Let them dribble

By Mike Woitalla

It's one of the most common screams heard on the youth soccer fields of America: "Pass it! Pass it! Pass it!"

Unfortunately, parents and coaches often aim their shouts at young players who are at a stage of their development when they should be encouraged to dribble.

Becoming a confident dribbler is the first step to developing a comfort on the ball necessary to be a good passer and shooter. Discouraging young players from dribbling is like telling toddlers to shut up when they're learning to speak.

"This whole routine of 'pass, pass, pass' is unrealistic for the young age groups and it's been pounded into so many of our kids for so long I would argue a little that it helps explain why we lack outstanding dribblers on our national teams," says Sam Snow, U.S. Youth Soccer's Director of Coaching Education.

Former U.S. women's national team coach Tony DiCicco addresses the issue in his instructional book, "Catch Them Being Good":

"At a youth soccer game you'll probably hear parents and coaches on the sidelines yelling, 'Pass the ball! Pass the ball!' ...

"When we continually tell our young players to pass the ball, we're not allowing them to develop their full potential, especially those who have the ability to take their opponents on and beat them one-on-one. As a result, we run the risk of diminishing a player's artistry and potential."

Mia Hamm credits pickup games she played with her older brother and other children as a key to her success, because, "I was able to dribble all I wanted."

Youth coaches often emphasize teamwork before children can comprehend the concept.

Those who sit back and let the children explore the sport at a natural pace will usually find that the players begin to ask each other for the ball. And there are ways to create a practice environment in which all the players get a share of the ball without forcing them to pass.

Small-sided games ensure that all players are close to the action. Coaches can play along in practice and aim their passes at players who haven't gotten enough touches. You can even throw an extra ball into the scrimmage.

That passing is a crucial part of the game at the older age levels doesn't mean it should be demanded of young children.

"You can learn the tactical side of the game later," says Landon Donovan. "But if you don't learn at an early age to be good on the ball, then it's just useless."

The U.S. Soccer Federation's Player Development Guidelines point out that "At the younger ages (6 to about 10), soccer is not a team sport. On the contrary, it is a time for players to develop their individual relationship with the ball.
"Do not demand that the more confident players share the ball. Encourage them to be creative and go to goal. Do the same for the rest of your players."