

## **We identify our best players, but our best players still aren't good enough.**

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I have recently finished reading the latest Soccer Journal, specifically Gary Allen's article, "Developing Speed of Play". Gary is on the US Youth Soccer Staff and the article is well written. Like many of the articles in the Soccer Journal the authors consistently recommend that we as a nation need to put more emphasis on individual player development. Gary writes, *"For us to develop players who can play with multi-dimensional quickness, we must focus more on the process for each player rather than on creating tiers of result-seeking teams at younger and younger ages."* This has been a common theme not only in the Soccer Journal but in the entire soccer media actively involved in the discussion of player development in the US.

SoccerAmerica winter issue 2011; Warning Signs, by Paul Kennedy. *"Former star Julie Foudy suggested that U.S. Soccer work more with the women's game at the youth level, where the USA is beginning to lag behind such countries as South Korea and Japan, which are both producing marvelous young players."*

When I look at the soccer landscape in the US I see that the major organizations have done and are doing a significant amount of work identifying our best players. ODP is the most prevalent example as well as US Club Soccer's id2 program. In addition there is a plethora of leagues specifically designed and marketed as Elite players Identification and Development Leagues, USYSA Regional, US Soccer Development Academy, Super Y, US Club, Elite Clubs National League are the most notable. For those of us that can remember Project 40, the same theme was presented, specifically that if you identify the best players have them train and play together then you will develop the players skilled enough to win a World Cup.

### ***So what's wrong with this picture?***

The assumption while partially correct, players will develop at a faster pace when challenged by equal or better players, does not take into consideration that our fundamental skill level throughout the country is far below that of the dominant soccer powers in the rest of the world. In addition, we as a nation have done little if anything to encourage our young players to develop elite skills. Rather as is

indicated in Gary's article we have put the emphasis on creating teams with the best athletes not creating the best skilled players.

### ***OK, so what do we do?***

When you look at the research that has been done on how elite athletes are developed there is only one common element. Elite athletes invest at least 10,000 hours in deliberate practice routines. Deliberate practice routines are repetitive activities involving basic fundamental skills. (Ericsson, K. A. (2006). [\(The influence of experience and deliberate practice on the development of superior expert performance.\)](#) These practice routines are not fun and they are not entertaining but they are the only way to become an elite athlete. While there is an appropriate place for social competitive and recreational soccer programs there should also be a place and an emphasis on elite development programs. These elite development programs must have as their primary goal, the development of ***individual fundamental skills*** associated with the game of soccer. Playing on elite teams and playing in elite leagues must be secondary to the primary goals. The majority of the player's time in these new programs must be spent on deliberate practice routines. In addition unlike most of the current elite programs which measure their success in the wins and losses column the elite development programs must see their success in individual players becoming highly skilled, something we currently spend very little time measuring and rewarding. Here again is where we as a nation have failed to emphasize the appropriate activities necessary to help develop elite players. Far too many of our programs at the youth level have set "players having fun" and "winning games" as the most important goal for the program to achieve. In addition, our overall emphasis on winning games, is in direct conflict with Goal achievement research. In their research of college-aged soccer players Filby, Maynard and Graydon (1999) concluded; ["After five weeks of training, results showed that the two multiple goal strategy groups outperformed the other three groups. Relatively speaking, the group exhibiting the lowest level of improvement was the OUTCOME ONLY group."](#) In spite of this research will still see the major emphasis with our best players is on game results rather than developing individual skills. If we want to compete at the highest level we must change our youth programs and

start new programs dedicated to producing highly skilled players. These programs must start when the players are U9 not when they are U16-U18 by that time it is far too late to develop the exceptional skills required to become an elite player.

***How is this different from what our elite clubs are doing?***

The majority of elite programs in our country are focused on preparing players and teams to compete effectively in the next match. While a truly developmental elite program will focus on the individual development of the players. For example most elite programs at the U9-U11 age will recruit the best athletes in the area and train them to compete, (win) at the highest level or most likely an age group or two up. Again using the false assumption that if you play against players of your ability or higher you will become an elite player. In contrast a truly developmental program will recruit the best players and have them engage in deliberate practice routines based on fundamental skills.

The fundamental skills of soccer can be broken down into four groups; 1. Skills used in moving with the ball, 2. Skills used in receiving the ball, 3. Skills used in redirecting the ball and 4. Skills used in moving without the ball. New programs need to challenge these players to compete against each other in objective competitive skills activities based on these four groups. In addition programs need to add small sided games, 3 vs 3 and 4 vs 4 as the primary focus. The objective competitive skills activities are measured and recorded so players can not only see their individual improvement but they can also set measurable Performance and Process goals based on their own individual results. The small sided games are competitive but on an individual level not a team level. This is accomplished in two phases: First award points for: wins(3), ties(1), goals(max of 3) and shut outs(.5) to each player on a team after each game. Keep a total of points acquired by player not by team. Second, players are mixed and play with a different group of players each game. The result of this small sided game process is that a player hierarchy based on game results is established. The benefit to the development process is that you are now recognizing and rewarding the individual player for their own efforts and achievements. This process is directly in line with

developmental research that indicates players develop farther and faster when they are given individual immediate objective feedback and are engaged in the process of setting and managing individual measurable goals. Outside team competition is also a part of the developmental program however it should be a smaller part of the process. Leagues with limited games and one or two tournaments per year would be adequate. At the U13-U15 age groups the majority of the training time is still concentrated on individual skills enhancement and small sided games, 8 vs 8 while full sided games and tactical training is also part of the process.

### ***The conclusion***

If we as a nation want to effectively compete at the highest levels in the game of soccer now and in the future then our national organizations along with our local clubs need to establish and maintain a new developmental process that is focused on the individual player and not on elite teams. I firmly believe that the skill level of our younger players, U9 to U15 must be improved extensively or we will never be able to win a men's world cup and will struggle to maintain our dominance in the women's game. We need to give our National team coaches the best skilled players in the world if we expect them to compete effectively against the world's best teams.

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