

The Car Ride Home

I recently had the opportunity to meet with a group of parents of a u-9 boys travel team to discuss our club's mission with respect to facilitating the conditions which focus upon player development over match results. These particular parents had enjoyed a rather successful wins/losses record that leaned in their favor over the past few seasons. The focal point of our club however was now upon fostering development of each player in lieu of concentrating upon securing wins each Sunday. This change in course brought with it a bit of uneasiness and perhaps even some anxiety on the part of the parents. I prefaced this meeting during the prior week with a series of e-mail messages to the non-volunteer coaching staff, parent managers, and parents, outlining the age-appropriate curriculum, providing an overview of the game-like progression of our economical training sessions, and describing the long-term benefits derived by the players in terms of their growths within the four pillars of the game (technical, tactical, physical, and mental) in this type of learning environment. I explained the importance of their collective energies in support of this effort, particularly among the parents whom I feel have the ability during that famous car ride home, to "make or break" the finest laid plans which guide our club's instructional path. The parent buy-in was therefore identified as a crucial aspect in determining the ultimate success of our mission.

The meeting began with a summary of our club's player development model and the vision with respect to enabling the players we serve to build a solid technical foundation upon which the majority of further advancement in the game relies. They seemed to listen carefully to highlighted talking points such as: guided discovery, confidence and experimentation with the ball, solving soccer problems, and attacking-oriented group possession but I could sense a level of frustration through non-verbal cues of some group members when I made clear to them that teaching this type of soccer will take time. I informed them about the bad news first. Youth teams that try to play this way are often outscored by opposing teams which apply the "quick fix" of "booting" the ball out of the back and chasing it down in the attacking half to go to goal. I assured them that although this process of learning to play high quality soccer may take a few seasons, the benefits derived by each individual player are long term. I continued that it will no longer be a fair match-up between the "soccer-playing" team and the "quick fix" team once the players become capable of applying their learning of good soccer with sound execution. I respectfully requested patience from these parents during this developmental journey of their children and encouraged them to take teaching re-enforcement moments to recognize positive soccer habits observed during training sessions and matches regardless of the final outcome. The car ride home was noted as the perfect opportunity for this to occur.

One particular mother approached me privately at the conclusion of this meeting. She applauded as a child psychology specialist our club's philosophy with respect to guided discovery and allowing the game to serve as the teacher. She also opined that I was "on the right track" relative to my efforts of educating the youth soccer parents about the development vs. winning topic in order to successfully advance a true player development culture. She conceded that she is a bit challenged in the soccer knowledge department and requested that I provide to her some examples of items to discuss with her son during the sometimes infamous car ride home. I explained that as a soccer dad I have some experience that I could share in this area concerning interaction with a youth player minus the need of an advanced soccer intuition.

I like to initiate with some open ended questions which illicit more detailed responses than “yes” or “no” and encourage him to talk about what is on his mind, thus providing clues of what he finds noteworthy about the practice or game. “Hey pal, what did you think about that game (or training session)?” That question usually brings out a response such as; “That was fun Dad. We practiced step-over fakes and I was able to do them with both feet. Coach George told everyone that I did it very well and I even demonstrated it for the team. I tried them in our game to trick people. It worked once but the orange team stole it three times.” My response would not address whatsoever the three times that the step-over fake was unsuccessful in beating opponents 1v1 but would accentuate my pleasure of his attempts to apply sound technique while under pressure. “That is so exciting to see you do that step-over fake. I bet that it is not an easy thing to learn to do, especially when someone is trying to steal the ball from you.” A response would possibly be; “Yeah, it is tricky to do when you’re running too but I am getting better every day.” My follow-up would be; “You better believe it! I can’t wait until you have the opportunity to try that again and again!” He will most likely turn this conversation into the direction of stopping for pizza and that would be just fine with me, considering that we had a very productive car ride home in terms of its player-development reinforcement value.

The car ride home, if looked upon as an occasion to summarize key elements of the player’s learning and practical application experiences that day, serves as a significant opportunity to buttress the positive development that is taking place. Each of these discussions may have a positive beginning, middle, and end regardless of match results or perceived mistakes on the field. The youth soccer experience should be one that is immensely enjoyed through exploration, risk-taking, and learning of ball skills as opposed to stressful feelings about winning and losing and worries about making errors or displeasing coaches and/or parents. Let’s keep this game the beautiful one!

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