

“Developing the U11-U14 Player”

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The United States and Ohio South are blessed with a tremendous amount of wealth and resources relative to the rest of the world. We have fantastic volunteers that are eager to help, and a large group of soccer ‘professionals’ that are passionate about the game. Bookend this reality with our population density and the sky is the limit for the growth of the game here. Yet with all of these wonderful resources we have to ask ourselves if we are doing the best that we can for our kids?

To be clear - - winning is important. Yes I said it. Usually when you read articles like this, winning is generally dismissed. I don’t think that we are being fair to the kids if we do not recall our own emotions as young athletes’, and the passion that each of us had to win. Soccer is a competition - - kids want to win - - that is the player’s priority. As adults, we have to lead without ego, teach responsibly and behave with enough emotional intelligence to make winning our second priority. Our priority is to either build a program or be a part of a program that provides curriculum based instruction designed to develop players to be the best they can be in the late high school ages. This must be the driving motivation for every team and player goal, every season, every game, and every practice. Our challenge is not to compromise these principles - - and win.

I sincerely believe that there are two kind’s approaches at these ages. The ‘Team Centered Approach’ teaches’ players to function in systems that win now. If you find that your training sessions are consistently designed around making your team function better to win the next game than you are creating habits in players to function in your system not necessarily the ‘free-flowing game’ or in a multitude of systems. This is the appropriate approach for the adult player, not the youth player. The appropriate approach at these ages is the ‘Player Centered Approach’. The ‘Player Centered Approach’ is designed to develop players that can play in multiple systems and positions to win later at the highest levels. In this approach your practice designs and team/player goals start at what a player should look like at age 18 and flow down year by year with age appropriate activities and goals designed to make each player the best player he or she can be at age 18. This is the appropriate approach for the U11-U14 player.

The problem with the ‘Player Centered Approach’ is it makes it harder to win at the early ages. I am not suggesting that you cannot win, it’s just harder. Anytime you promote sophistication and creativity, you are increasing the likelihood of mistakes, thus increasing the likelihood of losing. This is a quagmire for many, especially those motivated by winning first. It also requires parent education, and parents who believe and are supportive of your message. The best person to lead this message is the leader of a club who has the playing and coaching experience that has developed players to reach collegiate and professional soccer, and the coaching education that is appropriate to lead all of the ages within that club. If you do not have this kind of experience then lean on this person to help you, both with parent and player education.

What are the building blocks of the complete player? In my opinion, they are technique, insight (tactics), psychological, and physical. When developing technique, rotate the emphasis of your training sessions through passing, receiving, dribbling for possession, dribbling for penetration, shielding, heading, tackling, and shooting. As you rotate through these technical themes, incorporate the appropriate tactics and communication for each. In regards to psychologically developing your players, can you promote and/or help instill self-discipline, resilience, commitment to his or her own development, a winning mentality, and self belief? In terms of their physical development, your training sessions should be physically challenging. Above and beyond the physical challenges within the soccer activities themselves, you should be teaching children how to change directions, while incorporating fast footwork, balance, speed, agility, and running backwards. The more you can incorporate the ball in developing this aspect of their game, the better.

Finally - - are your training sessions fun? To prevent a misinterpretation of fun, I am not suggesting that you play ‘duck-duck-goose’ or sing camp fire songs at practice. I define fun as kids enjoying a training atmosphere that is competitive, challenging, and engaging. Do they want to come back?

So remember - - establish goals that are age and ability appropriate, have a 'Player Centered Approach' supported by curriculum based instruction consistent with these goals, focus on the building blocks of the complete player, and make it fun!