

## ***Keeping Them Interested***

By: Lou Mignone

My 5-year-old child is interested in playing soccer. What can I do to get him/her involved? The first thing that immediately comes to mind is; “That’s great! Let’s work upon maintaining that interest by providing to him/her a wholesome supply of gratifying activities. The child’s interest in playing the game serves as the necessary fuel to keep the fire burning, for without this desire the child will eventually pursue other diversions. We certainly know what we may do to get a child involved in soccer and that is to sign him/her up for the local recreational Little Kickers Program. Will that be enough however to keep him or her meaningfully connected to the sport for any length of time past this initial phase? I believe that this answer lies within the child’s assessment of the overall quality of his or her experiences which are effected by the enjoyment of the activities presented, the opportunity provided for active involvement and growth in skills, and the often present backdrop factors of external pressures to perform more effectively (run faster, kick harder, be more aggressive) and to achieve a winning game result or season championship.

Research published by the Department of Kinesiology at the University of Colorado in the area of motivating factors for male and female children to participate in youth soccer highlighted the top three to be:

- 1) To have fun,
- 2) Feel good when I have played well
- 3) To have a good time.

The least motivating factor and last place finisher at #27 was “To win against others” (McCullagh, et al., 1993, p. 228). How can we as a youth soccer community ensure that these intrinsic motivating factors of having fun, feeling good when one has played well, and having a good time remain at the forefront of our presentation of the game to these players while diminishing the significance of the extrinsic reward of gaining superiority over others? Some may feel that this is an unrealistic goal in view of the fact that our American youth sports culture places such a tremendous emphasis upon winning as the be-all end-all. I believe that although this worthwhile undertaking may be wrought with complexities, cultural change is possible especially if it is implemented at the introductory point of the youth soccer voyage.

Beginner programs like Little Kickers have over the years adapted the playing environment for these youngsters to be more suitable for this age group’s level of understanding and physical capabilities. The 2v2 or 3v3 format to small goals without keepers provides to these players the freedom to experiment with the ball’s rolling and bouncing characteristics as they maneuver the ball on the dribble while challenged by an opponent. This small-sided format serves to directly engage each child within the action of the activity, thus increasing the probability that he or she will derive enjoyment and become accustomed to utilizing different surfaces of the feet to manage the ball. This phase of learning after all, is termed by the U.S. Youth Soccer Coaching Education Department as the “me, my, mine stage of development” because of the intimate connection established between the individually oriented u-6 player and the ball, thus reducing the presence of any significant group collaboration. We look to this natural

occurrence as a positive one that must be encouraged and built upon particularly over the following six years within Zone 1 of the player development process which encompasses u-6 through u-12. Embracing this individuality is a must and coaches must take care to make it clear to parents that these players must try out new things with the ball and get to know it very well prior to sharing it with others. Shouting demands such as “pass it” will only confuse them and may even stifle their inventiveness.

Practice session coaching should involve the facilitating of fun activities for the u-6 group, affording to each of them plenty of opportunities to experiment with their own ball, which they view as more of a toy during this chapter of their soccer journal. Simple learning topics centered on dribbling, starting, stopping, changing pace and direction, and using various surfaces to control the ball’s movement are sure to be fun and challenging at the same time. Individual achievement under these conditions will be readily recognized, recorded, and measured by the child each time that he/she successfully performs these basic skills through activities chock-filled with dynamic repetition. Typically these accomplishments relating to the acquisition of new ball skills during pleasurable activities, although overlooked by many adults, are the driving force that propels a child further along the developmental journey. We must not underestimate the importance of enabling these players the freedom to explore various challenges at their own ability level so that comfort and confidence on the ball may be realized. This idea is vividly expressed by Dr. Muska Mosston’s Slanty Line Theory. Dr. Mosston, a physical education teacher that slanted a rope, providing to his students the opportunity to choose the height that coincided with their ability to perform a successful jump. Once they felt more confident and desired to try a new height that same opportunity was still there (Fleck, et al., 2002, pp. 4-5).

Careful attention is often paid by parents when selecting an appropriate program or club for the advancement of their children as players within the game however little or no consideration is given to the need for knowledge-base expansion on the part of these adults pertaining to youth soccer player development. This missing link may serve as a primary impediment to the improvement and sophistication of our youth soccer culture inasmuch that the soccer mindset of the parents is oftentimes not in line with the goals and objectives of the coaches and players within the club. Instruction delivered by the director of coaching to the club’s parent contingency relative to its coaching curriculum, style of play, mission of developing players, and vision of success can be performed on a regular basis via e-mails, hand-outs, or parent meetings, either formally or informally. This networking serves to keep parents up to speed, thus involving them in the solution to this dilemma. The well-informed parent can have the ability to provide positive reinforcement of sound soccer principles when observed from the touchline during matches instead of shouting commands that contradict the instruction that is carefully planned and delivered by staff during training sessions such as “get rid of it! Boot it! Send it!” The stress over choosing whether to function in matches as he or she would perform during small-sided training session games or respond to voiced parent expectations of what ought to happen at various moments will be gradually eliminated as a result of soccer enlightenment on the part of the parents. This education process delivered in a comprehensive manner among the staff, players, and parents will not only sharpen the player development focus and quality of instruction but will aim at

minimizing the sideline behavior that places an over-bearing emphasis upon being stronger, quicker, and winning.

We must keep in mind that the three greatest motivators for a child to participate in youth soccer are to have fun, to feel good about playing well, and to have a good time. Although this seems to be a fairly simple order to fill, considering the fact that as coaches we are experienced at designing vibrant, challenging, skill building activities, we must be mindful of the fact that parents need care and attention as well. Seize those coaching moments to illustrate the value of promoting risk-taking for a youth player in possession of the ball fearing not the possibility of making a mistake. Request that they join you in persuading their respective child to take-on opponents 1v1 and praising them for doing so regardless of the outcome. Help them to understand that “dribbling is the first step to mastering ball skills,” (Woitalla, 2008) which in turn aids at building player confidence and advancement along the “slanted line.” The “boot it” demands from the spectator side of the field will hopefully transform sooner than later, into praising fakes, recognizing creativity, and commending each proper first touch. Setting this tone with parents early on in the youth soccer experience through sound soccer education and effective communication will serve to better enable each young player to achieve what he or she desires most from their involvement, stress-free fun, and enjoyment.

## References

Fleck, T., Quinn, R., Carr, D., Buren, W., & Stringfield, V. (2008). *The official u.s. youth soccer coaching manual*. Retrieved from [http://www.usyouthsoccer.org/assets/coaches/2011\\_COACHES\\_MANUAL\\_PDF\\_FOR\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.usyouthsoccer.org/assets/coaches/2011_COACHES_MANUAL_PDF_FOR_WEB.pdf)

McCullagh, P., Matzkanin, K.T., Shaw, S.D., & Maldonado, M. (1993). Motivation for participation in physical activity: A comparison of parent-child perceived competencies and participation motives. *Pediatric Exercise Science*, 6, 224-233. Retrieved from <http://www.eteamz.com/NCRL/files/MotivationforParticipationinPhysicalActivity.pdf>

Woitalla, M. (2008, May 23). How the screaming hurts. *Soccer America*. Retrieved from <http://www.socceramerica.com/article/26649/youth-beat-how-the-screaming-hurts.html>