

Youth Soccer in America - How do we measure success?

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From the US Youth Soccer Technical Department – For weekly content from the US Youth Soccer Technical Department, check out their blog at www.USYouthSoccer.com/Blog

"There are already a multitude of articles saying that winning and losing are not the correct measures of success in youth soccer, instead we should measure the development of the players. OK, perfect. The next obvious follow-up question then is, 'How do we measure the development of a single player?' If US Youth Soccer can answer this question in a way that is helpful to committed coaches and understandable to parents with limited playing experience (and paying the money to have their kids involved), they may be able to turn this overly organized youth soccer system of ours into a much more effective development program."

- Cary McCormick, Arlington, Va.

Indeed how do we measure player development?

Too often in America, a professional sport model is used in measuring youth sports success. Youth soccer is not immune to this misapplied standard. For soccer the situation is made worse by a desire of many adults to use measuring tools from other sports. In fact, it is maddening to many adults that soccer is not as black and white as with some sports in judging successful play. Many team sports played in our nation are statistically driven and coach centered.

Soccer is neither of those!

Indeed just like the Laws of the Game our sport has many shades of grey within it. As a player centered sport some coaches become disillusioned as they learn that they are the 'guide on the side' and not the 'sage on the stage'. Too many soccer coaches bring a military focused attitude to the youth sport environment. This coach-centered perspective has been handed down to us from other sports and coaching styles of past generations.

In many sports the coach makes crucial decisions during the competition. In soccer players make the primary decisions during the match; the coach's decisions are of secondary importance. Ego-centric personalities will find coaching soccer troublesome. The other significant group of adults at a youth soccer match is parents. They too often have their view of the match colored by the professional model and by a view of "coaching" that is portrayed in the media. Although it is changing, the majority of parents watching their kids play soccer have never played the game. In fact the statistics show that most of today's parents never played any team sport. So their only exposure on how to measure sporting success is gleaned from the sports media. The sports media predominately report on adult teams at the college and professional levels. These adult measurements of team performance should not and cannot be applied to youth sports.

The analogy can be made to a youngster's academic development in preparation for work in the adult business world. While the child is in primary and secondary school, the corporate world measurements of success are not applied. Those business assessments are not yet appropriate because the school-aged student does not yet have the tools to compete in the adult business environment. The knowledge and skills to be a competitor in business are still being taught and learned. This holds true in soccer as well!

Soccer is an adult game designed by adults for adults to play. Adults enjoy the game so much that they have shared it with their children. Yet adults make errors when we bring our adult performance and outcome based thinking into the developing player's world.

Alright fine you say. So how do we measure success? How do parents know if the team coach is doing a good job of teaching soccer to the players? How does the novice coach know if the kids are growing within the game?

As a way to measure success, let's look at the facts provided a by a study by the Youth Sports Institute, on what players want from their sports experience.

TRUTHS about children and sports

- Fun is pivotal - if it's not *fun*, young people won't play a sport
- Skill development is a crucial aspect of fun - it is more important than winning even among the best athletes
- The most rewarding challenges of sports are those that lead to self-knowledge
- Intrinsic rewards (self-knowledge that grows out of self-competition) are more important in creating lifetime athletes than extrinsic rewards are (victory or attention from others)¹

During childhood allow the kids to have a good time playing the game while instilling the passion to love playing soccer on their own. Only a passion for the game can lead to success.

"Success is something players take ownership of and in time it becomes personally meaningful. Success is a process, not a product. The process of doing one's best is the key to success. The determining criterion of success is whether a player gave his or her best that day. Doing one's best is the most important statement a player can make about the importance of an activity and the meaning it has. With years of experience comes self-knowledge and self-awareness. So players learn over time what it means to do your best, to give 100%."²

"Winning isn't everything, but trying to is!" – Rainer Martens, sports psychologist

Motives for Participation in Youth Sport

Reasons for Participating in Non-school Sports (study of 3,900 7 to 12 graders)

Boys

1. To have fun
2. To do something I'm good at
3. To improve my skills
4. For the excitement of competition
5. To stay in shape
6. For the challenge of competition
7. To get exercise
8. To learn new skills
9. To play as part of a team
10. To go to a higher level of competition

Girls

1. To have fun
2. To stay in shape
3. To get exercise
4. To improve my skills
5. To do something I am good at
6. To learn new skills
7. For the excitement of competition
8. To play as part of a team
9. To make new friends
10. For the challenge of competition³

Truths & Motives for Participation

1. Have fun and to enjoy participating in sport.
2. Learn new skills and to improve on existing sports skills.
3. Become physically fit and to enjoy good health
4. Enjoy the challenge and excitement of sports participation and competition.
5. Enjoy a team atmosphere and to be with friends.⁴

Suggestions for Parents

- Remember the *truths* and talk to your children with them in mind. After a game, ask questions about *fun, skill improvement, learning experiences* and *having a good time with friends*.
- See yourself as part of the team and supportive of the coach; avoid setting up a conflict in your child's mind between his or her parents and coaches. If you want to affect the coaching, volunteer to help.
- Develop perspective: remember what you could do at your children's ages; don't judge them by what you can do now. Kids will not become great players overnight.
- Develop an understanding of what your children want from sports—not all children want the same things. Determine if they want to be involved at all.

Basic Urges of Children

- Movement
- Success and Approval
- Peer Acceptance & Social Competence
- Cooperation & Competition
- Physical Fitness & Attractiveness
- Adventure
- Creative Satisfaction
- Rhythmic Expression
- To Know 5

Note: Winning alone is not a motive for participation by boys and girls.

"We are asking our players to compete before they have learned how to play."

-Jay Miller, U.S. U17 Men's National Team coach 2001

In general the benefits of youth sports for children include character building, humility in winning, leadership growth opportunities, cooperative skills, social skills and dealing with obstacles, losing and competition. We employ soccer to develop well adjusted, good citizens.

Measurements of Success in Youth Soccer

Short-Term

- Fun - Do the players smile and laugh? Do the players look forward to playing? The first question from the player's family should be, "Did you have fun today?"
- Fair Play - Does a player demonstrate a sense of sportsmanship through words and actions?
- Laws of the Game - Do the players know and follow the rules of soccer?
- Health and Fitness - Are the players physically fit enough to meet the fitness demands of the game? Are they developing good nutrition and hydration habits befitting an athlete?
- Friendships - Are the players creating new friends within the team and with players from other teams?
- Skills - Are the players demonstrating a growing number of ball skills and are they gradually becoming more proficient in those skills?

Long-Term

- Commitment - How do the players answer when asked at the end of a game, "Did you try your best?"
- Roles in the Team - More important than learning a position, are the players learning about positioning? Knowing where the right back or the center forward spot is on the field is important, yet learning how to move tactically within the game is far more important. Do all of the players get exposed to playing all of the positions?
- Leadership - Are players being given the opportunity to take on leadership roles and responsibilities? Are the coaches and team managers teaching leadership?

- Tactics - Are the players experimenting with new tactics in matches? The coaches must teach new tactics to the players in training sessions and then allow them to try out the tactics in a match, regardless of how that might affect the outcome!
- Retention - Do the players come back year after year?

Retention is recognized as a short term measure of success in youth soccer and developing well adjusted citizens is another long term measure of success in youth sports. In a 2007 US Youth Soccer survey 96 percent of parents responded that one of the benefits they desire for youth soccer to provide to their child is fun. 97 percent of the parents surveyed feel the reason their child participates in youth soccer is fun.

What Parents Can Do

- Talk positively with their children before and after activities
- Supply transportation
- Assist with supervision
- Officiate games
- Help with administration
- Assist with the organization of special events

Statistics, win-loss-tie records, goals for/goals against, saves, number of corner kicks and so on are straight forward ways to measure what happened in a game. Those unfamiliar with soccer find the use of those measurements comforting as they help them define a sport they find confusing. Yet those measurements fail to show the complete picture of a random skill, open-ended, transitional sport with no timeouts. There is an immeasurable organized chaos factor in soccer.

How can one measure or quantify the unexpected 60 yard dribble and goal of Diego Maradona in the 1986 World Cup? What measurement of success can explain how some player, somewhere in the world, decades ago, spontaneously did a bicycle kick in a match making that move a part of soccer from then on?

The bottom line is that statistics in soccer are largely meaningless. From this thought springs the reality that soccer perhaps is the cruelest of team sports. It may be the only team sport where a team could have the majority of ball possession, outshoot the other team and still lose the match. If you have played soccer long enough you have been the team that was much better than the opposition and lost. You have also been the team that was outplayed by the opposition and won. The win-loss record does not accurately show how the game was played, how the players performed or how well the coach prepared the team to play the game.

Scientific research has concluded that it takes eight-to-twelve years of training for a talented player to reach elite levels. This is called the 10-year or 10,000 hour rule, which translates to slightly more than three hours of practice daily for ten years (Ericsson, et al., 1993; Ericsson and Charness, 1994, Bloom, 1985, Salmela et al., 1998). Unfortunately, parents and coaches in many sports still approach training with an attitude best characterized as "peaking by Friday," where a short-term approach is taken to training and performance with an over-emphasis on immediate results. We now know that a long-term commitment to practice and training is required to produce elite players in all sports.

Sports can be classified as early specialization or late specialization sports. Late specialization sports, including athletics, combative sports, cycling, racquet sports, rowing and all team sports require a generalized approach to early training. For these sports, the emphasis during the first two phases of training should be on the development of general motor and technical-tactical skills.

Late Specialization Model

Stage 1 – Fundamental Stage

Age: 6-9 years

Objective: Learn all fundamental movement skills (build overall motor skills)

Stage 2 – Learning to Train Stage

Age: 8-12 years

Objective: Learn all fundamental soccer skills (build overall sports skills)

Stage 3 – Training to Train Stage

Age: 11-16 years

Objectives: Build the aerobic base, build strength towards the end of the phase and further develop sport-specific skills (build the "engine" and consolidate soccer specific skills)

Stage 4 – Training to Compete Stage

Age: 15-18 years

Objectives: Optimize fitness preparation and sport, individual and position-specific skills as well as performance (optimize "engine", skills and performance)

Stage 5 – Training to Win Stage

Age: 17 years and older

Objectives: Maximize fitness preparation and sport, individual and position specific skills as well as performance (maximize "engine", skills and performance)

Stage 6 – Retirement/Retention Stage

Objectives: Retain players for coaching, administration, officials, etc.6

It is certainly the stance of US Youth Soccer to focus more on match performance than outcome; yet this is not to say that players should not strive to win. There's nothing wrong with winning! Trying to win is desirable and praiseworthy. It means trying your best. Indeed trying to play your best (match performance) often leads to winning. But not always! Remember the outcome of the game is not a reason why kids play! Players and coaches should diligently work to improve their performance. This is the drive for excellence as opposed to success.

Success does not breed success; it breeds failure. It is failure, which breeds success. If that advice seems patently absurd, think about the careers of many famous winners:

- **Babe Ruth** struck out 1,333 times. In between his strikeouts he hit 714 homeruns.
- **Martina Navratilova** lost 21 of her first 24 matches against archrival Chris Evert. She resolved to hit more freely on the big points and beat Evert thirty-nine out of their next 57 matches. No woman tennis pro has ever won as many matches or as many tournaments, including a record nine Wimbledon singles titles as Navratilova who retired from professional tennis at age 50.
- **Abraham Lincoln** failed twice in business and was defeated in six state and national elections before being elected president of the United States.
- **Michael Jordan** was cut from his junior high school basketball team, before becoming a sports icon.
- **Theodor S. Geisel** wrote a children's book that was rejected by 23 publishers. The 24 publisher sold six million copies of it –the first Dr. Seuss book – and that book and its successors are still staples in every child's library.

Consider the times when you tried to learn a new game or sport. Did you get it perfect the first day? Not likely. A former teammate once told me that he did get one sport right the first time he tried it. We asked what he meant and he said, "It was the first day of snow skiing classes. I skied all day long and I didn't fall down once. I was so elated; I felt so good. So I skied up to the ski instructor, and I told him of my great day. You know what the ski instructor said? He told me, 'Personally I think you had a lousy day.' I was stunned. 'What do you mean lousy day? I thought the objective was to stand up on these boards, not fall down.' The ski instructor looked me straight in the eye and replied, 'Sir, if you're not falling down, you're not learning.'"

The ski instructor understood that if you can stand up on your skis all day long the first time out, you're doing only what you already know how to do, not pushing yourself to try anything new or difficult.

If you always play it safe you aren't going to improve yourself because when you try to do something you don't know how to do, you'll fall down. That's guaranteed! Nothing is ever done perfectly the first time someone tries it – not in business, not in school and most certainly not in soccer. The point isn't to promote failure for failure's sake, of course. We don't advocate for a moment that failure ought to be the objective of any endeavor. Instead, we advocate learning. We want American players to be leaders and not look for someone to blame when mistakes are made while expanding their soccer horizons. Instead ask, "What can be learned from the experience?"

Trying new ball skills or new tactics, a new set play or a new formation will cause errors during matches. Yet if the players do not feel they are allowed to try out these new talents in a match, when will those talents become a part of their game? The sounds coming from the spectators at a youth match should be cheers for when a player tries something new. Parents can measure their child's success in soccer by the improving athletic ability of their child, by the growing confidence and self-reliance of the player, by the emergence of refined ball skills, by the opportunity afforded by the coach to play in different positions on the team, by the taking on of leadership and responsibility, by the demonstration of fair play and by the smiles. The parents will know that there is a chance for success when they see the players and coaches striving for excellence!

"There are many people, particularly in sports who think that success and excellence is the same thing and they are not the same thing. Excellence is something that is lasting and dependable and largely within a person's control. In contrast, success is perishable and is often outside our control... If you strive for excellence, you will probably be successful eventually... people who put excellence in first place have the patience to end up with success... An additional burden for the victim of the success mentality is that he is threatened by the success of others and resents real excellence. In contrast, the person fascinated by quality is excited when he sees it in others."

- Joe Paterno – Penn State football coach – 1990

Striving to improve individual, group and team performance is more important at the youth level than the outcome. Simultaneously players should play to win. Coaches should teach and develop the players as they learn how to win. Parents should support the players and coaches. Intrinsic success is by its nature more difficult to measure than extrinsic success. A trophy is more tangible to an adult than the exhilaration a child feels while playing soccer. The final measure of success for parents of their child's soccer experience will require a good deal of patience from the adults. That measurement is the free choice of the child to stay in the game!

In soccer circles it is agreed that four groups of adults support the youth game. Parents, coaches, administrators and referees have an equal obligation to the players. That obligation is to live by the vision you have just read!

"We must work to create an environment to develop the American player's growth and development! In the past we have tried to train the Dutch way, the Brazilian way, etc. We can and will together create the finest players in the world if we understand the growth, development and specific characteristics of our youth. Distributing the body of information from the "Y" License is the first step."

- Dr. Thomas Fleck

In matters of style, swim with the current. In matters of principle, stand like a rock.

Mission Statement

US Youth Soccer is a non-profit and educational organization whose mission is to foster the physical, mental and emotional growth and development of America's youth through the sport of soccer at all levels of age and competition.

Sources

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