

ETHICS IN YOUTH SOCCER

A Message to club Leaders

First, The Good News - Bad News

The explosion in youth soccer participation in this country is attributed by most experts to the facts that soccer is a relatively cheap sport, is healthy, building a solid base of coordination, speed and stamina for life, and it doesn't discriminate against any body size or height. In short, anybody and everybody can play, enjoy, and reap the benefits.

After over 30 years of sustained growth, youth soccer has become very much entrenched in our communities across the nation. For soccer lovers, this is a great time to be involved with the game and revel in its coming of age. There are many positive signs associated with this growth. The level of organization and sophistication in the youth game is steadily rising. The players are certainly getting better. Our national teams at all age groups, male and female, are making progress, and professional soccer has finally gained a beachhead in the American sport landscape and is in the process of consolidating. We are also beginning to notice the emergence of a new generation of youth coaches, coaches who actually played soccer when *they* were growing up. Many of these coaches work in youth soccer full-time as Directors of Coaching or paid staff.

Youth soccer has also become very competitive. Although competitiveness is a natural and desirable mindset in the quest for sport excellence, it can also spawn negative consequences if not harnessed properly. And many people are noticing the warning signs and are trying to raise the awareness of the decision makers in youth soccer, the club coaches, administrators and parents. For example, the Citizenship Through Sports Alliance has a panel of youth sports experts from across the country. This panel publishes an annual Youth Sports National Report Card. The CTSA's 2005 report was highly critical of the lack of a child-centered philosophy in youth sports, giving youth club leaders a grade of 'D' (Poor) while the coaches didn't fare much better, receiving a grade of 'C- minus' (between Fair and Poor). More alarmingly, the panel gave a grade of 'D' for parental behavior.

Like all youth sports, soccer cannot escape the negative effects of over-competitiveness. The main areas of concern are:

Flawed Player Development

The competitive element in youth soccer can be counterproductive by hindering player development. When the emphasis is on playing to win, acquisition of basic skills takes second place to team organization. Over-coaching stifles individual creativity and problem solving skills, size and stamina of the early developers is

valued over skill, and the whole practice-to-game ratio is out of whack in favor of games. The formative years of 6-14 should be spent honing technique and encouraging self expression, best accomplished in practices where ball contacts can be maximized. But coaches prefer to put their players through an interminable procession of games and tournaments where actual touches of the ball are minimal and secondary to the requisite hard running. This is also a time when a life long love of soccer should be fostered. But the excessive travel and grind of too many games, coupled with the direct or indirect pressure to perform, result in player burn out and loss of interest. The high attrition rate of teenagers quitting sports sends a clear and unmistakable message.

Another adverse effect of our burgeoning soccer culture is the notion that more is better and that to reach ones potential and be discovered, one has to spend loads of money traveling all over the country in search of the next 'showcase' tournament. This notion blinds coaches and parents into a spending spree that is needless and misguided, not to mention that it squeezes financially needy families out of the system. One of the original attractions of playing soccer, it being an inexpensive sport, is no longer true. It's a universally acknowledged fact that low income communities in any country are a breeding ground for many elite athletes. A player development process that prices out low income children will pay a price of lost talent, in the long term.

Every country has its own soccer culture, evolved over decades. The US soccer culture is in its embryonic stage but if we are not careful, a flawed American soccer culture and player development philosophy could ingrain itself, with a misplaced emphasis on games and tournaments at the expense of practices and technical development, with an accent on quantity over quality. And once that happens, it's very hard to change.

Turf Wars over Players and Coaches

When winning is the main goal, youth clubs resort to poaching the best players from each other. The quick fix strategy of recruiting the best players is more enticing, compared to the long term and labor intensive approach of developing ones own. Coaches are training their eyes on the outside instead of focusing on excellence and best practices on the inside. Furthermore, the recruiting wars create a caustic environment of mistrust and animosity among coaches, parents and administrators from competing clubs.

Deterioration of Core Values

When games become too competitive, the teaching of sportsmanship, maintaining dignity in dealing with winning and losing, respect for opponents, and developing character all take a back seat. In the heat of battle, the reason for playing is lost under the large shadow cast by the end result.

Some of the important life lessons that youth sports is supposed to teach our children, from building character, to humility, to taking responsibility for ones own actions and performance, are neglected. When the better kids are courted by coaches who fall over themselves to sell their programs, what kind of message does that send to these impressionable players? It nurtures the instant solution culture where problems can be solved simply by moving to another club rather than deal squarely with character deficiencies. And when results don't go ones way, the blame game becomes the escape route from accountability and responsibility.

Timely Reminder: Purpose of Youth Sport

The competitive trends are not only adversely affecting the essence of player development, but also cause the line between ethical and unethical behavior to become blurry. Youth club leaders need a timely reminder of the purpose of youth sports. The mission of any youth organization is to develop character, instill values, teach respect for authority and society, develop confidence and a positive self image and help youth reach their potential in life. We just happen to use soccer as the vehicle to achieve this mission.

The mission of a youth club should not revolve around winning championships. Winning is a byproduct of a quality program. But it should not be the driving force. Many well meaning club leaders verbalize and articulate the need to de-emphasize results, but fail to notice that their actions, or the actions of their staff, contradict their stated philosophy. Some simply don't see the difference between 'teaching life lessons through sport' and 'collecting trophies in sport'. The ambivalence in what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' dims the moral clarity and leads to a collision between mission and ambition. Some examples:

We want our club to be The Best in the State/Region/Nation

When club leaders make such claims, on the face of it, it sounds reasonable and a plausible sporting goal. But the question begs: Is it really about the players, or is it about adult personal ambitions? Just how far are they willing to go to achieve this ambition? Will judgment be clouded by ambition and push the ethical envelope too far? Who benefits exactly? Will these leaders look after the best interest of the individual players?

It's a business! It's survival of the fittest!

As youth clubs grow in size and budgets, comparisons with business are inevitable. Although a business model can and should be used to structure and professionalize youth soccer, it should not be used to condone the more distasteful 'cut throat' aspects of business as acceptable practice in youth soccer.

Corporate business mantra allows market forces to determine winners and losers. The goal of each entrepreneur company is to maximize profits, annihilate the

competition and monopolize the market share. If soccer followed the same mantra, the end result will be only one club left standing in, say, Atlanta. Youth soccer should not allow itself to be governed by market forces alone.

Youth soccer has more in common with organizations such as Boys Scouts of America, or a School District Board. Such organizations strive to operate in a businesslike manner, with fiscal responsibility, and a child welfare oriented philosophy. They have board of directors who set the vision and mission and who hire experts to run the day to day operation. A Club Director of Coaching's role is more akin to a School Principle's than that of a corporate CEO. And school principles don't waste their time and energy trying to lure children from other schools.

We are an 'Elite Club'

Club leaders who position their organization as an elite club aimed at the elite player must remember that they are still dealing with fragile, impressionable children who are psychologically easily bruised. The term 'elite' is overused and often misused in sport. Unfortunately, the school of thought among some coaches is that "if the player wants to be part of our elite club, he/she must be able to handle the pressure". An 'elite' tag is not a license to abuse players and it doesn't absolve us of responsibility for the unpleasant consequences our players might suffer in the name of competition.

A club that claims elite status has a responsibility to provide the players elite level facilities, expert coaching, administrative support and, above all, a high standard of behavior and role modeling. Elite status should reflect a measurement of what the club can do for the player in terms of character and skill development, not what the player can do for the club.

As was noted earlier, the undeniably disturbing trend on youth soccer is that the line between 'right' and 'wrong' is no longer clear. Most club leaders are well meaning and passionate about the game, but some inadvertently take the wrong turn somewhere along the way, while others turn a blind eye to questionable behavior within their club, in their quest for success.

Is it ethical for a coach to try and convince a player to join his team after the player has already given his word to another team? In the strict terms of the local governing rules, this scenario might be legal, but it's not ethical. Is it ethical for a coach to make false promises to a young player, or to disparage a fellow coach in order to convince a player to sign? When a coach tells a player that his current coach cannot help him reach the next level, ethical boundaries have definitely been exceeded.

When the main reason for traveling to an expensive prestige tournament is to give the team a recruiting advantage, is it fair to impose such expenses and time away from home on all the players just to attract better players, some of whom will replace existing ones upon their return?

What would you do as a parent, if you found out that your child's teacher shouted at and criticized him/her in front of the whole class because your child gave the wrong answer. You would undoubtedly be very upset at the teacher and probably have a word with him. Yet, many parents allow the coach to shout and berate their child when he/she makes a mistake on the soccer field. How is this different from the classroom example? Any way one looks at it, it is child abuse. Parents should not tolerate this type of behavior by coaches. But many do, because they think this coach will help their child reach the 'next level'.

Some club leaders tolerate coaches who are poor role models because of their winning track record. Coaches, who are constantly shouting at players, or criticizing referees with sarcastic remarks, or are often confrontational with opposing coaches and parents. Coaches who punish their players for losing a game by making them do laps or sit ups. Coaches who flaunt the rules and teach their players that 'acceptable deceit' overrules sportsmanship and fair play, and that nice guys finish last. Such poor role models should not be tolerated. It flies in the face of the main goal of youth sports.

Another widely accepted reality is the perpetual bench warmer. If club leaders and coaches were to personally experience the indignity of sitting on the bench for a whole game, or for most of the game, they might view this humiliating practice in a different light. The argument that the bench warmer still gets to play in games of lesser importance or against easier opponents misses the whole point. If the purpose of youth sport is to help children develop self esteem, how is the implied lack of confidence in a player going to accomplish that? Is it ethical for a coach to ask a family to fork out hundreds of dollars for an out of town tournament but keep the player on the bench because it's a 'must win' tournament? Has anyone bothered to look at the faces of the players sitting on the bench, those who know they won't get to play? Or the painful expression on their parents faces as they share in their embarrassment?

Americans love to cheer for the underdogs. Sport folklore is awash with stories of a team of underdogs overcoming adversity, rising to the challenge under the inspiration of a caring coach and beating a team of cocky favorites. In youth soccer, the real life, but sadly ignored, underdog is the bench warmer. It's time Hollywood made a movie about a bench warmer who overcame the ignominy of his tag, under the tutelage of a caring adult, and scored the winning goal in a 'must win' tournament.

Who invented Standings and Trophies?

It's a myth that elite players need to play for championships and trophies to be properly challenged. Elite players are challenged by playing with and against other good players. Players in general don't need the extrinsic stimulation of a trophy to give their all and engage in intense play. The competitive juices inherent in elite players take care of that. That's what makes them elite. Anyone who has observed any of the top youth teams play each other in meaningless friendlies or festivals would have noticed the intensity and effort to be no less than when a trophy is at stake.

It's the adults, the parents and coaches, who need the extra stimulation of a trophy. It's the only way for them to remain emotionally engaged in the game. As their children embark on their journey through the youth sport experience, the adults' attention span evolves from "look how cute he is in that uniform" to "this is getting boring! Let's start keeping scores and standings". In today's world of expanding highways and shrinking street games, the adults are the driving force behind youth sports. Championships and State Cups were manufactured to help adults maintain an emotional stake in their children's sport, to enable adults to share in their child's experience. But let's not allow adult needs to get in the way of the mission of youth sports.

The Role of Club Leaders

Club leaders are in the position to positively influence the sport experience of our young players. They must not shirk their responsibilities as decision makers and administrators of the game at grass roots. Their actions must be governed by high ethical standards, for the good of the game, and for the benefit of the next generation. Club leaders should keep in mind the following principles and guiding points:

- ◆ A Club's philosophy should be compatible with an appropriate mission statement and the actions of the board and staff should stay true to this mission.
- ◆ Club leaders should take responsibility for the actions of all its members, from coaches to parents to players.
- ◆ Club boards should let the technicians make the technical decisions. The board should not interfere with the soccer decisions made by the experts they hire. But, at the same time, the board should monitor the staff to ensure that the club's philosophy and reputation is not undermined.
- ◆ Club leaders should make every effort to reverse the spiraling costs of youth soccer and make it accessible for everyone who wants to participate, regardless of financial means.
- ◆ The universally accepted wisdom from every sport and educational expert and every Olympic gold winner is that any meaningful and successful 'Quest for Sporting Excellence' should focus on the process, not the result.
- ◆ Club leaders should handle the coaching staff consistent with the above philosophy. This means that staff performance review is based on quality of experience and role modeling and not be winning oriented. It means a zero tolerance of unethical behavior or player abuse. It means coaches are held accountable and pay the consequences for breaches of ethics.

- ◆ Club leaders need to implement parent education programs. Parents can often be the lightning rod of discontent and are often the least informed, yet, most influential in conflict resolution. Clubs should not be held hostage by parents for the sake of winning a trophy.
- ◆ Clubs should focus on developing their own players rather than cast envious eyes at those from the club next door.
- ◆ Clubs have a responsibility to teach players more than just about X's and O's. Club leaders must set their goals to the higher moral grounds of developing citizens.
- ◆ Club leaders should put aside own personal agendas when in leadership positions. This means refraining from exerting influence to benefit themselves or their children. It means making the tough decisions even at the expense of political expediency or personal desires.
- ◆ Club leaders should focus on safeguarding their club's reputation. In the long term, this is the best philosophy for success and growth.
- ◆ Club leaders should strive to maintain a cordial and collaborative relationship with their neighbors. Every club needs quality competition to reach its potential. Your neighbors are not your enemy but your quality competition. Without a healthy doze of local rivalry, clubs would have to travel further to find it.
- ◆ Most conflicts in youth soccer stem from adult-induced petty disputes, collision of personal agendas and power struggles. The victims are invariably the players and the game itself.

In closing, we need to acknowledge all the good work and selfless effort by the volunteers who form the backbone of the game at the youth level. There is no denying the achievements and successes the game has witnessed up to now. The membership of Georgia Soccer can be proud of the relentless growth over the past 30 years and the hundreds of thousands of players who have gone through our many programs in their formative years and graduated to become productive and successful citizens.

But we must not let the growth blind us to the problems that exist. As the stakes get higher and the game gets more competitive, we need to remind ourselves of our responsibility to our children and to the sport and not get carried away by unhealthy zealously and a win at all cost attitude.

As club leaders, you are the conscience of youth soccer. And that is a big responsibility.