US Women's National Teams Program

POSITION STATEMENT

'Playing to Develop' versus 'Playing to Win'
'Learning versus Winning'

Issue

In youth soccer circles today, an over emphasis is being placed on winning. It stems from social pressure in America where we are expected to be the best in everything. We glorify winning and first place finishers. The emphasis in sports on 'winning' is out of balance. Witness the increase in violence at youth athletic events. In sport, we are obsessed with the 'outcome' rather than the 'process.' As long as we win, we are happy. We evaluate coaches only on their win-loss record. What about enjoyment of the process, the journey, the experience and it's ultimate influence on us as people, coaches and athletes? What about evaluating coaches on the improvement, growth and development of their players? After all, we can't control the outcome, but we can control the process.

Recommendations

Admit that we're obsessed with winning. When Suzie comes home after her game, the first thing we ask is did she win and the second thing is did she score a goal? Reframe the way we look at sport. Suzie, "how was the game today? Did you have fun? Did your team play well? How did you play? Did you do some of the new things the coach asked you to try? Are you hungry?"

In youth soccer, the priority for coaches and players should be on individual player development and learning. Set age and ability specific technical, tactical, psychological, and physical goals to aid in optimizing player development. This will provide coaches a framework and structure to follow. These goals also provide an alternative for coaches and parents to measure achievement and development of their players. For under 14 and younger, the primary objective of game participation and training is to provide the players with learning opportunities. Teams should "strive to win," but this should not be the focus of any training sessions, half-time talks or player motivations.

At the age of 14 and above, careful consideration needs to be placed on balancing instances where in addition to developing as individuals and a team, finding ways to 'win' also becomes part of the overall objective**.** One of the biggest obstacles in women's athletics is that young girls are socialized not to be competitive**. By all means, 'teach players to compete, to compete hard, to compete to win, but don't have winning be the only measure of success.'** Choose which tournaments and games are to be played to 'learn,' and which are to be played to, 'win.' It is not in the best interest of the players' development to have a schedule where the sole purpose for participation is 'winning.' Individual and team improvement and peak performance should be the measure of achievement, rather than winning or losing.

It should be noted that while the US Women's National Team steps on the field prepared to win every game and every tournament, there are only two tournaments (every four years) that we play with the sole purpose of 'winning,' the Olympics and the Women's World Cup.

At 16 years of age and below, players should be encouraged to play different positions on the field. This will allow for a greater understanding of the game.

Coaches should attempt to have players play for an extended period of time. The players are thus asked to solve their own problems on the field instead of having the coach make substitutions in order to solve the problem for them. Players should not, 'platoon players' in and out of games in order to 'wear an opponent down.' Unlike most American sports, "soccer is a players game," not a coaches game. Substitutions allow for all players to play and will speed development for a greater number of players. The coach should decide before the game or tournament what the philosophy will be regarding substitutions – then stick to it.

The system and style that the coach selects should be based on matching the skill and abilities of the players and not to achieve a 'win.' Exposing players to various systems and styles of play offers a tremendous opportunity to learn.

Care must be taken at the younger levels (U16) to select players based on their soccer abilities and not on their strength or size. It is tempting to use bigger, earlier maturing players to help you win games this year. If our aim as coaches is to develop players and teams to advance to the next level, we must be mindful of a smaller players 'potential' to be a better player in a year or two.

Lastly, player, parent, and administrator education is vital. Through communication and explanation of long term goals and rewards a coach must bring all parties to a consensus in support of this developmental philosophy. In order for these ideas to work properly, the coach must demonstrate his/her ability to develop players and teams. 'Winning,' is not a measurement of coaching success. The technical and tactical ability of the player, player and team improvement during the course of a season, player and team satisfaction, and player matriculation are the best yardsticks for success.

Rationale

With sound technical, tactical, physical and psychological skills encouraged through a 'process' oriented philosophy, players will develop the necessary tools to maximize their potential. A thoughtful plan based on the level and needs of the players significantly increases the rate of retention, improvement, and enjoyment.

> "There are many people, particularly in sports who think that success and excellence are the same thing and they are not the same thing. Excellence is something that is lasting and dependable and largely within a person's control. In contrast, success is perishable and is often outside our control… If you strive for excellence, you will probably be successful eventually... people who put excellence in first place have the patience to end up with success… An additional burden for the victim of the success mentality is that he/she is threatened by success of others and resents real excellence. In contrast, the person fascinated by quality is excited when he/she sees it in others."
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> **Joe Paterno – Penn State Football Coach - 1990**