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Train to Retain:
Thoughts On Training Less-Advanced Soccer Players At the Critical U12-U14 Age Group

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Every year, throughout the U.S., less-advanced boys and girls are opting out of soccer as they enter high school. Clubs that have as many as four teams at the U12-U14 age levels are down to only one or two teams by U15. Many outside forces are at work, of course, when players turn 15 and enter high school: peer pressures; activities such as debate and theater, political and film clubs, music groups, other sports (more socially "in" than soccer); and the simple fact that at 15, teenagers are growing and experimenting with their lives in ways that do not always cleave to our sporting mentality and expectations. Add to that the following characteristics most experts agree define the young adolescent period: 1) intense interest in becoming or appearing to be *more adult*; 2) rapid physical growth and hormonal changes that affect coordination and adaptability; 3) mood swings between elation and lethargy; 4) possible experimentation with sex and drugs; and 5) emphasis on strong peer allegiances.(1) Keeping young soccer players motivated is a challenge for every coach at any age, but this young adolescence age-group in particular poses a unique challenge to coaches: Can we train U12-U14 players in such a manner as to lessen the possibility of losing them at age 15? Studies—and every DOC—can confirm that for the highly-skilled players, self-perceived competence is enough to overcome the conflicts and extrinsic forces that lead to drop-out; but for less-gifted athletes, the situation is more clouded.(7)

Highly-Skilled vs. Less-Skilled

A highly-skilled player's confidence level allows him or her to experiment wildly within the young adolescent paradigm; the same player who begins behaving boorishly and fouling excessively at age 13, might be the same player who will work night and day to

perfect a bicycle kick! But for the less-skilled and/or less athletically-gifted player—accustomed to making mistakes more often and very aware of the growing gap between him- or herself and the best players—this paradigm translates into a growing *unwillingness* to take chances,(2) depriving the player of one of life's best teaching tools: trial and error. For the more skillful players, the repetitive nature of skill acquisition—and the *possibility of real perfection*—allows for integration with the uber-goal of appearing more adult. To the less-skilled player, this integration appears impossible—each mistake exists in a world of its own; as the mistakes accumulate, these players get caught in the trap of low expectations—yet retain high hopes for positive outcome.(6) But these hopes are more a by-product of inclusion on a team that satisfies external, or social, needs, than part of an internal drive for perfection (or at least progress).

During my 15+ years of coaching, I have observed this dichotomy (low expectations/ high hopes) moving forward the way an engine without oil moves forward: soon enough it will seize and stop operating completely—unless a lubricant is added. It is this article's contention that the most suitable lubricant is a tactical awareness *appropriate* for the average or weak technical skill the players possess, but *complex* enough to foster the acquisition of "game intelligence. You do not have to "dumb-down" the tactical approach. Quite the opposite. Combination plays, zonal defending, all the complexities that help make soccer the "beautiful game"—the game for *players*—can and should be introduced and refined. But you *cannot train both these groups of players the same way*. If you want the less-skilled, less athletically-gifted players to continue with the sport, you need a different approach. You may even need a different kind of coach; one who is willing to 1) replace a *training to win* mentality with a *training to understand* one, 2) replace the goal of technical *perfection* with one of technical *functionality*, 3) spend *more* time with 2v2 and 3v3 before progressing—if at all—to the mid-sized games, and 4) stress *the effort* to problem-solve—ie: to combine on offense (give-and-go, wall passes, etc) and read threats on defense (who is pressure, who is cover, etc.)—and *not so much the execution.*

For the highly-skilled player, adapting to increasing numbers and increasing complexity is a challenge, but a seductive one. His skill base allows him to translate 3v3 to 6v6 and 6v6 to full-sided without emotional turmoil; increased complexity equals increased opportunity, even if those opportunities are initially elusive. But for the lower-level player, movement from 3v3 to 6v6 is like switching to a new language. She can feel lost in a sea of possibilities. Where the highly-skilled player sees opportunity, she sees confusion and—ultimately—failure. By age 12, she has been identified as less-skilled and knows it; she has developed little, if any, "game intelligence," and the possibility of developing it gets slimmer every year. She is likely to rely more and more on extrinsic values (friendships, the "coolness" of being on a team) than intrinsic ones (the movements and flow of the game itself) for satisfaction and enjoyment. Coaches are often heard saying that a player has to reach a high skill level before he or she can develop a real feel for the game. Thus lower-level teams are urged to play "simply," and games often end up being boring expressions of pass and move, the outcome decided by the most physically mature players on the field. But coaches make a costly mistake if they assume "game intelligence" is either innately developed, or acquired best by all level players purely through game experience. Extensive studies have shown that the less-skilled the player is, the *more intervention, guidance and structured training are required.*(3) Coaches who sense this, however, are often discouraged from instituting those training initiatives; the following excuses are most often deployed: "with only two practices a week, there will be less time for games," "it's only natural, kids learn at different rates," and the often misused and misunderstood "just let 'em play soccer, the game's the real teacher." Coaches sensitive to these critiques will often hammer away at repetitive practice in skill acquisition for short but intensive periods in practice, then move to small-sided games with the *same* emphasis on simple technical skills, followed by a to-goals game where tactical advice is rarely given. To me, this is like telling young children they cannot write or tell a story *until* they have learned all the rules of grammar and can correctly spell. Is that the way to nurture love of language? Is that the way to foster creativity? Over the last thirty years, school teachers have learned that the one *is not dependant* on the other.

While watching the lesser-skilled players continuously fall short of ideal is frustrating, it is necessary and must be endured graciously. Like encouraging schoolchildren to express complex stories and *at the same time* working on spelling and grammar, teaching the *complexities* of the game in a small-sided structure can and will foster soccer intuitiveness in even the least-skillful player. It will take longer, it will be messier, but it will go a long way towards overcoming the performance "fear factor" that so often breaks the competitive spirit of adolescents as they enter high school. We need to remind ourselves that adolescence is the period when "doing it right" (ie. performing/honing the proper technique) loses its luster and random exploration of alternative paths to fulfillment emerge. To youth coaches, these alternative behaviors generally fall under the category of "distractions." But too often we try to coax these players out of their "bad" habits, rather than address the underlying cause. In highly-skilled players, the cause is often boredom, possibly the result of dull practice routines. But in less-gifted players the cause is more likely to be confusion. A player's lower skill level does not allow him or her to grow through problem-solving on the field *without considerably more feedback,*(3) and coaches focused on winning further exacerbate the problem by keeping these players on the bench in games.

More often than not, lower-level players perform at less than an optimal level because they are afraid to make a poor touch, which might cause them embarrassment.(4) The attitude is: better to "get beaten" than to make a mistake. "Getting beaten" is seen as an acceptable outcome. Competition, they have learned, has winners and losers, and losing is just part of the game. Competing is the key. As long as you are competing—so it goes—you are OK. Highly-skilled players at this age will tend to blame external factors for a poor performance, but will limit their discouragement to the single performance. Coaches can set this right relatively easily. But less-skilled players will tend to blame themselves and see a poor performance on a continuum ("I am getting worse.")(4) A follow-up training session for the latter should not resemble a training session for the former!

Left untreated, the litany of actions associated with the lower-level player's attitude are legion: The boy who expends exhaustive amounts of energy running in front of—or behind—the spot where he needs to be to head (or chest trap!) the ball. The girl who holds/dribbles the ball forever, and pointlessly—until she loses it— because "nobody was open." The boy who runs full speed ahead to defend and only slows down when the opponent is already past him. Rather than taking defensive posture and settling in, this boy will take a wild swipe at the ball, thus proving to himself that he is "trying really hard." Or the girl who kicks wildly and forcefully and (maybe) successfully on her very first touch with *every* ball that comes her way, because this—and perhaps only this—is what she has done successfully in the past, accompanied by a chorus of parental admiration: "Great kick!" Lower-level players who *do* continue to try to improve will *slow down* to make plays when they are getting—or are in—possession for just that reason. All they would need to do to get out of trouble would be to speed up, but they will not do it, because they might touch the ball in the wrong direction, or make a poor trap and lose the ball. They will practice at an agonizingly slow pace, rather than try it faster—and fail.(4) Then, the emotional context of competition on the weekend adds the weight of anticipated failure, and the likelihood that the lower-level player will execute *under stress* at a higher speed than his or her skill level will allow.

So the coach of lower-level players needs to teach the complexities of the game *knowing* that both the slower pace of some players, and the angst-ridden recklessness of others, may lead to more prolonged tactical failure; he needs to put as much emphasis on the tactical effort (give-and-go/overlap/wall pass etc.) as he would the repetitive practice of individual skills. It could be as simple as a coach lauding the failed effort at a give-and-go—the result, say, of poor technique on the part of the girl making the one-touch "go"—but reminding her that *speed* (her emotional context) is not as important as *accuracy*. He will have laid the groundwork for her to *improve* (possible) rather than *perfect* (impossible) her technique, because she will have an intrinsic motivation factor (get better at the give-and-go) and thus a reason to keep trying. Even if—and maybe *especially* if—that failure resulted in the opposition scoring, that coach would be wise to keep encouraging the *effor*t.

Coaches need to be aware that the *perceived performance gap* between the skilled and/or athletically-gifted player and the less-skilled player develops early on, as early as age 10, and widens when they are both put on the same path and trained in the same way: when the gifted athlete has "mastered" a movement pattern (meaning he has shown the ability at game speed to apply a technique consistently and appropriate to the demands of the game), the coach moves on. For the less-skilled player on that team, or for a lower-level team, the coach will simply lower his expectations; but if both practices are run essentially the same way, the gap will widen irregardless, exacerbated by adolescent anxiety. For example: For the lesser-skilled player to get the ankle *rigid* (toe up/heel down) and the hip *loose* is difficult, because to this type of player a tense ankle may equate with a tense leg, and he may be afraid his first touch will send the ball miles away. So he makes his entire leg "soft." The same is true of weighted passes. Lower-level players may be afraid to really whack the ball with the foot turned out for fear of two things: the pass will be misdirected (an embarrassing error) or the leg speed will result in a mis-kick, getting more grass than ball (bad enough) or whiffing (missing) the ball entirely. These players may—through repeated structured repetitive practice—learn to perform the skill well in practice, but in a competitive situation, the movements either speed up (emotional context overriding the motor skill) or slow down so much that the movement may not have time to be completed before an opponent's challenge. This phenomena is well documented: the *emotional* component of competition, which is in great measure determined by self-awareness of the athlete's efficacy on the field, simply corrupts optimal muscular coordination.(5)

By age 12, with the skill gap widening, there is little hope of it lessening unless the coach recognizes that the less-skilled players need a different approach. Sometimes coaches see the correct path but pressure from parents (who want their children to be treated "just like the A team" unwittingly add to the dilemma. The truth is, *kids know where they are in the pecking order.* They watch the better athletes and know that *that is not them*, *and might never be them.* In hard individual competition, they know they will lose to that talented athlete *every time. So why continue?*

The real need is to instill *confidence* in the lower level player. Confidence in what they *can* do individually and with a tactical/team plan that is the *sum of those confidences*. Even a player with a poor feel/first touch can be taught that a clanky first touch played away from pressure (with a turn of the ankle) can give them a second touch and a chance to perform within a tactical plan (ie: "first touch to space, second touch a pass to the outside back, move back to support the pass you made"). Two players can be taught how to prepare for a give-and-go ("approach your teammate square or slightly behind square to signal your desire for the give") and be rewarded for this in-the-game read, even if the execution falls short. A player with poor dribbling technique can still be taught to dribble at pace and place her body and both feet between a defender and the ball and execute a simple shield while players move about her and give her options to pass—she can feel *confident* within the tactical plan because she has drawn a defender to her (or two if she cares to run a little faster!) and given her teammates more time and space. The coach at this level would be wise to create a tactical plan and movement patterns that ensure that *every* player has a job to do every minute of every game *no matter where the ball is or who possesses the ball.* Thus the beginning—*or a renewed sense—of confidence* can come from the player *understanding her role* and not just from her ability to execute skills. Don't underestimate the simple power of *being in the right place at the right time.*

This level player will benefit *greatly* from having some proscribed rules of movement as part of a tactical whole.(3) Limiting options for these adolescents does not mean constricting their game; it will have quite the opposite effect it does for more gifted players. It will mean more time to concentrate on making good choices of when to execute complex movements. Too many choices will confuse this type of player. Instead of feeling freedom, the less-skilled player will be overwhelmed by the hot sweat of anticipated failure. But coaches must be wary of limiting and defining the roles of such a player based purely on his or her existing but minimal strengths, and overlooking their developing (not good enough yet!) ones. Otherwise, the big kicker never learns a soft first touch, a marking defender never gets involved in the attack, a midfielder never tries a give-and-go or overlap. By the time this player turns 15, she (or he) will have no real

understanding of the game—because she has spent all her time worrying if she has measured up (not well) to an impossible ideal in a game that appears to her to be random and confusing.

Coaches of lower-level players need to use league games as a way of measuring the week's training in easily understandable terms, regardless of the outcome. For example, in a pre-game reminder it might be enough to say: "We are trying to get our four backs working together as a unit, calling out 'First' for the girl closest to the ball, and 'Second' for the covering defender. Defenders three and four provide balance and look for danger coming from their areas. Remember to support from the rear at an angle. Does that sound familiar? Let's see how well we can do that today." Or: "We've been working all week on our forwards pressuring with call-outs from our midfielders and each other. The supporting forward says what? (Player answers: *move her right or mover her left!*) Excellent. And what might the supporting midfielder say? (Player might answer: *"Keep her outside" or" move her to the middle."*) Post-game, the coach can make sure that the players were engaged: "We set out to have our defenders work as a unit. How did we do? What worked? Let's review it in our next practice."

In working with the less-gifted player, coaches must realize the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors, and make the necessary adjustments. Increasing the player's self-awareness of efficacy may have a more lasting effect than any extrinsic reward or threat—like "great job today!" which the player may or may not feel was due to her own actions, or "you have to try harder!" which is often simply a misdiagnosis. These phrases are designed by coaches to get instant reactions. But increasing a player's self-awareness of efficacy requires time and patience, and progress is not easily observable or measurable.(3)

The coach must also realize that age 14 is *not* too late for a child to develop skill or even flair, as well as an abiding love of the game. But this player does not need the additional pressure of the typical phrases uttered at this stage: "You can't learn the tactics until you learn the techniques." "You'll never move up until you develop better skills." "If you

haven't got the skills by now, you'll never develop them." This is like saying that if a young person doesn't grow up speaking a language, they will never be "fluent." *But there is no time limit on learning.* Everyone learns at a different rate and brings a different combination of natural intelligences to the process. As coaches, we just have to figure out what those are, and be patient, and demanding, at the same time.

Think of it this way: if it were you, how would *you* want to be treated? Wouldn't you want to be able to try and fail *without* being judged? Wouldn't you want someone to tell you *how* you can succeed competitively *with the ability you have*? Who realizes you don't learn the same way or at the same speed as others? Wouldn't you want someone to help you improve at a *realistic* rate? We should offer our lower-level youth players no less than what we would desire for ourselves.

Winning and *losing* will still be important, but the meaning of the words will change.

With these insights into the characteristics of the lower-level player in this critical age group, I hope to provoke coaches of these players to 1) shift focus, from the demands of the game to the needs of the players, 2) teach the complexities and subtleties of the game (give-and-go, wall passes, third man running, overlaps, etc.) in the small-sided arena, but do not dumb-down the game when moving to the full field, 3) not mistake the lack of athleticism or skill for lack of intelligence or ability to read the game, 4) not let their players' performance in games be the sole indicator of progress—rather create realistic goals they can achieve, goals that create patterns of success and continuous improvement. Those players will not only continue to play, some of them will turn out to be diamonds that their previous coaches thought were lumps of coal.

(1) from Spano, S. (May 2004) Stages of Adolescent Development. *Research FACTs and Findings.* And *Stages of Adolescent Development* (chart), State of Oregon, Department of Human Services, 2009

(2) this speaks to the theory of "learned helplessness," a clinical anxiety disorder, that

is observed in moderate form in adolescents in test performance in classrooms and in sports. Ex: *Learned Helplessness: A Theory for the Age of Personal Control,* Christopher Peterson, Steven F. Maier, Martin P Seligman, 1993, Oxford University Press

(3) see *Practice, Instruction and Skill Acquisition in Soccer: Challenging Tradition,* A Mark Williams, Nicola J. Hodges, Journal of Sports Sciences, Research Institute for Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, UK (July 2004)

(4) from *Cognitive-Affective Sources of Sports Enjoyment in Adolescent Sport Participants,* Michael P. Boyd, Zenong Yin, Adolescence, Volume 31, Issue 122, 1996

(5) *Skilled Versus Novice Performers,* from the online journal: EXRX, www.exrx.net/sports psychology, 2010

(6) from *Great Expectations: How Do Athletes of Different Expectancies Attribute Their Perception of Personal Athletic Performance?,* Marcias A. Wilson, Dawn E. Stephens, Journal of Sports Behavior. Vol. 28, Issue 4, 2005.

(7) *Competence, Perceived Importance of Competence, and Drop-Out From Soccer: A Study of Young Players,* Y. Omundson, P. Vaglum. Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, June 2007.

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