

KICKING IS NOT A SOCCER SKILL – PROGRAM RATIONALE

Skill Priorities

Everyone knows that the game of soccer has a number of basic skills, or *techniques*, that players have to learn, such as dribbling, receiving passes, making passes, shooting and heading. Players also have to learn to make good decisions during the game, such as when to dribble, when to pass, and to whom to pass. These players' decisions are referred to as *tactical* decisions.

The first principle of soccer development is that players should master the basic techniques before they can learn the tactical side of the game. **Technique before tactics!** Think of techniques as vocabulary, and tactics as the grammar rules for forming sentences and paragraphs. Now, imagine a young immigrant who arrives in America without a word of English. It's pretty obvious that before we can teach this immigrant about the rules for joining nouns, verbs, and adverbs to form a sentence, we have to give him a chance to accumulate enough vocabulary. The bigger his vocabulary, the better will he be able to use grammar to articulate his thoughts.

In terms of soccer development, your child is just beginning his/her 'schooling'. We use the word 'schooling' here because there are many similarities between a regular school and a youth club, which can be considered as essentially a soccer school. In fact, as you might have already noticed, throughout this letter we will be using many analogies from real life schooling and the principles of growing up to explain the rationale behind the program.

As far as techniques are concerned, some techniques should be taught before others. The first technique that children should learn is **dribbling**. The ability to dribble is absolutely critical since dribbling is the foundation skill and preparation for all the other fundamental techniques of soccer, such as receiving, passing and shooting. When players are receiving the ball and making preparation touches prior to passing or shooting, they are essentially engaged in a mini-dribble. Young players need to learn to dribble within a variety of playing situations, such as dribbling forward unopposed, changing speed and direction with the ball, shielding the ball from opponents, dribbling past an opponent, and dribbling to get away from pressure. A limited ability to dribble leads to a limited range of passing or shooting. There are also times in the game, when the player with the ball has no passing options and the only way out of tight pressure is to dribble.

Aside from the fact that dribbling forms the foundation for all the other skills, there are many other reasons why we need to focus on dribbling at U-6/U-8. First of all, it takes years to become a comfortable and confident dribbler. Players have to learn to combine body control, agility, coordination and balance with the mechanics of dribbling and the sooner they start, the better. Just like any complex bio-mechanical skill such as skating or gymnastics, the later you start, the harder it is to achieve perfect form. Secondly, the process of learning to dribble involves trial and error. At first, the players' rudimentary attempts at dribbling will often result in failure as they discover the contrast between a soft touch and a hard touch on the ball. The players will slowly develop a 'feel' for the ball as they experiment at controlling and propelling it. Young players don't get discouraged easily if they don't succeed. Players of this age do not possess the analytical thought process to look back or think ahead. They live for the moment, in the here and now, and the fact that the last time they tried to dribble it didn't work will not even

enter their minds. But if we wait for the players to mature before we emphasize dribbling, many of them will lose their confidence if they do not succeed and will become reluctant to dribble. Thirdly, In 3v3 and 4v4 play, the fields are so small that dribbling is always an option since the ball is always just a few yards away from shooting range. Once the game moves to the larger sized fields, dribbling becomes less effective on it's own and must be combined with passing to get the ball from point A to point B. And lastly, it's better to go through the process of trial and error when game results are not important and standings are not kept. At the U-10 and older ages, game results assume more importance, making it hard for the parents and coaches to show patience and tolerance for mistakes, and putting added pressure on players to 'get rid of the ball' rather than risk losing it. Once games become competitive, the resultant environment is not ideal to start learning how to dribble.

Kicking is NOT a Soccer Skill!!!

Most coaches and parents of beginner players unknowingly emphasize the wrong skills. In a typical U-6/U-8 club play, the players are encouraged by both the parents on the sidelines and the coaches to 'boot' the ball up the field. Shouts of "get rid of it!" and "kick it!" are all too common. The further forward a player kicks, they louder the cheers. Players are so indoctrinated to 'kick it forward' that very few of them dare to get out of pressure by dribbling. The fact is that the players are asked to execute a skill (kicking) that they would automatically learn anyway as they grow up, even if they didn't play soccer. If you don't believe it, just go outside to your back yard, place a ball on the ground, take a few steps back, run up to the ball and kick it forward. I am willing to bet you that, even if you never played soccer in your life, you would still succeed in kicking the ball forward. Your kick might look awkward and your movement lack grace, but you still would manage to kick it forward.

The reality is that players are controlled like puppets by the adults to such an extent that they are not thinking for themselves and are afraid to do anything but kick the ball. Even throw-ins are routinely thrown straight to the other team by confused players who are conditioned to play the ball forward, no matter what. The kick-offs are no better, with players kicking the ball straight to the other team, American football style. Players who clearly have plenty of time on the ball with no pressure anywhere near, are still kicking it forward without any thought or skill. And this type of mindless play is usually not corrected by the coaches and is allowed to occur time and again. The end result is that we are 'coaching' the skill of dribbling OUT of the players. We take away the natural 'comfort' with the ball - forever!

Let's be frank here. The underlying issue has to do with how you, the adults, look at the game and analyze it. It's fair to say that you all accept that results at U-6 and U-8 do not matter and that there is no need to keep standings. But you also instinctively know that the easiest way to get the ball from point A to point B is to kick it in that direction. It's hard for you to watch your child lose the ball in front of his own goal and for the other team to score. So, the next time your child has the ball in his/her half, you can't help it and shout "kick it!". But every time they kick it, they lose another opportunity to learn to dribble. The buzz word of our program is: 'Soft first Touch'. Every time your player goes to the ball, his/her first touch on the ball should be a soft one, meaning, NO KICKING!

Some of you might ask "but what about passing?" Isn't soccer a team game and passing a fundamental team skill? **Passing** implies an intention by a player to direct the ball accurately

towards a teammate. It implies decision making. Do not confuse passing with kicking. Kicking means using the feet to propel the ball in a certain direction. You will not see any passing in a U-6 game, and very little in a U-8 game. Passing is simply beyond the ability of U-6 and most U-8 players. In terms of the level of difficulty, **kicking** is the easiest to learn, **dribbling** is next, and **passing** is the hardest to master for young players. Think of dribbling as 'passing to oneself'. If players cannot pass to themselves, how can they be expected to pass to a teammate 15 yards away? What young players do is actually kick, not pass, and the cheers they hear from you when they kick only serve to reinforce this bad habit.

For this reason, we ask you to **stop shouting to your players to Kick the ball**. If game results truly don't matter, no one should be overly concerned if a player tries to dribble and loses the ball. First touch must be a **SOFT TOUCH**.

Weaning Young Players Out of Adult Dependency

Now that we explained the program's skill objective for your child's technical development, we would like to make you aware of another important objective, in the area of decision making. Children aged 4 to 8 are naturally dependent on their parents for many of their daily needs. This dependency transfers into youth sports, manifesting as parental coaching from the sidelines. The players themselves will tend to look to their parents for help since they are conditioned to be dependent on them. Therefore, another important objective of our U-6/U-8 program is to wean the players out of their dependency on adults during games. This is so very crucial for the development of soccer players. We all know that soccer is a player's game, meaning that it's the player who must make the decisions on the field. In soccer, coaches have a lot less influence and power during games than in some of the other traditional American sports. Soccer players must learn to think for themselves, and the sooner they learn to stand on their own feet, the better. Since results do not matter at these age groups, no one should be overly concerned if players make mistakes that lead to goals. Parents and coaches must resist the urge to tell their players what to do.

One of the main features of youth soccer is having the parents sit very close to the field. We realize that it all seems so nice and cozy to sit by the sidelines. But sitting so close to the players gives the parents too much presence, which impacts the players' behavior, response and performance. If we want to give the players a sense of freedom and the ability to make their own decisions, we need to physically step back. This is why we ask you to sit some distance from the field, where you can still enjoy watching without your presence intimidating the players. What we lose in coziness, we gain in giving an invaluable sense of independence to the players.

Individual Concept vs Team Concept

As parents, naturally you are mainly concerned with the welfare and development of your child. When your child goes to school, you are really only interested in how he/she is progressing in school. Do you really care how the class is doing as a whole? As long as your child is doing well and the teacher is keeping pace with the required academic standards for his/her age, you are happy. You don't go around boasting that your child's class average was higher than the class next door. The class concept in school is seen as a logistical convenience where children of like-age are grouped together to learn academics and social skills within the dynamics of a group. Nothing more, nothing less.

The same concept should be applied to youth sport. Just like a classroom, a youth team should be seen as a convenient way to group players of similar age and ability together, to learn how to play soccer, as well as develop social skills. Nothing more, nothing less.

But parents and coaches seem to have a hard time accepting this notion. They let the team concept take over and become the focus of the soccer activity. It's no longer "my son is going to play today". It's become "OUR TEAM is playing against THEIR TEAM today".

People want to be part of a team. They feel safe and comfortable. There are many positives in a team environment, such as building lifelong friendships, sharing common goals, learning to trust and depend on others. But when the team assumes too much importance or consumes your life, it can lead to tension and conflicts. Games become more stressful. The mood of the family unit for the rest of the day hinges on the game result. 'What's best for the team' overrides what's best for the individual players. The negative aspects of the team concept manifest themselves in many ways: The amount of playing time players get, rivalry between teams spilling over into arguments and even hostility, coaches fighting over players, referee abuse, etc.

As parents, you should only be concerned with one thing: Is your child having fun? And is he/she being given the opportunity to play and learn the game? How the team is doing has absolutely no impact on the future well being of your child. Mia Hamm is not playing for the National Team because her U-10 team won the state championship. She is in the national team because she has developed into a skillful and athletic player. Your child might develop into a high level player or he/she might not. A lot of this depends on the genes and is pre-determined before your child was even born. As long as he/she is having fun and developing a lifetime habit of healthy participation in sport, that's all you can ask for. Remember: The team is there to serve your CHILD'S needs. Your child is not there to serve the team's needs. If the team's performance produces strong emotions in you, you need to step back and take a deep breath and suppress these emotions. **The team is just a logistical expediency to engage a bunch of kids in play. Nothing more, nothing less. Tomorrow, your child will be part of another team.**

Parents must beware of coaches who seem intent in building a 'dynasty' at these young ages. If a coach approaches you with the intent to recruit your child into his/her team because "He wants to build a strong team", you should question his agenda. The chances are he/she will emphasize the wrong type of development and training. The chances are that he/she will replace your child down the road when a better player crops up.