

Remember, it's playtime

Taking the drilling and screaming out of youth soccer will make the game more enjoyable and create better players.

By Mike Woitalla, Executive Editor

Soccer America Magazine

Let's take the approach so many adults bring to youth soccer to other children's activities.

Take a bunch of 6-year-olds to the playground, but don't let them scamper off to explore the different structures. Make them all line up and wait patiently to take turns on the monkey bars. If one of them wanders off toward the swings, scream at him.

Be sure to tell them exactly how they should climb. Yell at the slow ones to go faster. While they're hanging from a bar, shout at them to "grab the next bar!"

At the sandbox, don't just let them start digging around willy-nilly. No building mounds or castles until we teach them the proper way to hold the shovel. Line them up for the shovel drill and don't forget to yell, "Dig, dig, dig!"

After 50 minutes of instructions on the various aspects of proper playground usage, give the kids 10 minutes to play.

Sounds ludicrous, doesn't it? So do these scenarios, but they're real and all too common:

A 9-year-old dribbles downfield and comes to a screeching halt because his coach doesn't let defenders past the halfway line.

In an 8 v 8 game of 7-year-olds, two players on each team are forced by their coach to remain planted in front of their own goal. Wouldn't want to be vulnerable to a counterattack, would we?

A 6-year-old girl who started playing soccer a couple weeks earlier dribbles the ball toward the goal while her coach moves along the sideline screaming, "Kick it into the goal! Kick it hard! Kick it into the goal! Kick it hard!"

And I'm wondering what it would be like to have someone four times as big as I am hollering at me while I try to perform a skill that is barely within my capabilities.

One of my favorites is the "Spread out!" scream. I hear this from coaches, directed at 6-year-olds. Apparently they haven't noticed that these kids can barely kick the ball more than five yards, so it's a bit unlikely that they'll be able to exploit the flanks and whip in a cross.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of youth soccer is the insistence on making young players do drills instead of just letting them play small-sided games, the way Pele, Diego Maradona and Ronaldo did when they were young.

In America, children start playing organized soccer three or four years before those guys did. That's the way it is, because in today's world they usually can't just go outside and play pickup soccer for hours on end. But that doesn't mean they should have to show up at a practice and be instructed as if they haven't left the classroom.

Besides the fact that, after obeying adults all day at school while planted in a chair, children deserve and need playtime without overbearing adult interference, children learn soccer from playing and mimicking others, not from instructions.

The Brazilian and Argentine players who delight us so much developed their skills playing without adults looking over their shoulders stifling their creative impulses and critiquing their "mistakes."

Said Juergen Klinsmann recently about the decline of German talent: "Today all the youth soccer is played in organized tournaments, we don't have kids playing in the streets any more. But it's in street soccer where the real talent appears."

So it would make sense for coaches to replicate the kind of soccer the Ronaldinhos of the world played when they were under 10. But there are youth coaches - lots and lots, I fear - who feel they're being generous if they devote a third of their practice to scrimmaging. I imagine a 6-year-old Maradona would have quit the sport if his introduction to it entailed doing the drills we make our kids do instead of letting him run around trying to score.

Of all the hundreds of successful American and international players I have interviewed or researched, they have had in common the fact that they played soccer as much as they could outside of their organized leagues - in their backyard, in their house, at the local park. They did so because they had fallen in love with the game.

The chances that children will develop a passion for the game are much greater if they have a good time playing it. And I can't imagine anyone with a soccer background will disagree that the most fun part of soccer is playing a game, with goals to score on.

And when children play mini-games they should be allowed to play as they please - explore the game and not be talked to constantly by the coach.

Above all, young children shouldn't be discouraged from dribbling.

Expecting an under-8 team to develop a passing game is like forcing little kids to figure out Rubik's Cube instead of letting them play with Legos.

Young kids can comprehend the concept of dribbling and they like to do it.

So they should be encouraged. After all, a look at higher levels of the game reveals what a precious skill dribbling is. We have far more good passers than good dribblers. Moreover, dribbling develops ball skills that will help players become good passers.

Fortunately, the U.S. Soccer Federation is trying to send the message to youth coaches that "the game is the best teacher," a favorite phrase of Manfred Schellscheidt, who contributed to U.S. Soccer's "Player Development

Guidelines: Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States."

Schellscheidt, the head of U.S. Soccer's U-14 boys development program, has won national titles at the pro, amateur and youth levels. Richie Williams, who played on Schellscheidt's two McGuire Cup-winning teams before winning college and MLS titles, described Schellscheidt's practices: "Our training sessions were basically just playing."

A key part of "Guidelines" are recommendations for team sizes and goalkeeper-use at particular levels, and which rules to apply or not apply - for example, 3 v 3 games without keepers for children under-8.

"Guidelines" encourages coaches to create practice sessions that simulate pickup games, to organize less, to say less, to allow players to do more, to encourage the dribbler ...

One hopes that "Guidelines" will have an impact on the well-intentioned adults who run our youth leagues but sometimes forget that soccer for young children is playtime.

(This article originally appeared in the February 2006 issue of Soccer America Magazine.)