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Center Circle Column

In early September, there was a Division I game between two Top Ten teams, one from the West Coast and one from the East Coast. It was an early season special. Two big time programs went at each other; each hoping to make a statement for the 2008 collegiate season. It was a beautiful day and the stadium was full. After observing the game for the first half, it was clear that the West Coast team had better soccer players. Pound for pound they were more technical than the home team. The West Coast team lost 3-0 - and it could have been more. Good soccer players; who played good soccer but didn't compete. They *PLAYED* the game; they did not *COMPETE* the game.

In a recent interview discussing the upcoming NHL season, Columbus Blue Jackets coach Ken Hitchcock told reporters that the CBJ would make the playoffs if he could find players "who would *COMPETE* and not just *PLAY*". And, there is a difference he said. "Players who *PLAY* bring skill; players who *COMPETE* bring everything!"

There is too much playing in American soccer and not enough competing. Playing permeates all levels of the game from U5 to the MLS and the National teams. We are confusing ability for talent. As Allen Fox, author of *The Winners Mind* suggests, "Most people mistake speed and skill for talent. Real talent STARTS with energy, drive, work ethic and the will to win. Without these attributes, a player can never be great."

In this country we have focused so much on playing, that we have not taught our players to compete - to fight - to work hard or to have the will to win. As a soccer culture, we have always had an inferiority complex. So, we emphasize playing, technical ability and skills. Our youth players *play* a lot of soccer, but few *compete.*

What happens to all the highly regarded U17's we have had in this country? Where are they now? They are playing somewhere.

It is not always the fault of the players. Our "soccer system" or our "soccer culture" is dysfunctional. When a player is not playing in his/her club, he/she simply change clubs. There is no thought about competing for a spot on the team, fighting for a spot, getting better to find a spot - we simply change clubs. The message to the players is that striving to get better is not important; it is simply how you *play and how you look.*

High school age players don't care much about the outcome of games (whether they are playing in high school or club), but they do care about "showing"- about playing to showcase their skills and ability for college coaches. The emphasis is on playing. How many times have you heard a parent tell their son or daughter that you played well or you showed well despite losing the game?

Add to this the large number of meaningless games in youth soccer and we have a deadly combination. Young players play in meaningless high school games and hundreds of meaningless club games. The emphasis slowly changes from the game to the individual. The emphasis changes to playing and showing and competing is lost. By the time the players move to the next level, they have not learned how to compete. Or as Allen suggests, they do not have the drive, work ethic or will to win.

Players lose motivation and confidence when the "work/play" is no longer easy (i.e. college soccer, or the next level). The rules have changed at the next level. The emphasis switches back to competing and hard work. The players can't handle it - they think they are playing - and they are, but they are not competing. We need players who compete *and* play; players who have the will to win.

In fact, research is very clear that constant praising of children's innate (soccer skill or intellectual) ability can prevent young athletes/students from living up to their potential. On the other hand studies show that teaching young people to focus on effort rather than ability helps make them high achievers and competitors in school, on the field and in life.

Why do some players when confronted with failure give up and others who are no more skilled continue to compete and learn? Carol Dweck of Stanford University and author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* suggests that the answer lays in people's beliefs about why they failed. Although very complicated, it seems that those of us who are praised for our ability/intelligence etc. when things are easy have trouble changing gears and working hard when things get tough. Children who are taught to focus on effort and getting better and not the outcome learn to work hard and solve the problem. Soccer players who change clubs never learn to solve the problem(s) that others face because they never face them! The key, says Dweck, isn't ability; it's whether you look at ability as something inherent that needs to be demonstrated or as something that can be developed. She further suggests that many young athletes who are led to believe that talent is more important than effort become uncoachable!

Somehow in the Land of the Puritan Work Ethic, we have separated ability and effort. We are teaching our young soccer players that ability, technique and skill outweigh effort. In fact, our young players feel that having to work hard at soccer is a sign of low ability. Since college coaches are interested in ability, young players don't work hard - they don't compete. When they get to college and things get tough they can't change gears and work hard. They are confused. They played "high level youth soccer" and made it to a college team playing one way. Now the coach wants the players to change and work hard. Many can't do it!

A high level of ability will inspire confidence in our young players - for a while. As long as things are going well, the players will be confident. But setbacks, adversity and failure change everything. How our young players react to setbacks depends upon their goals. If the goal is to play at the next level, focus on ability or skill (performance goals) there will be no improvement. But, if the goal is to become a better soccer player; to improve ability (learning goals) then the young player will work hard and compete and become a better player. Dweck's 2002 study showed that praising children for intelligence alone (or ability), rather than effort actually sapped their motivation.

Culture plays a large role in shaping our beliefs. Our soccer culture perpetuates the belief that talent is the answer. And talent is defined as skill. We focus on talent, we praise those who are talented, we fight for talented players for our teams and, as a result, have created a mindset that talent is the end all in soccer. That mindset can be changed and must be changed. The mindset that soccer ability is only the answer is a problem. We must return to an emphasis on effort, drive, determination and the will to win in addition to skill and talent.

How do we change from a "fixed mindset" to a "growth mindset" in this soccer culture? How do we change the emphasis from <u>relying</u> totally on skill to relying on <u>using</u> the skill in addition to hard work? One way, says Dweck, is by telling our players about those who were successful through hard work and not only skill. These stories and examples should show that real success needs a combination of ability and hard work. Sports generally and soccer specifically has many examples of this. Look at Cesc Fabregas of Arsenal as a good example. He has tremendous skill and soccer ability, but he also is the hardest worker on the field; that combination makes him one the best players in the EPL. The hard working Claude Makalele is another example. Often overlooked at Real Madrid as only a hard worker, his real contributions were displayed when he moved to Chelsea. Real Madrid struggled and Chelsea became one of the best teams in Europe after he left.

Another strategy coaches can use to change the mindset is praise. Instead of praising skill alone, coaches must praise effort, hard work and the will to win. Most people believe they should build up a person by telling him or her how brilliant and/or talented he or she is, Dweck's research suggests this in misguided and a mistake.

So, as coaches, it is time to change the mindset of our players. It is time to make work ethic and effort important again. It is time to combine highly skilled players with hard working players. We need highly skilled, hard working players. Our players must stop playing and start competing!