, for which Albertin also serves as technical director for under-8 through under-14 boys teams.

"The biggest problem at the youth level is the emphasis on winning," he says. "I don't know if it's in our genes or what, but there's so much desire to win at the ages when player development should be the emphasis.

"The first thing I tell parents is, 'You want to win at U-8, U-9, U-10, U-11, U-12 -- you're at the wrong club.

"We're here to develop players to where, hopefully, by the time they're U-14, U-15s, they're playing at a high level, where **if we do our job, winning will be a byproduct** and we'll compete for state championships."

At the U-15 level – when the college showcases begin – MVLA teams do get results and win championships. And it sent 14 players to the girls youth national team program in the last seven years.

"These players might not be winning at 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 – but that's not what it's about," he says. "We've lost some good players in the past because their parents wanted to win at U10, U11."

The challenge is to convince parents that at the early ages the focus should be on individual technical development – not scorelines. Montoya even advocates against playing league ball at the early ages.

“I don’t want our teams at U9, U10, U11 to play in the league,” he says. “I want to just have in-house 4v4s. It’s difficult because parents say, ‘We want to play different teams. We want to travel.’ I say, ‘Believe me. You’ll have plenty of time to travel and drive when they’re 14, 15, 16. You don’t want to do it now when they’re U8, U9, U10.’”

“We have enough players in our backyard. Let’s play 3v3, 4v4. But the parents want to play other teams. So I said, ‘OK. We’ll do it in the fall.’ But in the spring we’re not going to play anywhere. We are going to continue what I believe in. They’ll get more touches on the ball.”

Like most close observers of the women’s game, Montoya sees that the USA has depended too much on athleticism – being stronger, faster and quicker:

“When you watch the U-17 and U-20 World Cups you see the technical ability of the Japanese, the Koreans, the Germans, the Brazilians – you ask, ‘Why can’t our players do that?’ **We have the athletes and I think it does go down to the early youth level where there’s so much emphasis on winning.**”

When Montoya coaches his pros, he wants them to play like Barcelona or Spain. To rely on skill, creativity and possession.

“Once they realized they could play that kind of game ... When you have the ball – they enjoy it that much more,” he says. “As soon as we lose it, we try to win it right back. And when we get it back, then identify, ‘Do we do a quick counter or do we keep it and let them chase for a while?’”

With his youngsters, it’s all about developing the individual skills that will enable them to play a possession game *later*. That, he says, is **a bigger challenge for American youth coaches, whose players don’t watch as much soccer** as, for example, Brazilian children. So coaches need to demonstrate more and do more skill work – and encourage dribbling during games even if it means the risk of losing the ball and giving up goals.

“My U-9 teams -- I haven’t even told them to pass it yet,” says Montoya. “I want my right back to dribble six players. I want my left back to dribble five, six players. I want my center back to do the same thing. My center-mid, my forward. Every single one of them.

“So we get 9-year-olds who are doing spin turns like Marta does. They’re doing step-overs. And I want that. I encourage that at every single position. And every game, they’ll start at a different position.”

Montoya doesn’t mind if a young player loses the ball because she keeps dribbling and the other team exploits the error for a goal. In fact, he “bribes” his players to try dribbling moves during a game. Giving them a small prize if they pull off a step-over move or a “Maradona” during a game.

“When a U-9 player touches the ball once, passes, touches the ball once, passes. How much are they developing?” he asks. “Teams may look well organized when they keep their players in the same positions – the positions they’re strongest at. But what separates players at the highest level is doing magic with the ball. So dribbling needs to be encouraged early on. The organized tactical stuff should come later. I tell the parents don’t tell the kids to pass the ball.”

When strong athletes are encouraged to strike the ball into space and run after it – coaches may start winning. But these players suffer later because they’ve been encouraged to use their athleticism instead of their skill or their savvy. When they’re older, says Montoya, they have a certain style – but it’s a power, direct style.

“When they’re 13, 14, 15 -- there’s even more emphasis on winning and a coach is even less likely to work on developing the player,” he says.

But Montoya sees that parents are starting to understand why the scorelines shouldn’t be considered so important.

“It’s all about educating the parents,” he says. “And fortunately there is a generation of coaches coming up now who have played the game at a high level. But we need to make sure those coaches are working at the younger age groups and that they have developing players as a priority and not winning games.”

(Mike Voitalla, the executive editor of Soccer America, coaches youth soccer for Rockridge SC in Oakland, Calif. His youth soccer articles are archived at YouthSoccerFun.com.)