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The New Paradigm for Player Development

By Brad Partridge

Having been involved in soccer in the US since 1967 I have had the pleasure of seeing it grow beyond anyone's expectations. The sheer numbers of players, estimated at somewhere between 13 and 17 million is staggering to say the least. Watching US players in Europe playing at the highest levels is exciting and impressive.

Unlike most other cultures throughout the world, the game of soccer in the US has not been, until recently a primary sport. Not to mention the religious like stature it receives in many cultures such as South America, Africa and Europe. Yet we live in one of the most competitive, affluent and technically advanced cultures ever. Our youth are well educated, well nourished, and more physically fit than most youth players from these other cultures. Our soccer facilities for youth players are vast and growing. So the question begs itself why we don't and if we will ever produce one of the world's best field players.

The answer to this question lies in the developmental paradigms that have emerged in the US. The largest influence has come from the US Soccer Federation and its publication, "Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States". In the publication the USSF quite clearly states, *"The most fundamental skill in soccer is individual mastery of the ball and the creativity that comes with it. This should be a priority in training and games, especially in the early years. As this skill is mastered, the rest of the game becomes easier – both to teach and learn. Practices should be built around facilitating the development of the skills necessary to move and control the ball well."* This message is clear and concise, that is, youth players should be encouraged, motivated and coached to develop individual ball skills.

So we now have a very thoughtful and logical directive for coaches, trainers, clubs and organizations to follow. The result of which should be the development of very skilled soccer players. Unfortunately what has happened is that instead of letting these concepts work to produce skilled players we have based our practices, training and success on **team development** and not on **player development**. Instead of working specifically with players to develop better skills we have focused on teams playing more structured games and measuring success from the results. For our youth players the structured game has become the **developmental paradigm**. Many youth teams, U14 and under are playing more than 50 structured games per year while some are playing 75 to 100 games. Structured games are games played in leagues and tournaments with results and or standing acknowledged. With this being the norm our youth players are now engage in practice activities that are geared toward game preparation and results instead of individual player development.

The environment of these structured games has counteracted the original intended purpose of having the game be the best teacher and helping young player's develop. Players are not getting adequate touches on the ball. Players at an early age are being pigeon-hold in specific positions, and undue pressure to win is being created because of published standings and results. In this current environment players have lost the opportunity to be creative and improve. Finally we are seeing

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players at a very early age becoming disenchanted and burned out. When players do survive these conditions, we quite frequently see that their technical skills, creativity and decision making techniques are underdeveloped. The style of play at this point is most commonly seen as very direct “vertical soccer”. So we find our youth development programs stuck in a team and coach centered game results process that produces technically deficient players.

The New Paradigm

Research in athletic development and what it takes to become an elite athlete has given us several points to work from when effectively developing skilled players.

First, we know that effective skills development comes from constant repetitive activities and that it takes years of deliberate practice to develop an elite athlete.

See: **(The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance, K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Romer, Psychology Review, 1993, Vol 100 No. 3, 363-406)**

Second, we know that athletes respond to and are more motivated by immediate objective feedback and measurable goals than other forms of coaching.

The coaching process is about enhancing performance by providing feedback about the performance to the athlete or team. Researchers have shown that human observation and memory, wonderful though they are, are not reliable enough to provide accurate and objective information for high-performance athletes. Objective measuring tools are necessary to enable the feedback process.

[Mike Hughes](#), Centre for Performance Analysis, UWIC, Wales, UK

In a letter to his player’s parents on June 6, 2003 Anson Dorrance wrote,

“As part of what we try to do to take people to their soccer potential is to frame our athletic culture with these three fundamental ideas:

- 1. People do what you inspect not what you expect**
- 2. Players develop best in competitive environments**
- 3. The truly great athletes (the ones that are ambitious and hard working) want constant feedback and information about where they are and where they need to concentrate to get better**

Finally, we know that our youth are spending less time in unstructured sports activities and more time interfacing with technology. Anyone involved with young athletes today knows how they are constantly interacting with technology on a daily basis.

We can now refocus the paradigm based on these trends and developmental characteristics.

First, we need to spend more time engaging our players in deliberate practice activities. These activities should focus on the player rather than on the team. An effective way to accomplish this is to set up practice sessions that focus on each player working with a ball. By setting up groups of players instead of teams the focus stays with the player. Combining and mixing age groups and gender is possible since the emphasis is on the individual player’s development. One of the most important factors in the new paradigm is giving each player significantly more touches on the ball. By adding objective feedback and a competitive environment the new paradigm becomes an immediately effective process. Using objective data and new technology can help players see progress and set measurable goals. New internet programs are available to help coaches effectively and easily manage this process.

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(See the CAPS Program <http://capscore.org/> and The FASoccerStar program <http://www.fasoccerstar.com/>)

Adding Skills competition between players can be used to challenge players and provide a fun and enjoyable alternative to structured games. In a study done by the Youth Sports Institute of Michigan State University they found that:

“Skill development is a critical aspect of fun: it is more important than winning even among the best athletes.”

The last change in the new development paradigm is to allow players to engage in unstructured small sided games. Young athletes need an environment in which they can observe, experiment and participate without restrictions or boundaries. This environment gives players the opportunity to fail without consequences or criticism. Coaches and trainers can move players into groups of equal ability so that the players are constantly challenged. However, the coaches and trainers are there only to provide this opportunity and should not be actively telling players what to do or how to do it. **“Just let them play”**. Now, when players do compete in structure games they will be better equipped to deal with the challenges they face.

Now we have a new refocused developmental paradigm that is; based on the individual player, emphasizes technical skills, uses new technology and allows for unstructured play. The effect of this refocusing will be the development of players that are more comfortable with the ball, more creative and able to play at a higher level as they mature.

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