

Conquering the Myths of Youth Soccer

This past summer I finally found some time to read a few books. One of the books that absolutely thrilled me was a book called *Game On* by Tom Farrey. This book addresses some of the more pertinent issues facing youth sports today and also offers some ideas for reform. Each chapter has a theme based on a “myth” of youth sports. For this article, I am going to discuss just a few of these myths as they relate to youth soccer.

Myth: Organized competition breeds success.

Truth: Unstructured play is often more valuable.

The United States is very unique in its drive to organize young children. Structure is one of the main elements of baseball, basketball and football. But structure and organization doesn't always equal success. For example, the Dominican Republic doesn't really organize their kids even in baseball yet they produce some of the very best players and teams. Many great players that have played the game of soccer weren't organized into structured clubs, teams, trainings and games as young children.

Farrey explains, “Zinedine Zidane, the three time World Player of the Year, who retired after the 06' World Cup, received instructions as a teenager in one of the French federation's regional training facilities-but no one, including Zizou, would suggest that the origins of his sorcery began there. His exquisite feel for the ball was developed years earlier in the crowded, government-built projects of Marseille, messing around on the gravel of his town's central square and in the living room of his family's apartment where, through his trial and error, all the lights got smashed out.” (Farrey, 94) One way to bring about more unstructured play in youth soccer is to let the kids play more at the end of training with less coaching. Keep in mind that the idea of less structure and more play is often a difficult concept for some to grasp.

Education is the key.

For more on this method, please see the August 08 archive of “IN the NET” at soccerindiana.org.

I had an experience this past fall when I ran a practice for a U9-10 academy group. I let the children play 4v4-5v5 small sided games at the end of training for about 20 minutes. I pretty much let them play, as did their coach. We made little comments to the players as the games endured but never stopped the game. During this time, a parent, while having good intentions, was shouting instructions to his child. When asked to refrain from yelling or giving instruction, the parent indicated that he was making sure his child was learning. This is a common occurrence that can be overcome by increased education and communication.

Play Dates vs Games as a Methodology to Promote Unstructured Play

US Youth Soccer's Directors of Coaching throughout the country recently revisited our “Position Statements.” One of these position statements is to encourage recreation clubs throughout the country to adopt more “play dates” vs. a traditional league scheduling approach. I strongly believe in the benefits of the “Play Date” approach and believe that we should offer the opportunities of this format to our youngest player across the state. The “Play Date” approach basically consists of players coming together on a day/night to receive training from a group of certified (educated) coaches. These are, or should be, coaches that have gone through the National Youth License and have a background in both soccer and youth development. These groups of coaches lead the activities for a period of time and then allow the kids to break off and play their small sided game.

Those who are opposed to a more unstructured environment usually cite reasons such as: kids want to be on teams (which they do), need uniforms, etc. However, the “Play Date” approach can still allow for elements of the team environment. Kids can still play on set teams, have uniforms and sponsors. On a “Play Date” all kids would have equal opportunity to experience consistent training from a certified coach. After the age-appropriate training activities players go with a “team” and a “coach” to play a small sided game.

The small sided game should have very minimal coaching allowing the players to “figure things out” while a parent volunteer monitors the game in a less stressful environment for all. The whole training can be done in an hour and every player receives an age appropriate lesson by educated coaches that allows kids to not only play at soccer but play soccer!

Myth: Grade-school travel teams identify future stars.

Truth: They reward the early bloomers, leaving the rest behind.

Why the Rush?

Only in America are we in such a rush to push our kids into a busy schedule of structured practices, lessons and extra-curricular activities. This is also true for soccer. In a recent conversation, a Director of Coaching for a club relayed that

younger players are becoming more “mature.” Likewise, there are more parents who have had a background in playing soccer. For these reasons, there are some clubs who believe they need to offer kids who are seven or eight-years-old something more “competitive” than a recreational soccer environment.

While there is no question that children are more “advanced,” per say, due to earlier exposure to technology and education, the question is do these kids really understand how to “play” and/or to think on their own? If we organize them into teams, condition them into roles and answer all the questions, how will they learn to think on their own? This is a question that extends beyond soccer. For example, schools today teach “passing the test” to ensure high scores on standardized tests which translates to school funding. In some areas, this means recess is being cut, thereby leaving out a very important part of a child’s normal development. By organizing too soon and applying competitive pressure so early in life, we may be hampering our children’s natural ability to creatively problem-solve and self-organize.

In soccer, players from free play countries like Brazil, Argentina, France, and African nations are more advanced than players from more restrictive environments such as the USA. These players grow up in an environment where they see the game, live and breathe it, and play largely unorganized as youth. If there is organization, it is done by certified coaches.

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Research has shown that it takes approximately 10,000 hours to develop an “elite” athlete vs. 30,000-40,000 hours to break a bad habit or technique. This is why it is important that the emphasis should be on playing rather than competing at young ages.

Unfortunately in America, adults often organize the youngest of players to win games – keeping two players back, constantly yelling instructions, reinforcing habits in players that may not serve them well at higher levels and focusing on the outcome rather than the process.

What is the magical age to have kids start playing select/travel soccer? In a survey of college coaches conducted five years ago, the youngest age suggested was 11 with the oldest being 14. These are college coaches who see the end result and whose jobs are dependent on the outcome.

Soccer is a motor skill. It just takes time! The average age player at the 2006 World Cup was 27 years 4 months. In other words, that is when they peak! Yet there is a fear that if we don’t start kids playing “competitively,” they will be behind. Nothing can be farther than the truth.

Sure, there is the Tiger Woods syndrome. Keep in mind though that in golf, you hit one object and it isn’t moving! There are many athletes who get late starts, play multiple sports throughout their childhood and still develop into an “elite” athlete. Farrey’s book offers these examples:

- Retired tight end Kellen Winslow began playing football in 12th grade
- Current tight end Tony Gonzalez was also a basketball player in college
- Cynthia Cooper started basketball at the age of 16
- Tim Duncan was a competitive swimmer for most of his youth
- Andy Roddick played basketball through high school
- Roger Federer played soccer into his early teenage years

Then, there is yours truly who didn’t even think of kicking a ball until my dad dragged me to an Indiana University soccer coaching clinic at the YMCA when I was in fifth grade. I played recreationally until 8th grade when the late Dr. Allen Katner offered me a spot to play on a travel team. For some reason I didn’t make this book’s list, but I did ok in the sport, trading my abilities for a college education.

How can we best serve not only the early bloomers, but the late bloomers and the multi-sport athletes as well?

One idea for clubs who do wish to offer some of their U8 players a different opportunity is to register them as recreation plus players. This “rec +” designation allows clubs to contact other clubs nearby (within 30 minutes of each other) to arrange some interclub 4v4 games and prepare players for the U9/U10 Academy environment.

Academy – The Good

- Inclusiveness and Tryout Anxiety Reduction – Clubs are keeping more players rather than cutting them at such a young age. In the previous system, we were cutting kids way too early. How are we to know how good they can become? We can’t.

- Referee Training – Academy dates frequently serve as an opportunity for young referees to officiate a game under the tutelage of more experienced referee. It is vital that we have a training ground for these youngest of referees to experience and officiate a “travel” level game.
- Coach Training – We are seeing an influx of young coaches who played the game as youth, return to the game as coaches. By reducing the emphasis on “winning,” the Academy encourages an improved training environment for these coaches.
- Improved Sideline Behavior – The sideline behavior from what I have both seen and heard has improved drastically. This is due to a terrific effort made by clubs to educate parents and coaches about the proper developmental soccer environment.
- Club Cooperation – Clubs are working together to ensure balanced, and therefore, more competitive games.

Academy – Areas for Improvement

- Education – Parent/adult education is still needed. Enough said.
- Club Communication – Sometimes clubs are simply NOT on the same page. There are some clubs whose philosophy is to be successful by coaching to win the game. As a result they go against the spirit of the Academy by stacking the teams. Some clubs will not move kids from one field to another in hopes of balancing out the game. This makes it less fun for the kids. No one wins with a lopsided match.
- Kicks For Cancer – While never mandatory, some clubs wanted to participate while others did not which created in confusion on some Academy dates. Clubs who did participate in this program did a great job and hopefully, their kids gained a better sense of citizenship.
- Lopsided Matches – Because clubs have different missions, newer travel clubs and clubs who had multiple teams suffered due to lopsided scores. Some clubs made a very conscientious attempt to keep the game as balanced and competitive as possible, but the blowouts became more and more frequent. Lop-sided games can indirectly lead to recruiting, as parents sometimes equate a successful club with the higher score.
- Two Games per Day – The day is simply too long for these kids. The original purpose for multi-game play dates was to implement the Kicks For Cancer program, shorten the season to four Saturdays, leave Sundays open for family time, and hopefully give players more opportunity to “train” as opposed to “playing” matches. Due to the overwhelming amount of teams involved in the Academy, the idea of skipping a weekend so that the players would have a 1:4 match-training ratio didn’t occur.
 - The NISL league evaluated an alternate schedule of three 30-minute “mini-matches.” This approach shortened the overall day and also ended lopsided matches sooner. The game would stop, and the kids (who usually forget the result sooner than adults) were regrouped to play another match. This format also promoted an attacking soccer approach, hopefully improving attacking and defending qualities in players.
- U8 Academies – Some clubs organized U8 teams because they felt compelled to give their kids a “head start” to avoid losing members.

Myth: Children want to win.

Truth: They do, but it means far more to adults.

A few years ago, Indiana Youth Soccer implemented no standings and no score reporting for the U9-U10 age groups in league and tournament play. Soccer is much different than other sports. We, unfortunately, live in a society that is results-driven, but how can we ask kids to perform to win before they have even learned how to play?

Remember when parents were welcome to attend but were blessedly absent? If people want a return to championships at tournaments and league play for 9 and 10 year olds, then here is a radical solution: Put all of the adults (including the coaches, but excluding grandparents who generally understand what youth sports are all about) 30-50 yards away from the field, so they can still watch their child play. Children can still see their parents boast in approval. Let the kids play with a crew of referees and let them determine the outcome! How about that for “old-school”?

Remember when pride still mattered as a kid? Remember when one street would play against another street in baseball, not just for the outcome but for pure pleasure. Remember who was in charge of those games? We were! The “street” mentality is, unfortunately, long gone, but we can remove the emphasis of outcome-driven adults who believe their whole self-worth is determined by whether or not a victory is achieved. Sure, kids love to win, but they also love to simply compete!

Watch a child about 15-20 minutes after they play a game. Win, lose or draw, they are either running around on the playground and/or going to something else. They are in the NOW moment and rarely look at the season’s schedule to guess whether or not they will win or lose a game. That is what the adults do. Kids only dwell on getting beat after the PGA (Post Game Analysis) talk in the mini-van on the way home. For the most part, kids at this age will try hard whether there is a trophy on the line or not. If there is a goal on both ends, then “game on!”

Remember why children participate in sports in the first place. When children are allowed to create their own games, these are their priorities:

1. Action, especially action leading to scoring
2. Personal involvement in the action
3. Challenging and exciting experiences
4. Reaffirming friendships with their peers

Source: Game On

The final myth is not one that is in the book, per say, but throughout the book, Farrey does mention the impact of so many games on young children throughout a season. This is one myth that I, along with many club directors of coaching, have to address with members.

Myth: We have to play more matches year round or we will lose our edge.

Truth: We need to give them a break for a period of time.

At the ages of 11-18, we really need to start practicing the right number of matches for our players. Whenever I do an ODP training session, I am amazed at the number of players that are coming injured, have knee braces on, etc. at this age. Players at this age shouldn't have to have knee braces! Most of them are on either the early or late end of maturation; therefore, their bodies are going through many changes.

Because some clubs give year-long schedules with a limited break, more players are either burning out or have overuse injuries. The book *A Nation of Wimps* offers this statistic: In 2003, the latest year for which national data are available, more than 3.5 million overuse injuries in children were treated in the United States, out of approximately 35 million children from six to twenty-one who participate in team sports. It later goes on to state, "It's not enough that they play on a school team, two travel teams, and go to four camps for their sport in the summer," said one family sports medicine expert. "They have private instructors for that one sport that they see twice a week. Then their parents get them out to practice in the backyard at night" (Marano, 33).

College coaches are not looking for U8 champions or elite teams ranked in the top five of an online soccer database. Instead, they are looking for players who developed in a supportive, creative and healthy environment that fosters skill and love for the game. For example, Georgia Tech's basketball coach Paul Hewitt asks his recruits if they play another sport. There are valuable lessons to be learned by playing and trying different sports and not specializing in just one. There is a saying that the game is the best teacher, but if kids don't get a chance to learn from their mistakes and practice technically and tactically, they will not get better from just playing match after match. It would be like a teacher giving his/her students test after test without teaching them in between.

We need to embrace US Soccer's best practices suggestion to limit the number of matches and have more training in between. US Soccer's best practices document suggestion is to have 2-3 trainings per one match. The maximum number of matches should be no more than 30 in a calendar year.

"French children typically play no more than one game a week, and the seasons aren't endless. Even as high as the U13 level, most club teams play 30 or 35 games a year, max. (Farrey, 94).

In *Game On*, the author tells the story of Thierry Henry from France who trained at Clairefontaine (their national training center) at age 13. During that time, there was little emphasis on building speed, strength, and other physical traits but technique, technique, technique. If he tried something new, he wasn't punished. He was encouraged to experiment with the ball and perfect his technique. There were no matches during his two-year residency. It is also important to note that in Europe and other countries, most children do not have to pay to play organized sports. The other element is that some, if not all, play with hopes of being signed to a professional contract. We are not there....yet.

Tournament Play

Tournaments were originally created to provide outside competition in an environment where travel soccer teams were the exception, rather than a rule. In today's economy, where clubs are trying to hire coaches, buy goals and equipment, create scholarship funds for underprivileged youth and ensure the health and safety of players, a tournament is a great solution for fundraising. More and more clubs are offering tournaments to help raise money for their organization. An unintended consequence of the increased availability of tournament play is that teams are participating in more tournaments which means players are playing more games in a shorter amount of time.

The Indiana Youth Soccer experimented with an alternate tournament format during our ODP Friendly weekend. The teams played only one shortened match per day with optional technical sessions and "fun" activities like soccer tennis.

The event was well-received as teams got the opportunity to meet outside, quality competition without the emphasis on outcome. This format also encouraged coaches to try new lineups and gave players different opportunities on the field. A similar shortened game format could be applied to club tournaments so that the kids are playing the appropriate number of minutes and not an inappropriate number of matches. For example, a tournament could offer three 30-minute mini-matches in one day. With this format, teams would have the opportunity to play against more clubs, while still working towards a tournament championship.

Example: A tournament would offer four brackets of five teams each. Each team in a bracket would match up for a 30 minute mini-match, playing two games on Saturday and two games on Sunday. The team finishing on top would then play a 45 minute match for the championship. This is a very radical solution but would limit the number of minutes of play, hopefully helping to lessen overuse injuries. It would also promote attacking soccer, as teams would have to find ways to score rather than being scored upon. An altered tournament format as suggested above might be one way to give the players a more manageable schedule, allowing breaks for recovery and reducing stress and overuse injuries.

Overcoming the Myths with Education & Communication

Together, we can create a better environment for youth soccer. Our children deserve a proper foundation in soccer and life, and we all must work together to educate and communicate the best practices for our youth. Continue the good work everybody! Thanks for reading!

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