

What Does Player Development Really Mean?

By: VYSA Technical Director Gordon Miller

How many times have you heard clubs and coaches state, "Our main focus is player development"? Is this genuine? Is it believable? Are we really following through with our purported principles? Do our current practices and processes align with a player development model in which there is a positive long-term impact on our youth players?



US Youth Soccer states, "A club must have a model for the development of all players. The core for planned development is a sound curriculum. True player development occurs when each player's daily training and playing environment is of the highest quality. If this environment is consistent, with a clear vision of what lies ahead for the players, development is maximized"- With this being said, let's take a look at some obvious reasons why our player development model in the US is broken and why we are not creating an environment in which our players can thrive:

- **Players feel pressure to choose their sport**
 - The message that is communicated, whether subtly or overtly, is that if your child does not specialize early enough, then they will be left behind. Furthermore, if they are not showing to have the skills at U8, they could be written off to make it into a U9 travel program. This message unfortunately now seems to be prevalent in other sports as well. There is no data that proves, that if you specialize in a sport as a kid, that it increases your chances of, "making it."(In the off season, Michael Jordan played baseball, Wayne Gretzky played baseball, Kobe Bryant played soccer. That list goes on.)
- **Qualified Coaching at all levels**
 - Coaches, at the most critical times when players develop and learn, sometimes tend to be our most inexperienced and uneducated. Don't all parents have the right to expect that their child's coach knows what they are doing and can, in turn, enhance their soccer experience. Yet, how many have a coaching license? How many go to clinics? Once they volunteer, or sign up, doesn't it become the coach's and the club's obligation to find out as much as they can about the sport?
- **Age Appropriate Curriculum**
 - There is lots of information out there that reflects the current stage of development of the child. National Youth certificate, F, E and D Licenses all reflect information that pertains to the physical, emotional and psychological development to the stages of player development. Is the coach and the club following a technically laden curriculum? Is the training reflective of the learning capacities of that particular age group?
- **Ratio of Training to Games-**
 - For players up to U12 there should be 2-3 training sessions per week and 1 game on the weekend. The US Model is upside down. A 12 year old player could experience a typical training week as shown below:
 - 2-3 practices with travel team
 - 5 practices with middle school team
 - 2-3 games with middle school team
 - 2-3 games with travel team at a tournament.
 - Clearly, players are playing too many games with not enough quality, well organized training sessions. This could lead to serious injury and early burnout of the game for our young players. On top of that, some parents are getting burned out due to all the driving that they are putting in. In some cases that burnout is then getting transferred to their child.
- **Tournament Play**
 - Top travel teams in Virginia are playing anywhere from 6-10 tournaments a year. We need to approach this from quality vs. quantity. Costs to participate (travel, accommodations, meals, etc.) as well as many games as possible in one weekend, put undue stress on our players and parents.
- **But we want to WIN!**
 - Training topics are often organized to fine tune technical proficiencies and maintaining possession of the ball. However, on game day, training topics are lost in the shuffle as winning becomes paramount. They will build out of the back in training, but be told to long ball it out of the back and quit fooling around with it, in the middle of a game-by both coaches and well intended parents. If a team arrives for a game with not enough players, is the team on the other end with a full squad looking to help provide opportunities for more players to play. Often not because the win is the most important!

Despite the overwhelming landscape we have created in the youth soccer arena, as noted above, we are starting to truly refocus and refine. In fact, US Soccer has recently communicated an array of mandated player development initiatives that will go into place in the next couple of years to support player development in our country. For example, the changes establish a path forward in terms of age appropriate game size, # of players, field size and changes to the birth year registration. Every organization, who is affiliated with US Soccer, will now have to comply with these mandates. The short-term goal is that the US begins to re-focus and believe in developing stronger youth soccer players. With support from clubs, coaches, parents and players, we will end up with a higher standard of player and thus a better experience for all involved in the game.