

Did you win?

Over the past couple of months, I spent time attending coach education events; a licensing course in Chula Vista, California, the NSCAA convention in Baltimore and the USYSA workshop in Pittsburgh. While the classroom and field sessions are an invaluable venue to pick up new ideas and grow as a coach and educator, the opportunity to meet, re-connect and network with coaches from around the world has an even greater impact on me.

I had a particularly engaging exchange with a coach from Ohio. It was one of those seamless conversations that seemed to touch on every possible subject that falls under the umbrella of youth soccer. At one point, the notion of a “*must win*” U10 game came up. The give-and-take of the discussion flowed; no debate ensued as we were philosophically on the same page, but it has been on my mind ever since. Most leagues no longer publish standings for this age group and most tournaments are set up in festival format (“everyone wins”) but below the surface, little has changed. Winning the game (league or tournament) is still what’s driving most decisions with our teams. You see this if you stand on the sidelines of many of our U10 games. Go to a game but don’t watch the players; just listen to the spectators and coaches!

I had the opportunity to work with a U10 girls’ team from Chili, NY over the past couple of months. They have all the makings of a successful team ... spirit, athleticism and desire to learn. They have supportive parents and a coach that is eager to grow and open to feedback! In the time I spent with these girls, I didn’t make them better players. I *did* make some fixes to their play that with time and repetition should improve their game. Where I saw the real and almost immediate growth was with their coach!

A statement the head coach made to me early on, “*but it’s hard because there’s so much pressure to win*” when we talked about staying the course and sticking to training sessions focused on technical development, regardless of the outcome of the league games; using guided discovery rather than always telling the players what they should do ... her comment, dealing with pressures to win, is so real! I’ll just bet most of you have experienced this. I know *I* have. But who is that pressure coming from? Is it the parents? Opposing coach? Club Director? Is it a fear of losing players? Is it your own ego? And while there’s pressure, are you strong enough to stand up against it? Are you *willing* to fight it? If you work on connecting passes to bring the ball up the field in training, are you patient and allow them to try it in the game even when the pressure is on in your defensive third? If your players try to do this and they get stripped of the ball, do you scream at them (because they failed) or do you applaud the attempt to connect passes (the “intent”) and encourage them to try it again (knowing it might fail again)? If you’re yelling at them in the game, what are you *really* yelling at? That they tried to use their technique in the game during a pressure situation or that the attempt didn’t work? Should you ever hear a U10 coach or spectator make disapproving remarks during a game?

Can we teach players to compete, to *play to win*, without compromising development? Absolutely! In fact, we *should* be coaching our kids to compete, to *want* to win. But this cannot be confused with *coaching to win*. When we organize our U10 training sessions to win next Saturday’s game, we’re most likely sacrificing time spent working on critical technical skills. Setting up training sessions filled with competitive, small-sided activities will give players the environment to compete, make decisions and reinforce their technical and tactical skills. We apply our coaching fixes during the training sessions and use Saturday’s game to sit back and assess ... see what worked and see what didn’t. Be quiet and plan out your next training session based on what you see needs fixing!

When we focus on the final score to determine the overall performance of a U10 game, we're looking too big and not using the proper measurement to assess player and team development. If we look at the game as numerous opportunities (to take a defender on with the dribble or to move and change angles to support the player on the ball, e.g.), we stay focused on player development, maintain a competitive environment yet have something real to measure the success (or failure) of the game; *real* in terms of information that can directly relate to how effective training is, and what could be changed or enhanced. For example, you may have lost the game but if your team is becoming more effective at recognizing when and where to move to support the player with the ball, that lost game was worth it because in the end, your players are growing. I've seen too many U10 games decided based on who can simply blast the ball the farthest; more often than not, the score doesn't tell the full story.

It's not a skill unless it can be executed in the game; performed under pressure. If they don't have the environment to try, how do they ever acquire the skills required to reach higher levels? If we only play our best players in their strongest positions, we may win the game but we're not really progressing (as much as we could) in terms of player development. Thinking of a U10 game as an extension of training just might get your head around this approach, this point of view. Maintain the importance of *wanting* to win but keep the overall focus on the play that occurred during the game; reward intent and not result. Thinking this way, we also allow each child to succeed as they all have areas of individual strength and weakness.

I received this email from that U10 girls' coach I worked with; an update after their last game.

"Before our game on Saturday, I started off with telling the team that we were going to try something different today. They were going to coach themselves. I was going to watch, make substitutions and sometimes ask them questions when they came off the field. They were startled. At first they were smiling and happy but then realized that they were going to have to do all the communication. You would have been very proud of me. I think I made 3 comments the entire game!"

"It took the girls about 15 minutes to realize I meant what I said and I wasn't going to coach out to them; it was kind of quiet out there. But all of a sudden you should have seen the passes, the confidence and the plays that started to take place."

"During the game a mother from the other team must have been getting frustrated that their team wasn't doing as well as she thought they should. She yelled out "Shoot the Ball" when one of their players had it. She yelled it so loud that we could hear it on the other side like she was right next to us. I don't think I've ever heard someone yell that loud (except maybe me!). I thought to myself how annoying that sounds and how that player and/or team must feel hearing that command. One of the girls on our bench said, "How embarrassing". That was an "Ah Ha" moment as Oprah would put it for me as a coach."

"The end result was a win for us but you know what, that didn't even come up! It was the first time I didn't hear players talk about the score. They were talking about all the things we did well and what they noticed we could improve on."

"Over these past few months, I have changed my philosophy around and can now really measure what success is."

If we truly want to develop our players, we need to be brave like this U10 girls' coach and risk the final result. Sure, their team won the game but I have no doubt based on meeting the girls (and the fact that they didn't talk about the score) that the game would've still been a positive experience if it had resulted in a loss. She's given the game back to the players! Focus on winning too young and we miss out on critical skills *and* critical players ... focus on the most skilled and "pigeon-holing" players and you risk limiting their overall growth potential. Focusing too much on the results increases the risk of players turning away from the game because of burn out. Soccer became a *job* and wasn't fun anymore. Focus on intent and you nurture their passion for the game!

Last summer I was on a stretch of traveling and missed one of my daughter's U12 games. I phoned her and started the conversation with "*Did you have fun?*" She immediately went into the details of a scenario where she took on a defender and beat her with the dribble; something that she had been struggling with and started to really focus on. I was so caught up by the excitement in her voice that I just assumed they won the game. We hung up a couple minutes later and as I continued my drive, I realized that I never actually heard about the final outcome. A little investigative work on my part, I found out from another parent that they had actually lost the game! Yet that game was a success because her game grew and she obviously had fun! I admit I got a good laugh at myself about that I realized that the win/loss mattered more to me! That's usually the case.

So as we prepare for the spring soccer season, taking care of paperwork, field assignments, rosters and uniforms, I suggest we all give our communication skills a tune-up. Take an honest look at your demeanor. Take a listen to what you're saying. Remember, it's not necessarily *what* you're saying; it's *how* you say it! These kids just want to play but they also want to please their coaches and parents! If the first words out of your mouth are "*Did you win?*" Or "*Tough Loss*", it's a conversation show stopper. I love getting game reports from young children so I now purposely ask questions that prolong the answer to the win/loss question. Give them an opportunity to brag on themselves. Give them the chance to reflect on what just took place. YOU can spin a loss into a positive experience! OR, even better, allow them the chance to not talk about it at all! Most kids really don't want to analyze the game. They play because they like to play!

I hope you all enjoy the spring season. Remember, *it's just a game* and that most youth players recover from the loss by the time they get to the concession stand ... especially when they know they have un-conditional love and support from their coaches and parents.

See you on the field!

Maureen Whitehead