

PLAYERS FIRST

The Call came one day to a state soccer office. It was the coach of a State Cup winner in the Under-14 age group. He complained that none of his players had been selected for the state's Olympic Development Team.

On and on he went about his team, until finally the person on the receiving end interrupted. "I've never seen your team play, but I can describe it for you. They pass brilliantly. They are always moving to get open. They use the give and go, back passes, long passes to change the point of attack ..." "Absolutely," says the coach, who then resumes with how his team does this, his team does that, emphasizing the teamwork and passing.

The coach of another Under-14 team took a team to the Cup semi-finals. Where they lost. When you watch this team play, it moves the ball like this: win the ball, beating the first defender with the first touch, dribble and beat a second opponent, pass, pass, beat someone, beat another, pass, pass, pass, beat another, pass, shot.

Both teams win lots of games, most in fact, at their age level. While one has come up short as a team this time, they have our bets for the long term. The reason: the coach of one team has only a team; the second team has players.

WHAT IS A "PLAYER"?

It takes more than knowing how to pass, move and work as part of a team. A Player, in our definition, is first an individual with a dynamic first touch, who is poised and creative with a ball, capable of holding it under pressure and confident in the ability to take on and beat an opponent in a one-on-one situation. Facing a defender, a Player always has this choice: "I can beat you myself or I can beat you using a teammate." This Player's one-dimensional peer can only pass. Defending against a team of one-way players is easy. Defending against a team of Players will make you crazy.

"I THOUGHT THIS WAS A TEAM SPORT"

It is and, to those of us who grew up playing team sports, this emphasis on individualism and creativity seems almost "un-American." Wasn't 'ball hog' among the worst names you and your friends used? Please understand, we do not want kids playing 1 v 11. What we do advocate is developing players who *could* play 1 v 11 (and might be inclined to try!), but who also recognize when a pass is the better choice. What's important is that **the player must have the skills that allow that choice.**

WHY "PLAYERS FIRST?"

"Players first, then team" is a conscious choice, even though we know that this may be at some initial cost to team success (particularly if success is measured only in the won-loss column.) We make the choice for several reasons:

> Developmentally, children are more suited to individual play than team play at the younger ages. Teamwork is difficult for kids until they reach an age where the peer group becomes important. And it is impossible without the ability to control and pass a ball.

> Developing individual skills is tougher for older kids. It can be done, but requires hours and hours of very basic practice which older players will find tedious. Starting younger, this practice can be spread over a longer time.

> In our experience, it is far easier to teach the dribbler to pass than to teach the passer to take someone on. It's difficult to "retrofit" even a 12 year old who has learned only the passing side of the game and whose other skills are poor.

> It allows every player to be in control of the game. It has been said that in soccer every player is a quarterback. The player who can play with poise and confidence in 1v1 situations is truly in command when he has the ball.

> It works. Clubs that have adopted this philosophy of player development (mandating that 75% of training through U14 be devoted to developing skills) have seen huge increases in the number of players chosen for Olympic Development Teams and considerable team success in league and tournament play.

IT ALLOWS TEAMWORK TO HAPPEN

Individual creative play is the key to successful teamwork in soccer. The player who takes on and beats an opponent now has put her team at a numerical advantage as they go for goal. The defending team must react to its disadvantage. The next defender, suddenly outnumbered, must make a choice. Challenge the dribbler and the pass is open. Deny the pass and the dribbler continues to carry the ball forward. It's called "forcing the defender to make the wrong choice" (where either choice is wrong!) The creative Player puts defenders into positions where they must continually make those no-win choices.

COACHES: BE PATIENT, BE PERSISTENT

And be happy when your players show poise, show confidence, show creativity, show some flair with the ball. Create an environment where one-on-one is always allowed, is usually encouraged, and is frequently demanded. Your players will dribble too much at first, but suppress the "pass the ball" response from your sideline. Once they have the "take-on mentality", you can begin to develop the options they have using their teammates.

Like the second of those teams mentioned before, your teamwork may come up short at first. In time, your players will learn to recognize and make the better choices. Then the team becomes unstoppable. The coach of that second team placed five players on her state's Olympic Development Team. She has developed *Players* with the abilities and characteristics that will allow them to go anywhere and play well for anyone. Her team's time will come.