TOO MUCH, TOO SOON!

By Gordon Miller
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In a growing number of locations, within the VYSA and around the country, there are organizations and leagues that begin travel soccer at U9 and in some cases as young as U8. The process of identifying players at this young an age and then directing them into travel soccer is doing a disservice to the children and hindering the long- term development of our soccer players.

We must be careful about throwing our youngsters into the cauldron of the overly competitive travel soccer environment too soon, because it is becoming clear that it is more and more of a detriment and less and less of an impetus to the success of the young player. When the gauge of that success is measured by either players competing at a higher level or continuing to play when they get older, we fail on both counts. There is absolutely no data that supports that particular theory. If starting travel soccer this young were the right way to go then the rest of the world would be copying our model, but it doesn't. In fact other countries are in the exact opposite direction with their soccer philosophies and programs. For example, the French, Germans, Dutch and Spanish believe that it is important to keep young players (under the age of 12) playing within their own communities, with their friends, and, with educated coaches. They profess that it is critical for a player's development that the youngsters spend more time on the training field, in a less result oriented environment, learning the intricacies, nuances and techniques of the game.

So why are we are putting our young 7 and 8 year olds through tryouts and player selection processes that narrows the scope too soon? How many players do we end up missing when we make these hasty decisions? How many youngsters feel that they have lost their chance to make it and therefore lose interest and their desire and motivation to continue on in the game gets tempered? Developing soccer talent is not an exact science. There are a lot of factors that go into the mix and even then you can never predict with certainty whether a particular player will turn out or not. Yet, by the nature of our setup, we continue to do what we think is right and pick the best at eight years of age while discarding, or at best slighting, the rest. Yet, all sports are littered with plenty of # 1 draft pick stories that were, "can't miss prospects", that ended up some how missing. And these players are 19, 20 and 21 year olds.

A lot of questions must be asked: Why is it so important to us to place kids in a competitive environment before they are mentally and physically ready? Do we think that because a child is playing competitive soccer at 8 and 9, it will equate into success at 17 and 18? In fact, the opposite is more likely to occur, as we are finding that there are a lot more kids dropping out of soccer because the pressure to succeed has been placed on

them at too young an age and they are no longer in the sport by the time they graduate from high school.

How are these players being selected for U9 & U8 travel soccer anyway? What criteria are the evaluators using to select the players? Who is doing the selecting and what is their background, not only in the game, but in child development as well? Are the players being selected on their technical abilities or are they being selected because of their physical maturity? In many cases we are seeing players that are picked because they can kick the ball farther and run faster than their counterparts at this age. Quite simply, our kids are placed under tremendous pressure to be the best as early as possible.

When we place children in travel soccer too soon the emphasis is subtly being placed on the team result and winning the game, rather than on the individual player's performance. If the team doesn't win, then it doesn't get to play in this league or that division or in this particular tournament. Thus, coaches feel the pressure and start recruiting bigger, stronger kids that can help secure the victory-now. They start playing more of a long ball game and placing the emphasis on direct play. They want the ball out of their end as quickly as possible. What the coaches should be doing is, building out of the back, keeping possession of the ball, encouraging risk takers and flair and placing the emphasis on the individual's technical abilities. Are the coaches allowing an environment to flourish that allows the players to make mistakes because they know long term development is what they are really after? The answer is no, because there is too much pressure to succeed at every step along the way. If this coach loses too many games then he risks losing his players to a more "successful" team. The parents will want to move their child to a "winner," or get rid of him and bring in (in some cases hire) another coach. Thus, the environment becomes individually stifling and the player's creativity takes a back seat to the winning mentality.

It's not necessarily the fault of the coach either (although they are definitely not without blame). The coach is reacting to the environment that has been created and fostered by the leagues. The leagues set their own parameters; determine their own entry criteria, determine their own promotional and relegation criteria and determine their own definition of what a winner is. The largest number of kids playing is in the youngest age groups. Therefore, some leagues feel that they will lose out on that revenue if they don't entice them into the fold, and stop them from going to the competitor. Thus, the aura of travel soccer perpetuates itself.

This process also spawns an incredible amount of recruiting. Coaches feel pressure to succeed so they actively solicit the services of the next great superstar. Therefore, we now have young players being told that they are great and tremendous athletes and that they are indispensable to the success of a particular team, all before they have reached the age of 10. The parents are being asked to drive their young star miles and miles to practice and play games. And they justify it in their own mind because it's the thing to do and there is no real alternative.

What's the answer? Instead of shutting off the spigot to a drip at U9 and U10 we need to increase the player pool and give more youngsters the opportunity to develop. Organizations should increase the quality and number of training sessions and decrease the destructive notion and insatiable need to travel and attend tournaments. There needs to be a viable and comprehensive option that does a better job for our players. We need a bridge between recreation and travel soccer that allows more players the opportunity to develop and flourish. Instead of identifying the so-called stars at a young age, we should keep more players training and playing in a less stressful environment. If a child wants the extra training, as well as the additional competition (games), then the organization makes it available to them. But, it should be a fluid mechanism that kids can move in and out of if they so desire. And, this mechanism must have educated coaches that are able to teach the players properly in the fundamentals of the game in a less result oriented environment. There is a competition component to it but it is not life or death if they win or lose. The environment that has been created is conducive to risk taking and trying new things out without being the threat of being "punished." Player creativity is rewarded and encouraged. The pressure is then off the coaches because they don't feel that their jobs are on the line every time they set foot on the field. And, the result is that more players being developed better, in a less pressurized environment, and more are staying in the game longer.

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