



New Jersey Youth Soccer

U10 Position Paper

by Rick Meana - Director of Coaching



Recently a National Position Paper was released by US Soccer, the governing body of soccer in the United States to all State Directors of Coaching from around the nation detailing the merits of non-result oriented competition for the U10 and below age group. In practical terms this philosophy has as it's base that U10 leagues and tournaments, should not declare a champion or keep standings. Rather clubs, organizations should create "festivals" for U10 teams. To date non-result oriented competition has been a positive step forward in the development of U10 players. Many states have implemented this philosophy for example Northern California, Massachusetts, Maine, South and North Texas to name a few. There is evidence that this has also led to less documented incidents of inappropriate side-line behavior on the part of coaches, parents and spectators. My colleagues from around the country have addressed their state associations and the following paraphrases their thoughts. Special thanks go to Andy Biggs, Director of Coaching, Soccer Maine.

What is Non-Result Oriented Competition?

I often hear non-result oriented soccer referred to as non-competitive, but in fact it is competitive. At every level of the game the soccer player is faced with many challenges. Children enjoy the excitement of a challenge. As such, you have what would be considered competition in their eyes. While wins and losses are not recorded nor league standings kept in non-result oriented soccer most of the players will know the final score anyway, and that's ok. We expect that they will compete for the enjoyment of the challenge.

The non-result philosophy simply aims to focus the emphasis of this competition on the process rather than the result. Before youth players can place winning and losing in its proper perspective they must first learn to enjoy competition regardless of the result. Win or lose we want them to leave the field believing that taking part in the game was the best way they could have spent that hour of their lives. By recognizing all of the players for having the courage to compete rather than just the winning team we are sending a clear message that it's really how you play the game that is the most important. It's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game. Everyone has heard this yet very few practice this philosophy.

Why non-result oriented soccer at U10?

We need a philosophy of competition for U10 players that is consistent with the philosophy of player development that is taught in our coaching education courses. In our courses we stress that an important component of the development of U10 players is exposing them to playing everywhere on the field, and providing everyone with as many opportunities to play. This holds true not only for games but for practices as well. Activities, exercises, and game formats should be inclusive rather than exclusive. If U10 teams enter into competitions that reward winning, we are sending a mixed message and thereby sending our youth coaches down the wrong path. On the one hand we ask coaches to stress what is right for each individual player, and on the other hand the game format leads them to focus on what is right for the team. One of the most difficult problems that a youth coach will face is that player development, which focuses on doing what is right for each individual, and winning which focuses on doing what is right for the team are often in conflict.

In our licensing courses we stress to our youth coaches that their responsibility is to develop players rather than win games. It is the players' job to solve the problems and win the challenge. This means that we do not want our U10 coaches choosing to leave a strong player at center back or goalkeeper for the entire game just to give their team the best chance to win nor do we want them to hesitate in putting in a less skilled player in a close game because it may mean they must take a more developed player off. Unfortunately coaches will not take this chance. They would rather sacrifice player development in the name of winning. On the one hand they would be sacrificing the development of the advanced player and on the other hand they would be sacrificing the development of a child who may end up being a late bloomer. We do not want our U10 coaches coaching to win. Even if a player has played at least half a game all season if a coach chooses to deny the player that same time on the field in a tournament final then we have sent that player a clear message and the message is your not good enough to play. If we truly believe that the U10 coaches' job not to win games then why do we put them into a position where they need to choose between winning and player development? When we hold out the carrot of winning a championship trophy at the end of the season there are unspoken expectations that we may be testing the resolve of even the best youth coaches. Let us not forget the parents who put subtle or sometimes not so subtle pressure on the need to win. And there may be similar pressure and stress from coaches or administrators within in our own clubs. Maybe the older teams in these clubs are successful and if one of their U10 teams is not then that coach maybe be made to feel like they are inferior. We want our youth coaches completely free of pressure to do their jobs and non-result soccer will create the proper environment where all coaches can focus on developing all of their players. In this type of environment coaches coach to develop and the players play for the enjoyment of the challenge. Winning will take care of itself.

Would non-result oriented soccer eliminate a major incentive for creating U10 and below A and B teams?

The NJYS Coaching Schools believe that even at the U10 age it is still too early to make an educated guess at a player's potential. If we continue to organize championships in this age group we continue to send mixed messages to club coaches, because we are providing them with an enticement to ignore player development over winning now! The creation of A and B teams is in conflict with player development because of the message it sends to those players who are cut from the A team or worse are relegated to the B team. Upon learning that a player didn't make the A team or has been placed on the B team the message that we are sending is that soccer is not for them. At this age we find that kids begin to opt out of youth sports at an alarming rate. By choosing to use A and B teams we are just adding to the statistics.

By the time kids reach nine or ten they begin to look to see where they fit in and if they are cut or placed on a B team we are telling them that they don't fit in here. But at this age how can we tell that we may be turning away the next Mia Ham or Clint Mathis? Even worse we may be turning away someone who will become a great coach, administrator or financial supporter of this game. It is possible they may not even want their kids to play soccer. We all know stories of great athletes who were late bloomers, Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team. Currently the top clubs around the world who are famous for developing youth players document that only a handful of hundreds of U9 players that are identified ever make it all the way to the full professional team. These are players that are exposed to the very best coaching and world-class facilities. The important thing to note is that we really can't begin to guess at a young player's potential until they hit puberty. It has been stated by some of the top international coaches that the younger the player being identified the higher the probability of error occurs when judging ability. With this in mind it seems appropriate to eliminate any incentive for clubs to create A and B teams for U10 or younger. Likewise, It makes no sense to create one team and make those players who are cut into a recreational program.

We need to keep in mind that these are children not mini adults.

While it may be important to look at the now, it is our responsibility as coaches, administrators and organizers to take a look at what the future will be for these players. Our goal is to keep these players playing into adulthood. If this is what we choose to believe than why rush them into result-orientated play? I often hear from coaches and parents that kids like playing in a championship format and this is what they want. I wonder is this the child expectations or the parents?

In April of 1989 at the Annual Conference of the United States Soccer Federation, which was held in Colorado Springs, Seefeldt, Ewing, Walk, Hylka, and Trevor presented a study titled "Reason for Participating in and Dropping Out of American Youth Soccer. From this we soccer educators learned that winning was not amongst top ten reasons why girls played the game, and it was only 9th on the list for boys. Instead, boys and girls both reported that having fun, the excitement of competing and improving their skills were ranked higher than winning!

Conclusion

In light of what was reported in this study, what the statistics show (70% will drop out of youth sports before they reach the age of 14), and given the need to guide coaches to focus on development as well as not attempting to gauge ability at too young an age, there is much to say for adopting Non-Result Orientated Competition for the benefit of the development of our young players in New Jersey.

Even our top leaders in this sport, Bruce Arena Head Coach US Men's National Team Coach and April Heinrichs Us Women's National Team Coach agree, that youth coaches need to concentrate on the development of the players rather than on producing winning teams. As a country we have developed scores of athletes, but very few soccer players.

The top clubs all around the world for example, AJAX, Barcelona, AC Milan, Manchester United, Liverpool all sponsor youth development teams! These clubs aren't keeping win/loss records or league standings until the players reach the U16 level. Look at the French Men's National Team, eleven years ago they began similar programs throughout France, and in 1998 we witnessed first hand the benefits of these efforts. All in all, these programs share a common theme, prior to the U16 and some U17age, the coaches main responsibility is the development of the youth players; Non-Result Orientated Competition, a focus on Technical Refinement through small-sided play is the key to that process.

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