

Playing Soccer vs. Playing at Soccer

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I spend several hours of every week watching or coaching soccer games at various age and ability levels—high school varsity, ODP, and several different club age groups. As you would expect, even within similar age groups, the technical level of the teams varies quite dramatically. However, disturbingly, the quality of individual decision-making and the quality of team play in many of these games seems to be almost entirely unrelated to the individual ability of the players.

Let me clarify that statement a bit—individual technical ability is the most obvious and most important pre-requisite to play attractive soccer. However, the distressing problem apparent in many of the youth games I see is that many teams with very good technical players, (players with much of the necessary “hardware” to play attractive soccer), are only playing at soccer. In fact, in these games, every team fits very distinctly into one of two very different categories—those teams that are playing (or attempting to play) soccer, and those teams that are playing “at” soccer.

What’s the difference?

Playing Soccer: A game that “makes sense”—a game where players make conscious decisions about where to play the ball, and conscious decisions about how to move and where to run.

Playing at Soccer: A game marked by an inordinate emphasis on field position and hustle.

When you watch a team that is playing soccer, the game can almost always be summed up in one phrase—“It makes sense.” Players are consciously thinking about what to do with the ball, and passes are played with some degree of thought—they are played to teammates, not just aimlessly hit forward. The ball is played backwards or square as often as it is played forward and the team attempts to keep possession of the ball through a combination of dribbling and passing. Though most times these ideas are not executed perfectly by young players, importantly, the players show that they have ideas and are thinking like soccer players!

Unfortunately, at younger ages, when the technical skills of the players are not fully developed, teams that are attempting to play soccer seem to spend a lot of time in their own end of the field. In fact, they lose games to teams that play at soccer 9 out of 10 times. Why does this happen? It happens because the athletes trying to play soccer pass the ball to their teammates instead of kicking it as far forward as possible. When players are young they end up primarily playing short passes, and when because of weaker technical skills this string of passes ends at 2 or 3, the opponent wins the ball and kicks it 30 yards past everyone on the field. Passing and thinking is a losing proposition at first.

When you watch a team that is playing “at” soccer, there seems to be little rhyme or reason to what happens on the field. The team rarely puts together more than 2 passes at a time. The prevailing attitude of the players is to kick the ball as far forward as possible, as quickly as possible, and then to run as fast as possible to win it back. Goals are scored through a “dump and fore-check” style of play, not through individual skill or through intelligent team combinations. This style is also marked by an inordinate emphasis on aggressive defensive play, because when teams consistently give the ball away by whacking it forward they must be able to win it back farther down the field by applying unrealistically high pressure.

So, what's the problem?

- 1) Playing at soccer places no emphasis on making good individual decisions with the ball. Players become indoctrinated in the actions of playing without thought—aimlessly playing forward. At young ages, players are successful playing this style and, quite understandably begin to see this as “proper” soccer.
- 2) Playing at soccer does not develop soccer players. Playing at soccer will not teach players to read the game and does not stimulate players to find creative solutions to problems on the field. Athletes that play at soccer will not fulfill their soccer potential at any level.
- 3) Playing at soccer encourages undue emphasis on simple hustle and “win one for the Gipper” coaching. Highly charged players run all over the field to win the ball, with little or no idea of what to do when they get it.

Here are a few questions you should ask yourself as you watch your children's games:

- 1) Are players trying to pass the ball to teammates, or are most passes just whacked forward into space?
- 2) Does the team try to possess the ball? How many passes does the average possession last?
- 3) Is the ball out of play for a significant part of the game? (Bad sign)
- 4) Is everyone moving and involved in the game, or only the player with the ball and 1-2 nearby teammates?
- 5) How many times is the ball passed backwards? (As a rule of thumb, 1 of 3 passes should be backwards.)
- 6) Is most of the coaching communication concerned with “working harder”? (Query: What do you do when “working harder” is no longer sufficient because of a lack of soccer knowledge or technical skills?)
- 7) Does the team rely almost solely on whacking the ball forward to a fast player up front to score, and on a fast player in the back to cover for mistakes and send the ball forward? (If so, what kind of learning experience are the other 9 players getting? As you play at higher levels, you will inevitably find many defenders faster than your star goal scorer. Also, good players and well-coached teams learn to defend long aimless serves fairly easily.)
- 8) Does the game look out of control? (Are there rapid, consecutive turnovers? Are players running around with little organization or purpose?)
- 9) Does the team play any differently at the end of the season than they do at the beginning of the season? Is your child a noticeably different player?

Think about these questions during the next few games. If your son or daughter desires to continue to play as he/she gets older, he/she needs to learn how to play soccer now. Athletes and teams that play soccer, not simply play at soccer, will win in every sense of the word in the long run—and by then it's too late to for those who played at soccer to catch up.