

## **The Paramount Issue up to U14 is Inclusion – Not Exclusion**

**By Gary R. Allen  
US Youth Soccer National Staff**

I recently attended a meeting held by US Soccer for State Directors of Coaching (DOCs). The meeting focused on a discussion of overhauling our approach for youth players aged 6-12. Effectively, US Soccer has now determined that there are three “zones” for youth players: Zone 1 – ages 6-12; Zone 2 – ages 13-18; and Zone 3 – above age 18.

There has been much thought lately given to increasing the efficiency of developing our youth, especially in light of the continuing difficulty our National Teams have playing at the highest levels. The backdrop for this discussion was the advent of the National Academy program for U16s and U18s and proposals to extend it to U14s.

### **Understanding Development**

We have come far in many respects. To date we have focused mainly on procedural issues, such as numbers of games in a day, training to game ratios, substitution rules. We also have focused on improving our players’ training environments and our coaching techniques. Now, the hard part, i.e., getting to the root of what is still holding us back. Although the procedures are important, they go only so far. The real limitation, in my opinion, it is a lack of understanding and implementation of the substantive issues concerning development for ages nine-15.

The advent of a U14 National Team and the proposition to implement a U14 National Academy program is counterproductive to improving the development of players aged nine through fifteen. The underlying rationale is flawed. It posits, erroneously, that we can spot the future elite players at age 13, contrary to all research worldwide concerning athletes at these ages, as well as everything written by development experts. There has been much ado about creating “purposeful” training environments, and having players play in “meaningful” games. The prevailing rationale also assumes, erroneously, that the best way to develop these “elite” players is to surround them with other “elite” players, and separate them from the riffraff. One of the inherent problems, however, is that the environments we create for these “elite” players really are more limiting than expansive because they encourage the very strengths for which we deem them to be elite, and ignore the areas where they are less mature. At these ages, the key is to improve the "environment" for all players and for all aspects of play, not just those who adults think ultimately will be successful at the highest levels. (I won't even go into the well-recognized fallacy of this type of selection, where the success rate for picking even older players who ultimately play at the highest levels is less than ten percent. This is true worldwide, as well as in the MLS.)

## **Increase the “General Level” of Play, Not Select out “Elite” Players**

Producing players who can play at the highest levels means increasing the "general level" of play with the cream of the crop rising above this level. By doing so there will be many more opportunities for many more players, both the early bloomers and the late bloomers, to play, create, solve problems, and experiment. This is where most of us have had it all backwards for so many years. The focus has always been from the top down, rather than the reverse. Since the 1970s, the main focus has been on finding and developing the "elite" player, rather than improving the general level of play. First, there was the State Select Program for the Olympic Sports Festivals in the late 1970s and early '80s, which evolved into the Olympic Development Program (ODP). Travel or select leagues expanded to include younger and younger ages, in some areas including 7 and 8 year olds. What started in ODP for U19s, expanded downward to U16, then to U14 and finally to U13. We saw the development of the Super Y League, US Club Soccer, the Regional Leagues, the advent of the U17 Residency Program, and, today the Academy Program.

Each new program has attempted to select out the "elite players" for enhanced game environments and training. Strides in development have been made due, in large part, to the coaching education programs of US Soccer and the NSCAA, but, what is ignored is that much of the improvement has been merely the result of increased numbers of youth players. Our National teams can compete fairly consistently regionally, but we still struggle on the world stage. An apt contrast is Brazil, a country that could field three National teams in the World Cup, with a good chance for all three to reach the second round. If we lose three key players on our National team, we are not only in danger of failing miserably at the World Cup, but of not even qualifying. To be sure, Brazil's elite players are more skilled, but it is the general level of play for all players in Brazil that creates the depth for developing these elite players.

We have focused on stars like Ronaldinho, Messi and Ronaldo, but have turned a blind eye completely to the youth environment of the vast majority of players in Brazil, Argentina and other Latin countries. The environment is one of street soccer and free play, where the players experiment and compete each day, and the general skill level of play is much greater than here or in Great Britain or many parts of Europe. It is in and from these types of environments that the vast majority of skillful South American players have arisen.

It is not possible here to replicate the informal, pick-up neighborhood street soccer as it is played in Brazil, but that does not obviate the validity of its ultimate influence on the level of play of its ultimate stars. Rather than forming National programs that seek to find and develop the players we deem to be "elite" at too young an age, we should be seeking to find ways to increase the numbers of players and general level of play. We need to create environments for our nine through 13 year olds, and even older, to have the freedom and encouragement to experiment, and to develop tight skills through playing smaller sides.

## **“Elite” U14 Programs Stifle Development**

Why can't we get off of this plateau? I believe it is because we ignore the forest for the trees. European and English professional clubs increasingly have signed more and more foreign Latin players, in efforts to create better and better leagues. Then, they state that they must improve the level of play of the English and European youth players. They ignore the natural environment in which players in Brazil and other Latin countries developed, and instead have created an adult-prescribed regimen for a select few young players. Their solution is that same as ours has been -- to find "elite" players at younger and younger ages and get them into the "right" environments. They and we look at the harsh realities of what it takes to be a "pro", what it takes to play at the highest international levels, and then we try to reverse engineer the environment for the few players we think will have a chance to make it.

In our reverse engineering, we have focused on peripheral issues, but omitted many of the intangible ingredients that go into making world class players. First, we know that it takes 10 or more years for a player to develop, but we have not fully considered what creates player development. We have taken our adult view of the game, and the lessons our senior players have learned in the international arena, and have tried to recreate the pro environment for our younger players. Our attempts to date have been to create quality structured environments for our "elite players," where they train "purposefully" and play in "meaningful games." One of the most glaring problems is that we are basing our definitions of "purposeful" and "meaningful" on the precocious attributes of players who are immature in many other areas of development. Therefore, our training targets those areas where they already excel. Because, most often, the only reason they excel at these ages is a maturity issue, the only way for them to compete in more challenging environments is to rely on those areas where they are more mature. We compound the problem because we label the players we select as "serious players," as opposed to "recreational players." This has become a case of circular reasoning, and now we seek to find the "serious" players for travel play at younger and younger ages. The result, though unintended, is that we have created an environment where, indeed, results are paramount because our focus is exclusively on how to become more efficient players.

This is why it is counterproductive to have a U14 National Team and U14 Academy programs. By nature, these programs require selecting "elite" players. This means that the focus for local and regional U10 through U13 programs who want to "succeed" will be to identify and prepare "pre-Academy" players. We already see this on the state level with travel programs that begin at U9 and U10 and State Cup at U12. We now have special training programs and U8 and U7 for "pre-travel players." Mistakenly, we have proceeded as though development should be something different for the "serious player," than for the "recreational player," i.e., there is no interest in developing the "general" level of play. We ignore the fact that no one at these ages before puberty is a "player." Each player is a 10, 11 or 12 year old, in various stages of mental, physical and social development. What we term "serious play" is predominantly the earlier manifestation of a particular stage of development in certain kids, nothing more.

Moving the National Academy Program down to the U14 age group will end up being just a glorified version of what we have now with "travel leagues" at these ages. The same limited numbers of coaches will vie for the same small numbers of players, and the result will still be that we narrow the pool of potential players at ages when we need to increase the numbers playing. Essentially, it will be like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

### **Fitting Players into Our Concept of the Adult Game Rather than Letting Them Find the Game for Themselves**

What does this have to do with missing the forest for the trees, and the mistakes being made in Europe and England? We are taking only one aspect of what it takes to be a "high level player," and injecting it into our youth programs. This is the age-old approach of trying to fit players into the game as played and defined by adults. It ignores the fundamental facts of how youth develop, but also ignores the scope of the game itself.

The Europeans', English, and our approach miss some fundamental building blocks -- understanding how young players learn, and applying those concepts to the free-flowing, problem-solving nature of the game. Why is soccer the most popular sport in the world? It is the only team game that truly allows the culture of the players to come through because it requires the players themselves to solve the problems each game situation presents, individually and collectively. The attributes that make a world class player are not just physical and technical, but also include the ability to create and solve problems in ways no one else has seen before. The environments that the young player experiences in those 10 years of development need to present that player not only with many differing types of problems to solve and guidance for solving them, but also with the freedom to solve them. What we have done by selecting players out is not only define all of the problems to solve and the methods of solving them, but we have limited the numbers and types of environments within which players experience the problems. The variety and freedom are as important as the "purposeful training" we adults devise.

This approach has implications for coaches considering how young players develop. First, players need to be exposed to multiple soccer situations, and many different roles within their own team. It also means that they must be allowed to play with and against many different players, with different strengths and weaknesses, so that at times they are the dominant player on the team, and at others they are not, requiring them to solve different problems in many different ways.

By selecting out "elite players" too young, and seeking to make their environments more "meaningful" from an adult perspective, we have dramatically reduced the variety of environments they experience. We also have reduced the number of roles they play, the types of problems they solve, and the freedom they have to solve those problems.

## **Consider How Players Develop -- Physically, Mentally and Socially**

By selecting out players before they are in their mid-teens, we narrow the pool of players based upon developmental differences that are non-uniform, but also woefully unpredictable. From a physical standpoint, youth, from the ages of 11-15 are going through the most significant changes in their lives, with great disparity in rates of growth, coordination and maturity. By selecting players out at these ages, we are limiting not only those we omit but also those we choose.

The physical side includes the development of skill. Just as players need more opportunities to explore different physical ways of solving problems, they need more opportunities in “smaller free play sides” to hone their techniques and experiment with using these techniques to solve problems. If we doubt that players can develop skill in this way, all we have to do is go to any park in the evening and watch the multitude of young and old Hispanic players playing freely. While they may not have the tactical sophistication, they certainly exhibit the touch and quickness that even many of our best players lack. And they did not develop such skills in adult-designed “purposeful training.”

Second, youth 11 - 15 are moving into the “formal operational stage” of thinking where they are just beginning to think abstractly. By putting them into a constant barrage of “meaningful environments,” we direct their thinking, but retard their breadth and depth of growth in discovering their own ways to solve increasingly complex abstract problems.

Finally, socially, these ages are when their psyches are most vulnerable as they strive to find their identities. At ages 11-15, these players are going through tremendous physical, mental and social changes, all at different rates from each other. They are experiencing tremendous challenges to their self-esteem. They are beginning to recognize that ability may begin to play a more important role than effort in determining success. The emphasis on selecting players out at these ages unduly focuses on competition and success at the very time when they need inclusive environments that will not brand them as successful or unsuccessful by adults’ arbitrary scales. Doing so stifles their willingness to explore and find success in many different ways, not just the efficient “meaningful” ways adults prescribe, which is exactly what we lack in our highest level players.

### **Free Play/Non-Result Oriented Play Are “Meaningful” and “Purposeful” Environments**

We all have acknowledged the need for free play, but we most often relegate it to only very young players. We misunderstand what it is about free play that causes development. It is the process that is so important: that of playing with and against many different players in environments that only have ramifications for that particular game. It has nothing to do with a competitive spirit. When we all were younger, we played in

neighborhood sports games. We competed as hard as we could; we strove to make the sides even so it would be fun and challenging. But no matter what the result was on a particular day, the next day brought a new game, new challenges, without the albatross of a season record determining how we would play the next day.

These were not “purposeless” environments. They were not “meaningless” games. It is exactly the wide variety of environments that develop the creative players. In a subtle way, by seeking to put our young players in more "meaningful" environments, we have subtly made results more important than process. And for development, the process is the result.

### **Increase the General Level of Play for These Ages**

Ultimately, “elite” older players have to shift to more defined roles and structured environments. But, by lowering the age for this focus to U14, we are hurting our younger players. Instead of maintaining and developing the numbers of players at age 13 that we have playing at age eight, we are seeking to narrow the focus to find the cream of a very immature crop. We really must have a paradigm shift. At these ages, we must seek to raise the general level of play for all players, not pare away at the numbers, taking the last player standing. The cream will always rise to the top, but how high it rises depends on the crop itself. If the pond is small, it does not take much for a fish to become the biggest one there.

Back to those Hispanic players in the parks. The vast majority of them never became players at a high level. They represent the “general level” of play from their youth. Yet, they exhibit the tight skills and creativity that many of our best players lack. It is this "general level" of play that produced the highest level players from their countries. This is what we must seek to increase, especially at ages 9 - 15 in this country. This is the “meaningful” environment that will produce players of the highest caliber.

To date, much of our focus above the age of nine has been on important procedural issues. Now, we really have to address providing programs within our states that foster the inclusion of more, rather than fewer, players aged 9 - 15, in the better training and playing environments. We also need to focus on using our resources to hire our better coaches to work with more coaches and players, even across club lines, rather than continue to have clubs compete for the same coaches and players. As a part of this shift of focus, on a National scale the focus needs to shift to supporting these environments and coaching education, and away from reaching down into younger ages for a National program to produce higher caliber National Team players. Continuing on the path we have currently laid out will set us back even further by adding another layer of bureaucracy for us to fight to increase the numbers and develop more conducive environments for producing players who are truly creative and play generally at a much higher level than today. Until we really address these issues, the only thing we will ultimately do is move certain Titanic deck chairs for a few to momentarily get more sun.