Youth Soccer Coach Wanted: Only Those with Patience and Perseverance Need Apply

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Following are excerpts from an article in The Scientific American by Phillip E. Ross, dated July 24, 2006, entitled The Expert Mind. The article focused upon studies of the mental processes of chess grandmasters and clues to how people become experts in other fields as well. These excerpts can help us address some important points concerning the development of young soccer players in America.

"**Simon coined a psychological law of his own, the 10-year rule, which states that it takes approximately a decade of heavy labor to master any field."**

The 10-year rule, or 10,000 hours rule, can be applied as easily to soccer as to chess. Each soccer game involves myriad of decisions, technical and physical challenges in an ever-changing environment, among and against other players of varying abilities, and in different stages of physical exhaustion. More than any other team sport, the game takes on the characteristics of those playing it, and requires development in all of the areas above: mental, physical, technical and social.

Kids develop at different rates in all of these areas. Both the game and the players themselves are complex. To help them fully develop their potential as players, we must allow them to unlock in numerous stages the many aspects of the game. As philosophers and numerous experts studying human development throughout many generations have discovered, experiencing, doing, is necessary for perceptual change to occur (Jean Jacques Rousseau—1712-1778), and learning and growth and development owe their efficiency to slow and inefficient experiencing that has gone on before (Dr. John Lawther).

It is the "slow and inefficient experiencing" that is captured by the 10-year rule concept. When one combines this truth with the complexity (continual decisions in a constantly changing environment) of a soccer game, it becomes apparent that we must allow and provide players time and opportunity to experiment over a long period of time, rather than seeking to accelerate their play by focusing primarily on the outcome of their games.

"Teachers in sports, music and other fields tend to believe that talent matters and that they know it when they see it. In fact, they appear to be confusing ability with precocity."

Sports history is rife with stories of the experts overlooking players who later, by sheer dint of their own will, became great athletes. In basketball, Michael Jordan was dropped from his high school basketball team as a sophomore. In soccer, Johan Cruyff did not draw attention until after his teen years. In fact, across the board, those trying to predict who will be the future stars have a dismal record. For example, studies in England have shown that less than eight percent of the players picked by the experts to play professional soccer, even at age 18, ever made the grade as day-to-day professional players. With this kind of record, it is important that we recognize that we must pour our time, resources and efforts into a much larger pool of players, and not restrict our focus to those we think have "talent" at the early ages.

The various stages of technical, mental, physical and social development do not necessarily coincide within one individual, let alone in a team of individuals. Thus, while certain physically precocious 12 or 13 year olds might be able to outrun others and win games because of their speed, it would be a mistake to attempt to predict future success in the sport based upon this one aspect and stage of development. Worse, it would be foolish to try to define what successful soccer players look like, or try to select "elite" players, based upon their ability to win games because of their precocious development in one or a few areas.

Yet, this is precisely what we do in the United States. Instead of allowing more players to play in environments that require more varied ways than just speed or size to solve game-like problems, we tend to select out those players we deem to be "elite" at too young an age, and then reinforce the use of the precocious attributes they may possess, by putting them on teams with other players who also may have one or a few precocious attributes.

What the 10-year rule should teach us is that more, rather than selected fewer, young players should be exposed to training and playing together. They should be encouraged through smaller field sizes and smaller numbers per side to develop more varied ways to solve the problems the game presents, as well as to develop better technical ability by touching the ball more in game-like situations.

"Ericsson argues that what matters is not experience per se but "effortful study," which entails continually tackling challenges that lie just beyond one's competence. It is interesting to note that time spent playing chess, even in tournaments, appears to contribute less than such study to a player's progress; the main training value of such games is to point up weaknesses for future study."

This confirms the point that it is primarily through training that players learn, not in match or tournament play. Yet, how many youth coaches, as a "training tool" across the country, load up their schedules with pre-season and mid-season tournaments and multiple scrimmages.

Players must be given plenty of opportunities to experiment and fail; to creatively solve problems in ways that are uniquely suited to their temperaments and abilities. They can only do this to a very limited extent in games. The consequences of a failed experiment in a game cause most players to do only what they think will succeed. If they do experiment and fail, there is a great likelihood that they will be sitting on the bench and not playing. As coaches and parents, we must allow time and opportunity for this experimentation to take place. We cannot be guided by wins and losses that really only provide a snapshot at a particular moment, and do not constitute purposeful training. Games, thus, are not the ends in themselves for younger players, they mainly show the weaknesses at that moment, and provide a guide as to what is needed in training. It is the training environment that should constitute most of exposure players have to the game: training and free play, without the specter of winning or losing affecting a season-long record. Consequently, a much larger percentage of our time should be spent in the training environment, rather than loading up the season with extra tournaments and scrimmages.

In today's youth soccer, there is virtually no nonadult organized free play. Kids don't play pick-up soccer the way many of us played various pickup sports in the neighborhood growing up. We may not realize it, but these types of games provide an integral ingredient to the development of top-class athletes. One of the things most of us forget about the neighborhood games we played growing up is that they were, indeed, competitive. Competing to win each day was extremely important, but once today was over, tomorrow was another day, with a new chance to compete, but without the accumulation of a record and standings in a division. This is predominantly what the 10-year environment must be. Opportunities to experiment, to succeed, to fail, to play and to compete.

Another key aspect to the freedom to experiment present in the neighborhood pickup games that we lack in organized youth soccer today is the challenge of playing with and against many different levels and types of players. As kids, when we picked up teams we did not just take the best five and play against the worst five. It wouldn't have been any fun. Instead, we always tried to create even teams, and if one team was winning handily, we would have mid-game

drafts to create more even teams. This gave each of us the opportunity to play with and against different players all the time, and we had to adjust, both individually and collectively, as to how we solved the problems of the game depending on who was on our team and against whom we were playing.

This ability to adjust and change the rhythm of play is something we lack in soccer played in the US. This development is all but lost in youth soccer today because the adults controlling youth soccer currently do exactly the opposite from kids playing pickup games. We try to put all the "best" players on one team so that we can win the division, etc. It is the result, not the development, that is paramount.

One of the key aspects to effective training is to continually provide players with different types of challenges that are just beyond their grasp. Because of the varied and free-flowing nature of the game of soccer, doing so in an efficient way requires constant innovation, but also a huge amount of time on the ball in game-like situations for the players. It is mainly through inefficient experimentation that players learn intrinsically and efficiently, and develop the instincts for the game that are activated once they are engaged in full play.

"They had to work things out for themselves, as did Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, and if they fall below today's masters in technique, they tower above them in creative power. The same comparison can be made between Newton and the typical newly minted Ph.D. in physics."

Of major interest for all soccer fans, and really fans of any sport, is to watch an incredibly talented player solve problems in ways no one else has tried before. Highlight reels are loaded with heretofore-unseen feats.

It is interesting to note that some of the greatest players of all time: Pele, Maradona, Cruyff, Platini, Bobby Charlton, etc. were not especially tall players, but each of them was electrifying to watch. Yet, because we tend to focus on the results of games, and selecting future stars out so early, our attention most often turns not to the player with a spark of something unique, but to the physical attributes of the precocious "early bloomers." While this may seem to reinforce collective efficiency at a given time, because of the nature of development, it ends up placing a premium on being bigger, faster and stronger, and eschewing the creative methods that less physically precocious athletes use to solve the problems of the game. In addition to bypassing many future potential stars, this focus also causes the "selected" players, in these very crucial years of their development, to learn to be successful by using a very rudimentary, direct style of play.

Soccer is a game played on a relatively large field. Arguments for years have centered on trying to make the field and the numbers per side smaller. Unfortunately, even though strides have been made in these areas, fields

generally tend to be too large for younger players. This often results in footraces to balls driven into spaces that are mostly won by the bigger, stronger and faster players. Thus, in the formative years when they could be put in smaller environments that require them to solve problems by developing many different tools, these players are rewarded for relying almost exclusively on their precocious attributes. Thus, they learn to be efficient, direct players, but don't develop the creativity to work out different problems of the game for themselves.

"Motivation appears to be a more important factor than innate ability in the development of expertise."

This statement is immensely important, because it affects both the type of players we develop, as well as whom we develop. First, as to the type of players we develop, by placing such importance on the physically precocious player, we motivate those players to perpetuate the physical and direct style and method of play. The premium placed on winning games and having successful seasons actually diminishes any motivation for players to experiment, or try to solve a problem through guile or indirect and crafty play, because of the penalty for failure.

Two crucial aspects of the game at the higher levels are patience and concentration. Because success based upon physical prowess often results in promoting direct play, players up through the mid-teen years often have never developed the patience or the concentration to hold possession of the ball beyond three or four passes, and certainly do not have the foresight to use the ball to draw opponents into certain parts of the field so that they can exploit the spaces they create. This sort of patience, concentration, guile, and using the ball as the ultimate decoy are not even considerations for most teenaged players. Most of it is due directly to what has been the reason they have been "selected" and the continual motivation throughout their earlier years: success through physical, direct and efficient play

The second issue of motivation is "who" is motivated to continue to play. It is well-known that in youth sports generally, approximately 70% of all athletes at age 12 stop playing sports altogether by age 13. Why? Most of it comes back to intrinsic motivation. Players entering their teen years are like all teenagers, they are beginning to search for their identities, and they also start to realize that they do have choices about how to spend their time. Why is there such a rise in "extreme" sports in this country? Could it be that these sports provide teens with a way to express themselves and solve problems in unique ways, without the constant prodding from adults to do things in certain, prescribed ways?

Another fact, of which many are unaware is that almost 75% of physically precocious athletes only develop into mediocre athletes. By focusing all of our "special" attention at ages 9-14 primarily on these players, we are missing many players, who, though they are not precocious, could ultimately be the great

athletes when they mature. Yet, currently, we provide them with very little motivation to continue, focusing most off our attention on those we deem to be "serious" players.

A 13 year old searching for affirmation as he or she begins to go through tremendous changes physically, mentally and emotionally, is generally not going to be motivated to continue in an area where he or she may not be successful because he or she has not grown enough yet, or may have grown too much too quickly and is temporarily awkward. Yet, instead of focusing on providing intrinsic motivation for more and more young teens to play, we adults do just the opposite, seek to select out those we perceive to be "elite" for success.

"A 1999 study of professional soccer players from several countries showed that they were much more likely than the general population to have been born at a time of year that would have dictated their enrollment in youth soccer leagues at ages older than the average. In their early years, these children would have enjoyed a substantial advantage in size and strength when playing soccer with their teammates."

The study referenced above showed that the vast majority of successful players were born in the first half of the year. Since we place such a premium on physical prowess between the ages of 9 and 14, this makes sense. It is at these ages that there is the greatest diversity in development. For a 14 year old, six months can make a huge difference in physical development. Every parent can relate to the fact that at these ages they have to constantly buy larger clothes and shoes. Most kids born in the second half of the calendar year, therefore, are at a distinct disadvantage having to compete with players born in the first half of the year.

Our current push to select Olympic Development Program players at younger ages exacerbates this problem. While we are legitimately searching for ways to increase our ultimate level of play, our efforts in this instance, hurt us more than helps us. We have decided that the solution lies in finding and identifying players at younger and younger ages. There is a Under-14 National Team, for which players must be chosen from Under-12 Regional teams. Thus, at the very ages when we should be expanding the pool of players for development, we are shrinking it, based upon the faulty premise that we can identify the future stars at 13 years old.

The issues for youth soccer development in this country are huge, but not insurmountable. To be sure, the solutions will require nothing less than a paradigm shift. All of the modern organization and viewpoints notwithstanding, the nature of how kids learn has not changed. If we truly want to develop players who can play on a world level, and a society that enjoys the game as much as the rest of the world, we have to recognize, embrace and utilize these truths.

Otherwise, we will perpetually be pushing the rock up the same hill, only to have it roll back down again.