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(adapted from Mass Youth Soccer Curr.)

To Cheer or Not To Cheer—That is the Question

Most coaches and parents of beginner players unknowingly emphasize the wrong skills. In a typical U-6/U-8 club play, the players are encouraged by both the parents on the sidelines and the coaches to ‘boot’ the ball up the field. Shouts of “get rid of it!” and “kick it!” are all too common. The further forward a player kicks, the louder the cheers. Players are so indoctrinated to ‘kick it forward’ that very few of them dare to get out of pressure by dribbling. Even when no one is around to pressure them, we see players just kicking the ball without any thought. Part of this might be because of the cheering they get from the sideline when they do this. However, kicking is not a skill. All of us, with no learning, can kick a ball. What we really want to emphasize is learning and skill development. So, please, do not cheer for kicking...cheer for dribbling and creativity. We do not want to ‘coach’ the players out of developing ball skills and showing creativity—do we?

On the surface it is easy to say that results at U-6 and U-8 do not matter and there is no need to keep standings. In actuality, players at this age often do not know the score when the game ends.

I am willing to bet they know the directions to the nearest ice cream store however. Even with this understanding it is hard for you to watch your child lose the ball in front of his own goal and for the other team to score. It is difficult to not place importance on the score as we are tallying it in our head. Despite this, we need to remember what is best for the players. Partner with your spouse or a friend and help stop each other from saying “kick it”. It is especially hard when the ball is front of their goal and you want them to clear it, but please remember, every time they kick it, they lose another opportunity to learn to dribble.

Many of you may be wondering about teaching passing as that is certainly part of soccer. However, just as in school, we are taking one step at a time. Before we do multiplication and division, we are doing addition and subtraction. There is a progression to learning and the players are most capable of learning dribbling at this age. You will not typically see any passing in a U-6 game, and very little in a U-8 game. Passing is simply beyond the ability of U-6 and most U-8 players. Most players realize there is only one toy on the field and they want to play with the toy. They do not understand the logic in giving their toy to someone else. If they do that,

they no longer get to play with the toy. Think of dribbling as ‘passing to one self’. If players cannot pass to themselves, how can they be expected to pass to a teammate 15 yards away? Despite our grandest hopes, let us be honest with ourselves as well. Some of those kicks that end up going to teammates are still just kicks. The fact that they randomly ended up with a teammate does not make the kick a pass.☺

Weaning Young Players Out of Adult Dependency

In addition to technical development, we want to help players with mental development. Just as they practice technical skills to improve their play, they also need to practice decision making. This can very easily be done by placing them into situations repeatedly and allowing them to make decisions on their own. If natural consequences do not teach them what the best decision is, then the coach can help clarify that with the player. If we constantly tell these young players what to do and prevent them from making these decisions, they will never improve their decision making skills, a very important part of the game. Typically, children aged 4 to 8 are naturally dependent on their parents for many of their daily needs. In youth sports, this dependency is manifested as parental coaching from the sidelines. The players themselves will tend to look to their parents for help since they are conditioned to be dependent on them. Although it can be very hard, we need to allow these players to make their own decisions. The hardest part will be that some of the decisions will be faulty. However, we must allow them to learn from their successes and failures as both provide vital information and help in development. Therefore, another important objective of our U-6/U-8 program is to wean the players out of their dependency on adults during games. This is crucial for the development of soccer players. Since coaches do not have time outs and the game runs continuously, coaches have very little control over games once they start. Soccer players must learn to think for themselves and the sooner they learn to stand on their own feet, the better. Since results do not matter at these age groups, no one should be overly concerned if players make mistakes that lead to goals. Parents and coaches must resist the urge to tell their players what to do for the good of the players. Not surprisingly children tell us that they actually have more fun when they are not being told what to do constantly....imagine.

Commonly, we see parents sitting and standing very close to the sidelines and even encroaching onto the field. We realize that we get excited and are enthusiastic and that is great! However, parents sitting so close to and on the field impacts the players’ behavior, response and performance. If we want to give the players a sense of freedom and the ability to make their own decisions, we need to physically step back. This is why we ask you to sit some distance from the field, where you can still enjoy watching without your presence intimidating the players. What we lose in coziness, we gain in giving an invaluable sense of independence to the players.