

The Conflicting Models

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By Kent James

There are conflicting models of youth soccer development operating in the United States.

One is that players with potential greatness should be identified as early as possible, and then be exposed to the highest levels of coaching and competitive play to help them reach their potential very quickly.

Training for these players is serious, year-round, and intense.

The other is that youth soccer should be fun, as many players as possible should play, for as long as possible, which will provide the largest base of soccer players from which to develop professional and national team players.

Where these models clash is at the youngest age groups, U-12 and below.

Competitive pressures are encouraging elite clubs to professionalize training at younger and younger ages. But is this development good for youth soccer as a whole, or even the kids on the select team?

There are two problems with professionalizing the youngest age groups -- exclusion and burnout.

Most professional coaches don't want to work with weaker players because they feel it is a waste of their limited time. They also don't want weaker players involved because they bring down the quality of play for the rest of the players, and using them in competitive games may cause the team to lose.

Additionally, cost and the scarcity of good professional coaches means that clubs must select the players to train, excluding the rest.

But even if evaluators could select the best players, U-9 players are so early in their process of development it is too difficult to predict how good they will eventually be.

So many players who might be talented players later in their careers are excluded and never get the opportunity to improve.

As for burnout. Starting these players (and their parents) on the intense, professional style training at a young age adds years of pressure to their youth soccer experience, which for most players probably does more harm than good.

Intense training is more important for a 16-year-old than it is for a 9-year-old. Even motivated, talented players at age 9 usually play because it's fun, not because they want a scholarship or a paycheck. One of the greatest tragedies in youth soccer is for a talented older youth player to quit because they've burned out.

A youth soccer system that provides a good experience to the greatest number of players will provide the largest pool of talented players for our professional and national teams.

These players will develop because they love the game, not because good coaches forced their development at an early age. Developing players can best be accomplished by providing professional training at a young age to all who want it, not just a select group of players.

But that training must be limited, so that young players are not burnt out, and are still able to play primarily for fun. Professional training needs to support and supplement the youth programs that exist, not take their best players away as quickly as they can.

Professional coaches should maximize their influence by coaching many young players with more limited time, rather than only a few players with a lot of time.

Professional coaches should teach the volunteer coaches, rather than look down on them. And the less intense recreation programs must also recognize that as the players get older, it is appropriate for the best players to move on, and enter a more intense, professional world.

At the younger ages, U11 and below, leagues should focus on evenly matched, competitive games, but it does not matter who wins or loses, so there is no pressure outside the game.

Professional coaches need to bring their expertise to helping these kids develop their skills, perhaps by providing weekly clinics for all interested players, not coaching small teams of selected players.

In such clinics it would be appropriate to group the kids by skill levels, so selectivity can lead to more focused training, but the weaker kids should not be denied training, they should simply be trained at a more basic level.

Helping large numbers of younger players develop their skills will elevate the level of play in the leagues in which they play, which would allow more players to progress on their own.

In contrast, taking the best kids out of these leagues to put them in a more competitive environment will bring down the quality of play in the leagues they've left, and hinder the development of the players there, and this is where the majority of the players are.

If we want to have the best soccer players in the world, we must do the hard work of improving the quality of play that the majority of players experience, rather than focusing on a select few.

In addition to creating a larger pool of players eligible for selection, such a strategy has the added benefit of building support for soccer generally, and allowing soccer to attract the best athletes the country can supply.

It is also financially more viable, because a small fee split among many recreational players could easily pay for professionally run clinics, instead of members of a single team trying to pay the salary of a professional coach by themselves.

Player development should be focused on inclusion at the younger age groups, rather than exclusion.

Intense, professional training should be reserved for older youth players, who are physically, socially and mentally ready to undertake it. We must resist the temptation to try to force the issue.

(Kent James has coached and refereed youth soccer at all levels from U6 to college for the last 20 years. He has a National Youth license, and was a state referee. He currently helps coach the Washington High School Varsity team, the Pittsburgh Football Club U17 Boys and the Victory Express U14 Boys teams. He continues to play competitively in Pittsburgh, Pa., and is on the board of Washington Soccer (PA), a local youth soccer organization.)