They're All Bunched Up!!

By Ihor Chyzowych

That's what I hear at every U-8 youth course I teach. My reply is always the same: "That's OK!" Then I get the puzzled looks from nearly every coach or coach-to-be. The kids know what they're doing, it's the parents and the new coaches who are confused. Adults see the bunch of players as unorganized -- not as a team. That's the first problem. Because, at this point, it's really *not* a team. The players at this age don't understand what being a "team" means. At their age, they are selfish in their game. Me, my ball, my game. Most kids can't even remember the name of their team or their coach. They won't even practice with any one else's ball! How can you expect them to understand or embrace teamwork or fixed positions? The ball is their magnet; so let them try to get it. In doing so, they're actually building good instincts that they'll use in the game when they are older and "team" actually begins to mean something.

For example, many good coaches struggle to "re-teach" 14 to 17 year olds the working concept of zonal defending and zonal pressure defense. Two concepts that they knew instinctively when they were 5. What happened? It was drilled out of them by a youth coach who kept telling them to spread out. When they're 5-plus years old, they already have a natural instinct for this kind of defending. They're already figured out that five of us versus one of them means that we'll probably get the ball. To parents, this is a mess on the field. They want the kids to spread out -- so that the one player with any skill can have the space to dribble around every one else like cones. Not a very good defense.

A good coach will definitely have to adjust these players' instincts, as they get older, but surprisingly not much. The game itself makes them smarter as they continue to play more and more. Another reason why "bunching up" is OK for young players: the kid in the center of that bunch is learning early on how to play in tight spaces and not to be afraid of traffic or contact -- invaluable skills that will be second-nature to him by the time he's older and able to play in fixed positions.

So, as hard as it is for parents to believe, young players learn how to solve problems and be creative while bunched up. These skills actually help them with their game when they're older and that game is more structured. As a coach, I'll want on my older team the youth player who consistently came out of the pack with the ball. He might be my striker because he's not afraid of crowds in the box, or of being marked by two players. He's been getting through the traffic and scoring in those situations since he was 5. Playing in "the bunch" has made him tough, technical and smart. My advice to new youth coaches and to parents is to stop worrying about the kids being bunched up. At U-8, just let them play. You're role at this point is to teach them some basic ball touches, point them in the right direction and let them go!

Let the game teach them for now. Let them teach themselves. And most of all let them enjoy the game. Seems simple? It is. But that's OK, too. That's the beauty of soccer.

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