

Aging players up

If a child is the best reader in the class, moving him out of the classroom and into the grade above is not typically considered. We might provide a more challenging book or focus on reading comprehension. So he can read, but does he remember *and* understand what he's reading like the kids in the grade above can? We might even create a separate reading group to give him some opportunities to challenge his reading. But parents and educators recognize that there is much more needed to ensure proper development than being a good reader to justify moving up a grade in school.

Why then do we too often feel the need to push our young children on the soccer field? When a child stands out as the best dribbler, most assertive or the one that seems to be involved in most of the action, the parents and/or coaches want to take this environment and make it more challenging. That in itself is a good thing but too often we think that the only way to do this is to move him out of his age bracket and age him up. The motives to *aging up* (e.g. placing a 7-year old on a 10-year old team) often include one or more of the following.

- Parent's thought/fear their child is not able to learn anymore at the current level
- Parent's and/or coach's belief that *more is better*
- Coach's inability to train varied skill levels within a training session
- Parent's thinking this will aid in nailing that college scholarship
- Coach's need to fill a roster

None of these talk about the child and his needs or desires. Why *do* children play soccer? I've gone to the experts themselves, the children, to find out! The two most common responses from 7 and 8 year olds was "*because it's fun*" and "*I want to play with my friends*". And while those reasons *were* important to the 9 and 10 year olds, I also got responses that were more goal oriented, like learning new moves and playing like the professional player they look up to.

There's no better training environment than the small-sided game....many more touches on the ball, opportunities to make decisions, transition, recovery, positional support.....continual snapshots of the large field in small, manageable doses.....by placing restrictions (or rules), the coach can create the opportunity to train a particular theme.....finishing, direct or indirect play, changing point of attack, combination play.....the list goes on. Rather than one large goal, the children have two small goals on the flanks to score in. You've now given them the setting to work on changing point of attack and positional support.....their vision, anticipation, ability to deceive. It's a much easier environment for the coach to observe and it's a much more difficult environment for players to *hide*. Strengths and weakness are glaring at you!

So while it is true that the small-sided game is *the* environment to train (at all levels) and most agree that players *can't hide*, I have found that it *can* give a false sense of certainty when using the 4v4 small-sided game to assess whether a *highly skilled* 7-year old should be aged up to a 10-year old team.

I had an advanced 7-year old in the U8 training group in my Youth Development Program. He stood out among the other children. He definitely had the most touches on the ball in the game because when he had the ball, he rarely lost it unless he took a shot or miss touched it. He never passed it because he didn't *need* to and he didn't *want* to. And why should he? While 7-year olds are starting to become aware of teammates, they are very well aware that if they pass it, they'll likely never get it back!

I allowed him to come play with the U10 group to give him exposure to the competition at that level and quite honestly, I wanted to be sure I was making a sound decision for this player's placement; keeping the player and his development at the core of the decision! What I found was very interesting. He was holding his own in the small-sided warm up activities but once we added numbers and a larger field, he was lost! The field opened up....there were more players on the field....more complex problems to solve.

Tactically, he was playing like the skilled U8 (aware of his teammates but will continue to keep the ball even when the game is telling him that a pass would be the best decision). Psychologically, he was lost because he was now not talking on the field; he was less confident with himself and his place on the team and field. This drop in self-confidence affected his technical abilities; his first touch was continually letting him down. Physically, he was lost because even players that weren't as skilled as him could outrun him or catch up; he never once was successful taking a player on with the dribble....and eventually he stopped trying. Rather than boldly going forward like he did in the U8 setting, he always looked to turn the ball back!

I *do* believe that a player needs to be challenged if they want to improve. The environment needs to provide a balance of challenge *and* success. If it's too easy all of the time, improvement will plateau and maybe even drop off (because the player gets bored or develops bad or unrealistic habits). But if it's too hard, important skills will never be given a chance to develop! Just being on a U10 team and *surviving* doesn't mean that the 7-year old player is improving at a faster pace than the 7-year old on a U8 team. In fact, I say that if we are looking at the whole player.....looking at all four components (technical, tactical, physical and psychological).....the players that are aged up are more likely to be developing at a slower rate than they *could* be.....or more specifically, particular skills that are critical to development as a player are being short-changed and may be jeopardized in the long run. Children learn technique through repetitive activities and these techniques turn into skill when they can be successfully performed in a game. If a 7-year old cannot outrun or out-muscle the average 10-year old, then they're not being given the proper environment to master the critical techniques of 'Running with the ball', 'Dribbling' and 'Turning, changing direction with the ball'.

If you ask the children, most would rather play with their own age bracket; with their friends! They're more comfortable in conversation and behavior which directly affects their confidence and self-esteem. So it comes back to the coach and parents. Coaches (and parents) need a solid understanding of how children think, behave and process information at various ages.....this is almost more important than knowing how to demonstrate moves and movement on the soccer field! Coaches need to understand how to create environments that provide challenge and success for all of their players regardless of where they fall on the spectrum.

I recently observed a U8 coach working diligently through an activity to get his players to improve their *team shape*. While he coached their every movement, he was feeling satisfied that they 'got it'. But once the game started, the infamous swarm ball took over. His frustration was evident as he froze the players and reminded them of their shape and how spreading out actually helped his teammates. One boy said, "I know" which seemed to irritate the coach. I'm guessing that the coach was thinking, "If you know, then why don't you do it?" Well, the answer to that is that while the average U8 player might *know* what to do, he's not able to *do* it yet. He's not there in his cognitive development! For a U8 game, coach can stand on the sideline at the midfield with a pile of soccer balls and as a ball is either scored or lost over the touch line, serve another ball in. This ensures continuous play but it also

allows the coach to take some control of the game where/when it's needed.....a ball can be distributed to a player that hasn't had many touches. Coach can distribute a ball to the skilled ball handler but send it in the air so he has to deal with a flighted ball. Or maybe chip it over his head so that when he receives it, his back is to goal. In that same game, we're able to balance challenge and success for *all* of the players.

There are certainly instances when a 7-year old should be aged up. But those are going to be rare. If he's really standing out from his peers, allow him to train with the 10-year old team to supplement his U8 training. But the truly effective, clever, creative coach will find a way to challenge a 7-year old within the U8 training group.

We all need to exercise patience. What's so bad about a player having an environment where he gets to be leader? Where he gets to be the hotshot, ball hog, go-to player? Where he gets to have the proper field size and speed of play to allow him to work his moves?! And maybe even be able to develop his *own* moves and unique style? Much of what we do and try in life has to do with our feelings of self-confidence....feeling safe in our environment to try new things. At these young ages, we need to focus on developing the whole player.....all four components.....each of them being vitally important....and above all, we need to help the player nurture a love and passion for the game!

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