Clash of coaching philosophies in youth soccer –
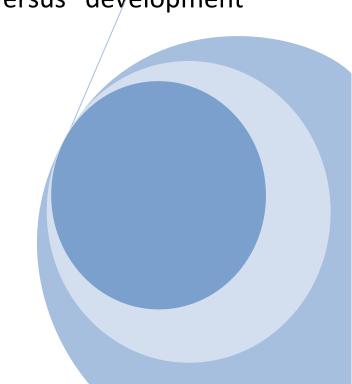
"winning" versus "development"

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I.   Introduction

Sports are a phenomenon designed in such a manner that a win/lose result as the consequence of the action is not only natural, but desired and sought for. Some sports allow for a draw to be the outcome of the game, but the main idea is still to engage in a challenge to test one's own skill and come out as the winner of the competition. On the other hand, sports are also games that provide sheer enjoyment by participation. This autotelic, self-rewarding effect of the game is what gets people involved the first place most often. These 2 elements and motivations intertwine to create a mix of emotions associated with sports on all levels and it is almost impossible to expect people staying interested in the sport without both of them. It appears to be normal to expect that the people, who enjoy playing the game, look to win every competition they engage in. Even though this is essentially true with all sports, it is argued by some that focusing on winning games at the youth level can stifle the long-run development and skill acquisition. The issue investigated is the clash of two major coaching philosophies in youth soccer – should the primary focus be winning games or development of players?

This is a very important issue present in the world of youth coaching, not only in soccer. For every coach that has the long-run interest of the players at heart, the development philosophy is a natural way of thinking. It is more important to "supply" the player with the skill (i.e. give it time to develop) that will allow them to play successfully for the rest of their life rather than looking for victories today neglecting the future. It is usually that the parents of players and uneducated coaches, who do not have the big picture in mind, get tied to the

"winning" mentality. Not seeing or understanding that this philosophy may be detrimental for the player's future, this influence may severely alter the culture and goals of the team. The problem for the team is greatest when the coach itself doesn't understand the concept of development and doesn't put winning in the appropriate place. Developing a developmental philosophy is important as it provides a frame-work for decision-making and guidance in setting and achieving goals.

The problem is omnipresent in today's world, as there is no patience for long-term results. In all the clubs in the world at the professional level, coaches are not given time to build something and results are expected to come – immediately. Being flashed by news that show only the best, such a culture developed around soccer and sports in general. Fabio Capello, one of the best coaches in the game, during the 90's signed a 3-year-contract with Real Madrid, the Spanish super-power. He said at the time that in the 3rd year of his contract, the club can expect to get results from his work, not sooner than that. It is a question whether Mr. Capello would have been Real's coach in the 3rd year if he hadn't won the Spanish league title in the first year.

II.   The problem

US Soccer Federation has identified the problem of American soccer being poor development in the youth categories. Comprehensive Review of Player Development in the U.S. concluded that American players are entering the international arena behind their counter-parts around the world and lacking primarily in technical ability and comfort with the ball (U.S. Soccer Development Academy Overview, 2008.). Therefore, the problem is obvious.

On the surface, this does not seem to be a really big philosophical debate. Most people when asked will agree that developing a young soccer player's skills is more important than winning the games at the U-15 level and under. However, players will move to clubs that are winning, poor development of players will be masked under good results and positive emotions will follow all the teams and coaches that are winning. In spite of what is being said – behavior of coaches and parents shows that winning is an extremely important thing in youth soccer, if not the most important one.

The problem in reality seems to start on a much broader, cultural level. The fact is that there is a huge difference between the youth and professional models of sport. Youth sports provide an educational medium for the development of desirable psychological and physiological characteristics. The sport environment is viewed as a microcosm of society in which children and youth can be exposed to and learn to cope with realities they will face later in life. Thus, youth sports provide a developmental setting within which and educational process is facilitated. From an idealist point of view, development would be the obvious way as it is important to develop a person that will be encouraged to make decisions and grow in

terms of confidence and responsibility. In contrast, professional sports are an explicitly commercial enterprise. Their goals, simply stated, are to entertain and make money. Financial success is of primary importance and depends heavily on a product orientation, i.e. winning (Smoll and Cumming, 2006.). This orientation of professional sports can hardly be considered wrong, as it is enormously valued in our society. This is not only as part of the entertainment industry, but also as a positive link through which the youth gets associated with positive values (mostly) and where modern era heroes (role-models) are derived from. The problems occur when adults erroneously impose a professional model on what should be primarily a recreational and educational experience for youngsters (Smoll and Cumming, 2006.).

Children are naturally competitive and seek to express themselves through the games they play. It seems that winning is important to them when they play. On the other hand, they derive a lot of joy from the competition regardless of the outcome. One would conclude that winning is not important to them at all after the game ended. In reality, the reasons for youth participation in sports have been quite clearly identified since the 70-ies. A survey indicated that young athletes participated for the following reasons (listed in the order of their importance): a) to have fun, b) to improve skills and learn new skills, c) for thrills and excitement, d) to be with friends or make new friends, and e) to succeed or win (Universities Study Committee, 1978.). These findings provide a clear path for goal-orientation taken in youth sports that adults should respect and follow. At Bayern Munich, the German institution of soccer, they didn't underestimate the element of inspiration for the U-10's. The youth teams get to train on the field adjacent to the first team. They see Phillip Lamm, Frank Ribery and Luca Toni train every day and carry those images to their training sessions and try to imitate

their heroes (Martin, 2009.). Similarly, When Manchester United's Academy boys glide from their dressing rooms at the club's magnificent skill factory hidden deep in the Trafford countryside, they run past 10-foot high photographs of David Beckham, Sir Bobby Charlton, Duncan Edwards, Ryan Giggs and George Best. "We want them to be inspired," said Meulensteen. (Winter, 2005.) It is this that shows where the development is led towards.

It is quite clear that until the adolescence period, the parents have a significant role in the life of a young athlete in terms of goal-setting, decision-making and support. Also, through their cooperative efforts, many parents contribute to the youngsters' sport experiences. Approximate 7.5 million men and women volunteer their time as coaches, league administrators and officials in all sports in the US (Smoll and Cumming, 2006.). The influence adults can have on creating the motivational climate and goal-orientation is often the determining factor of the subsequent experiences the young athletes will go through. Developing an ego-oriented culture, in which the emphasis is on winning and being better than the other, multiple issues are brought into picture – anxiety is created with pressures to win when that is clearly something out of the hands of the player and depends on many other factors than just a mere good performance. False ideas of ability being a stable factor and a gift to the talented athletes are being introduced to young minds, taking out of the focus the only thing they can control – their effort. The only way to win games is to play well (regardless of strategy), but sport psychology clearly shows that focusing on things one cannot control is detrimental to control of attentional focus. Focusing on result, the players are actually distracted from the task at hand and the way to get there – the game. Focusing on the game,

chances of victory subsequently increase. All in all, when excessive emphasis is placed on winning, it is easy to lose sight of the needs and interests of the young athlete.

Winning has easily slipped into the focus of the youth game and partly that is due to a lack of developmental goals and programs. Everywhere in the world, youth programs are an integral part of a club fielding an adult team (called first team) competing at all levels. The goal for every coach in the youth program is to develop players to join the first team some day and the success of a generation is determined by the number and quality of players that have succeeded in joining the first team. Talking about a U-10 team, the skill coach of Manchester United's Academy of England, Rene Meulensteen said: "If this generation carries on maturing, they will steamroller everyone at the U-18 level. They'll have skills coming out of their ears." (Winter, 2005.) It is this attitude that depicts the main idea of the developmental philosophy – building a team that is getting ready to play at the adult level.

III.   Why development focus?

a) Systematic and scientific based training

"The development of soccer talent is an on-going process; it truly is longitudinal. It is a process in which individuals' progress gradually from simple to the more complex experiences that the game provides. The process of player development requires planning that has clarity and based upon a modern technical development ideas. This plan and direction needs to come from the technical people; coaches who are educated, experienced and knowledgeable. Anything less than a comprehensive and coordinated effort only means that player development is left to chance rather than being maximized as a result of coaching, programming, competition and well thought out planning." (Simeone). With Manchester United's Academy complex costing a third of the $45 million Ferguson spent on Rooney, it makes sense to develop one's own players and get several Rooneys from the youth program (Winter, 2005.).

What distinguishes athletes from non-athletes is their ability to perform various tasks that require multi-limb coordination and speed of performance. A lot of these psycho-motor skills have been identified to develop through ages of early puberty. Because of that, training at ages 6-12 has to be aimed at developing various types of speed movements and coordination.

What distinguishes the best soccer players (meaning elite, professional level) from the rest is their ability to control their body and control the ball in speed. At the collegiate and adult level, one would not be able to distinguish between a national team player and an

amateur player by the athletes' body size or speed. It is the technical ability and tactical awareness that makes the difference between the good and the best. Technical ability of handling the ball is considered to be mostly a reflex, i.e. a learned habit that the body is trained to do from early childhood. In a typical soccer game, one doesn't have time to think about proper technique of performing a kick, but simply does what it has taught the body to do during practice. Many coaches claim that 90% of technical ability is acquired before the adolescent period (ages vary from individual to individual, but roughly through the age of 14 to 16) and that it is that factor that limits the potential of the player. Having in mind this concept of acquiring skills of ball handling, it is obvious that the time when the body is most sensitive to motor learning and creating patters of movement has to be used exactly for that. This means that before the age of adolescence, training of soccer players needs to have the primary focus of skill development. Only with a development philosophy one can afford to "wait" for a player to reach physical peak if their puberty is delayed compared to their counterparts. One such example is the story of Paul Scholes, a Man United and England national team squad member for years. "How many clubs would have taken Scholesy on at 16?" Kershaw of Man United asked. "At 16, we could play Scholesy for only 20 minutes a game. He couldn't run. He was a little one. Had asthma. No strength. No power. No athleticism. No endurance. 'You've got a bleeding dwarf,' I remember somebody said to Brian Kidd (the then youth-team coach). If Scholesy had been at a lesser club, they would have got rid of him and he would probably not be in the game now. We stuck with Scholesy, a wonderful technician." (Winter, 2005.)

Repeated execution will lead to creation of subconscious knowledge and neural pathways to muscles, freeing the conscious mind to decision-making. Players are constantly making decisions on where to run, when to run and what to do with the ball. Proper tactical training will aid in decision-making processes, allowing the player to use the tactical concepts to their advantage. These decisions should be based on the sound principles of attack and defense (support, depth, pressure, etc) and introduced at the appropriate age to youngsters. The minds of children develop constantly and the tactical concepts (by their complexity) have to be adjusted to their readiness of acquiring them.

All of these listed reasons urge for an introduction of an age-specific coaching curriculum which will ensure that appropriate skills are taught at appropriate age groups. This will also provide more specific goals within the domain of development.

b) Possession as a predominant style of play

Soccer is a game with numerous possibilities of combinations and a rich variety of solutions, but two main offensive styles of play can be distinguished – possession play and direct play. Direct play aims at reaching the goal in the least amount of possible delays (touches of the ball by numerous players). This is usually executed by a long-ball driven from one half of the field to the other, typically by the defensive line aiming for the offensive line (i.e. behind the defensive line of the other team), skipping the midfield. This style of play cherishes athletic ability, speed and power, and is a rather risk-free approach, as the ball is swiftly sent away from one's own goal. Also, only several players are involved in the offensive actions and have the opportunity to make decisions and touch the ball. This style was also endorsed by the

English Football Association (FA) for years, as the mindset was to be able to reach to the opponent's goal in 3 touches of the ball. This type of play is a legitimate strategy used often by many professional teams, mostly in the UK, Ireland and Scandinavian countries.

On the other hand, possession play is the style with the aim to control the possession of the ball and bring the ball close to the opponent's goal through many combinations to create a goal-scoring opportunity. This style is widespread in the soccer cultures of South America, southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, countries of former Yugoslavia) and Africa, but also cherished by the best soccer schools in the world (understanding player development). This style demands players to have proficient skills of ball control, as poor ball control will result in a turnover. This way means that many players touch the ball and develop their technical and tactical skills, flair and creativity. "We want players who can do the unpredictable like Rooney," Meulensteen of Man United said. "I see too many one-dimensional players at the top level. We inspire kids to take players on. In the attacking third, it's all guns blazing".

Even though this seems right in philosophical terms, many coaches and teams are put to test when this risk-taking approach of possession play costs them a turnover in their defensive third and a goal scored against them. If that happens (and it surely will, as mistakes are a natural part of the game), the kids need to be encouraged to do the same over and over again (only punting the ball once in a while to be less predictable) despite the possible risks. In that instance, pragmatic coaches driven by results, will give up from the desirable style of play (possession) and encourage direct play that will stifle skill development. Another example is a simple long pass through the middle to a rushing forward who is bigger and faster than everyone else might be all that is needed to create a breakaway opportunity. Goals scored in

such a way will encourage the players, parents and the coach to continue playing direct, but again, with the cost of skill loss. As Georgia State Director of Coaching, Jacob Daniel states: "Although the object of the game is to score more goals than your opponent, youth coaches should always emphasize and teach their players to play with skill, flair, good technique and, above all, using the sound principles of play. The manner of the win is just as important as the win itself, if the long-term goals of player development are to be achieved."

These 2 opposing mindsets are both legitimate ways of playing the game and interchangeably used by every team in the world (in different proportions). However, it is also obvious that the teams that nourished the possession play culture through the youth system become superior through superior ball control, comfort on the ball when under pressure and no-panic decision-making. Deducting conclusions from this, youth teams need to cherish possession play as it aids better to the goal of development.

c) Goal-setting and climate orientation

Another element that will determine the climate in which the youth team will function is the goal orientation decided by the coach, the players and the parent group. The only way to win games is to outscore the opponent, but the only way to score goals is to have possession of the ball and create chances that will allow the team to score. Therefore, the only way to win is through playing well (whatever the strategy of the team is) and focusing on the play and all aspects of the game (defending, attacking) ignoring the consequence – the result. Quite often in the game of soccer, the team that is better on the field doesn't win the game and the kids playing the game feel unsuccessful if the only goal of the game is winning.

Setting goals will guide the player's efforts and it is important these goals are set within a task-oriented, rather than an ego-oriented mindset. Being task-oriented means that the team is pursuing goals of acquiring skills and competing with themselves primarily. The team's success and failure is determined by their ability to master the demands of the game in terms of ball handling (technical aspect of the game), decision-making for passing and movement in the field (tactical), ability to physically compete and perform the demands of the game (physical) and the a good effort to compete (mental). Playing an opponent is viewed as a test of progress, rather than facing an enemy.

In youth soccer, the coach is the primary leader of the team and needs to take ownership of it. That means that coaches need to create goals that are task oriented and success and failure should be judged according to them. Rather than following the ups and downs of the result of the game, players need to be rewarded and punished on terms of effort exercised in the game, the success should be judged with the amount of time the ball was held in possession and chances this has produced. Also, specific goals for individual games (such as – successful one versus one play or line defending if that was practiced in the weeks preceding the game) can help in providing guidance to determining standards of success and failures. In this way, the emotions of the team will not fluctuate with results of the weekend game, but will rather be directed towards giving constant effort as an attempt to be better with every touch of the ball.

d) Education of coaches and parents

In many countries in the world, youth soccer is left to children more than in the United States and parental involvement in minimal. Watching a game in Brazil or Europe, most of the time the only voices you will hear are the coaches of the team and players in the field. A different culture has evolved in the US and parents are quite involved when watching their child play or train, giving directions and comments about the game. Both should be discouraged, as they make the children confused when an opportunity to make a decision comes.

Also, quite often at a soccer field, parents can be heard applauding a beautiful long kick, encouraging a style of play that is not in tune with the development philosophy of possession play. Having in mind that the culture of soccer and game understanding by masses in the USA is still in its diapers, the parents should be well informed about the preferred style of soccer – possession play. If they understand that with possession play, more players on the field will have the opportunity to develop through constant touches of the ball and applauding great combinations and a fair amount of risk taking – players will benefit from that. And when they leave the field, that is what should be talked about on the way home, instead of focusing on the score of the game. The first question kids are asked about the game usually is:"Did you win?". This should change into: "Did you have fun? Did you play well? How did the team play? Did you learn something to do better next time? What do you want to eat?"

IV.   Conclusion

The only argument that people tend to bring up against the development philosophy is the fact that a winning mentality cannot be developed without winning games. In reality, the development philosophy is the one that facilitates winning at older ages and is used by the top clubs in the world for the exact same reason – to be successful at the professional level. A realist will take into consideration the science behind soccer development and will not be able to ignore the "laws" that guide player development established by science.

All the best soccer schools in the world have established guidelines for player development and introduced the scientific method to formulate the age-specific training programs. Winning has been erased from these curriculums in terms of important goals to give room to development. It is the ones who are preoccupied with winning at the youth level that miss to be successful later as the development stages have not been honored and the opportunity missed. My personal philosophy is in line with player development, as I find it is more important to give tools for personal growth and player growth through soccer training. This will give players competitiveness at higher levels for the rest of their life. That style of soccer is also more exciting to play, giving motivation to pursue the sport even further. In spite the fact that all the reasoning leads towards a development philosophy in youth soccer, it is questionable how many emotional needs of adults can this philosophy satisfy and can it actually overtake the reasoning happening on the scenes. For the sake of the children, one can only hope…

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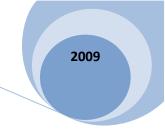Martin, J. (n.d.). *Not So Great Expectations.* Retrieved May 4, 2009, from Association for Soccer Education and Training: http://www.asetsoccer.com/dmdocuments/Not%20So%20Great%20Expectations%20(Jay%20Martin).pdf

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WINNING vs. DEVELOPMENT FOCUS

Sometimes, winning and development go hand in hand. At the youth level though, where kids develop physically (and mentally) at different rates, this is often not the case. Development implies risk taking, risk taking implies that there is a price to be paid (often that means losing matches). Depending on the focus of the club, different decisions will be made based on these core values.

DECISION TOPIC	FOCUS ON DEVELOPMENT	FOCUS ON WINNING
Player selection	Size matters less – Technical skill, passion for the game, and game understanding are valued	Size and speed matter most – Athleticism, physical dominance and early developers take precedence
Competition (league and tournaments)	Seeking challenge	Seeking dominance
Event importance	More training – less games	Less trainings – more games
Primary focus by coach	Training	Game
Playing time	Earned by performance, attendance and behavior; but guaranteed as it is essential for development	Earned by performance; not guaranteed
Determining positions	Multiple positions	One set position
Style of play	Possession and attack-minded, encouraging risk taking	Direct, minimizing risks
Team atmosphere/Culture	Game (task) oriented – How did we play?	Result oriented – Did we win?
Curriculum	Age-specific, holistic; rooted in Long-Term Athlete Development Model (big picture)	Week – and game – specific, fix last week's problem (narrow view)
Training time allocation	Dominated by age-specific exercises that hit windows of optimal trainability (sensible phases)	Dominated by scrimmaging, fun games, set-plays
Values	Integrity, cooperation, competition (*lat. competere* = strive within (to win)), develop work ethic and application of effort, discipline, positive life habits, spur passions for the game	Win games, exhibit dominance
Opponents	Respect them US + THEM; they make us better than we are	Enemy – US vs. THEM; they tell us we are better/worse than them
Referees	Respect their role – facilitation us playing the game. Another element we can't control in the game	An element we try to control and potentially use as an excuse if we fail (lose)
Mindset	Growth mindset	Fixed mindset
Feedback/Criticism	Seen as crucial element for growth	Seen as an attack on ego and confidence
Mistakes	Sign of stretching current capabilities, necessary for growth, motivation for improvement, educational opportunity	Sign of weakness, threat to the ego and confidence
Goals	Achieve excellence on and off the field, develop life skills using the game as a tool, develop life-long players of the game	Win games, exhibit dominance
Success	Determined by us and our own goals	Determined by result
Poor behavior by large game contributors	Not tolerated; educational opportunity	Tolerated; educational disaster
Key players	Pull the team and help others grow alongside	Pull the team and hide others weaknesses
Playing a year up	Most talented players encouraged to play up to the level where they will be challenged	Most talented players kept in their own age group, where they can dominate and win games, but remain unchallenged