Do we want Robinhos or Robots?

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How over-coaching and the emphasis on winning stifle young American talent.

The little boy dribbled and kept dribbling. He had taken the ball away from the midfield pack and zoomed toward his own goal. This surprised the other children and allowed him to keep the ball to himself for much longer than any player had managed during this U-8 game.

Having put some 15 yards between himself and the other players, he slowed down and seemed to marvel at all the territory he now had to himself. He started making a wide U-turn and flashed a big smile.

He moved down the sideline and back into the other team's half, then put his foot on the ball and stopped. When a couple of his little opponents approached, he accelerated toward their goal and took a shot that nearly scored.

What creativity, improvisation and savvy! And in his smile was the joy of soccer.

So how did his coach react?

First with red-faced screams of "You're going the wrong way! You're going the wrong way!" Then furious shouts of "Pass it! Pass it!" -- a chant that several parents took up -- followed by head-shaking in frustration.

Of course, the coach was shouting instructions to all his players throughout the game. That's the norm in youth soccer, in which misguided coaches -- and the other adults on the sideline -- believe they're helping children become better soccer players by telling them where to run and when to pass.

But what really irked the coach about the clever boy's maneuver was it was risky. A misstep and he could have provided a scoring chance for the other team.

And, absurd as it is, there are adults -- lots and lots of them -- who place great importance on whether their 7-year-olds beat another team of youngsters.

Youth coaches who want to rack up wins discourage their players from taking risks, such as dribbling the ball out of the back, by ordering them to boot it up-field or out of bounds. "Clear it!" they shout.

"The emphasis on winning is a detriment to young players because it prevents us from developing technically proficient players," says U.S. U-17 national team coach John Hackworth. "And we're not giving them the ability to make decisions. You can't find a youth soccer game where the coaches aren't screaming the whole time, telling kids what they should do and how they should do it."

If players aren't allowed to make mistakes and take chances when they're exploring the sport -- if they're constantly being told what to do -- how can we expect them to develop the soccer instincts they'll need to make the split-second decisions that are so much a part of the game?

"They hear 'Clear it ... Get rid of it ... Pass it ... Kick it up line' so often that by the time they're 13 or 14, when they get the ball and they don't hear the instructions, they don't know what to do," says Tab Ramos, the great U.S. midfielder who is now a New Jersey youth coach.

Telling young players what to do with the ball, bossing them around to stay in certain positions on the field and taking strategic advantage of the bigger, stronger kids are ways of increasing a team's chances of winning. But at what cost?

"If you want your 8-year-olds to win tomorrow, you're going to address that group differently than if you say, 'I want my 8-year-old to win when he's 18 years old,'" says Bob Jenkins, U.S. Soccer's Director of Coaching Education.

It's not just that the coaches are obsessed with winning -- there are the parents. A coach of a U-9 team told me that if his team compiled a 12-1 win-loss record, his parents would want to move their children to the team that went 13-0.

Ramos encourages his younger players, the 9- and 10-year-olds, not to kick the ball out of bounds when they're under pressure in their own half.

"We want him to find a way out of it," Ramos says. "Half the time, he's not going to come out of it and very often he's going make a mistake that's going to cost a goal. But this is when players should be allowed to take the risk so they develop their skills."

Too few coaches are willing to provide such learning experiences because they can lead to losses.

"A lot of parents are living through their children," Ramos says, "and for them it becomes a matter of them beating the other coach because that's the guy who beat them three years ago when their older child played."

Hackworth, who doesn't believe in assigning positions to players under age 10, proposes eliminating the "ultra-competitive premier flight" until at least U-12. And even then coaches should still resist becoming results oriented.

"We want competition," he says. "They'll always be competition and it's not bad. The bad part is the emphasis on winning."

That emphasis often results in coaches putting the physically advanced kids in particular spots. For example, a big guy in back who's instructed to boot the ball to the speedy guy up front. This denies smaller players opportunities to play significant roles while bigger players can rely on their athleticism instead of developing their skills.

Aime Jacquet, who coached France to the 1998 World Cup title and has also been in charge of France's renowned youth development program, said he investigates youth teams with winning records and if he discovers they won by relying on big players, he fires them.

If a coach isn't obsessed with results, he's more likely, when they're at the age level in which assigning positions is appropriate, to expose players to different roles. Keeping a player in the same position all the time won't help him adjust to new challenges when he moves to higher levels.

"Worrying too much about winning and losing gets in the way of development," says Manfred Schellscheidt, head of U.S. Soccer's U-14 program. "There are always shortcuts that you can find to win the next game. That doesn't necessarily mean you'll be winning five, six years from now.

"The kids all try to win anyhow, so I don't think we need to add to this. No kid ever steps on the field and says, 'Today I'm going to lose.' They're naturally competitive. We should be concerned about the players' performance, not the final score."

Coaching soccer really isn't that complicated. When children first become involved in organized soccer, the coach's job is simply to create an environment that gives the children a chance to enjoy the sport. It's such a wonderful sport that setting up goals and letting them play usually does the trick.

It should also be an environment that allows them to be creative, to express themselves and to bring their own personalities to the sport.

No doubt, the USA has produced legions of good players. But how many great players have come out of our youth ranks?

How many excellent American dribblers are there? How many American players can dazzle fans? How many defenders do we have who can play their way out of trouble, who can consistently contribute to the attack? How many American players can dictate the rhythm of a game?

Far, far too few.

And one wonders how many players with the capacity to bring individual brilliance to the field have had that hammered out of them by their screaming coaches.

(Mike Woitalla is the executive editor of Soccer America Magazine and the co-author with Claudio Reyna of "More Than Goals: The journey from backyard games to World Cup competition." This article originally appeared in the October 2006 issue of Soccer America Magazine. Send comments to mike@socceramerica.com)