



YOUTH SOCCER IN AMERICA: FEELING GOOD AGAIN THROUGH FREE PLAY

By Brienne Colby Sembrat, NSCAA member since 2014.
Director of Player and Coach Development, Mt. Lebanon Soccer Association

Overall we are failing to provide sound, positive, motivating athletic experiences for our children—failing big time—and they are simply quitting and/or not reaching the benchmarks of development in the game. I am going to propose one practical way back to healthy, developmentally appropriate, passion-inducing learning experiences—a proven route to feeling good again as parents, players and coaches.

This article uses soccer as the focal subject because it's what I know. A decent portion of the discussion, however, can apply to many sports and other pursuits as well: academic, theatrical, artistic, musical, etc.

I am a 46-year-old suburban wife and mother of two adolescent boys who has weaved her way in and out of the sport since the age of nine. I played soccer in our community, Cup programs, ODP, high school and college. I have coached boys and girls in micro soccer, rec, travel, Premier, high school and assisted at the college level. I have my USSF C National License. I have just taken on the role of Director of Player and Coach Development in my community. Yet, I have swayed off the correct and developmentally sound course both as a sports parent and a coach at times. I have not been comfortable in my own skin and the experience has not felt right or positive. While in my twenties I made my share of coaching errors, and in my thirties and forties, parenting errors when it came to sports.

Now, having watched and studied the game to a great extent while raising my kids, having learned from these errors (oh, believe me though, I do still make them), the goal in my new role for our organization is not only to try to provide programs that create very good, high-level players and teams, or even just to provide the resources and information for our coaches to raise their level of education. Such objectives are simply not enough and don't come close to meeting the needs of every player. So few players in any program will reach the scholarship level of collegiate play regardless of coaching quality, let alone the professional levels beyond that.

Additionally, it is difficult for parent volunteer coaches to find time and motivation to seek further education and licensing, although we will try our darndest to promote and support this.

I think we can agree, therefore, that our objective as administrators, coaches and soccer parents should be to provide and support a quality athletic experience, one that creates an atmosphere to grow; to make mistakes and learn from them; to learn about honoring the game and sportsmanship; to test the limits of drive and work rate at older ages and find the value and rewards of effort; to have fun with teammates on and off the field; and to learn respect for referees and opponents. And then, to come out on the other end of the youth sports experience with passion and the desire to carry on with athletics and healthy pursuits into adulthood, either as a coach, player, fan or educator.

THERE ARE, HOWEVER, SOME OBSTACLES WORKING AGAINST ACHIEVING SUCH STANDARDS:

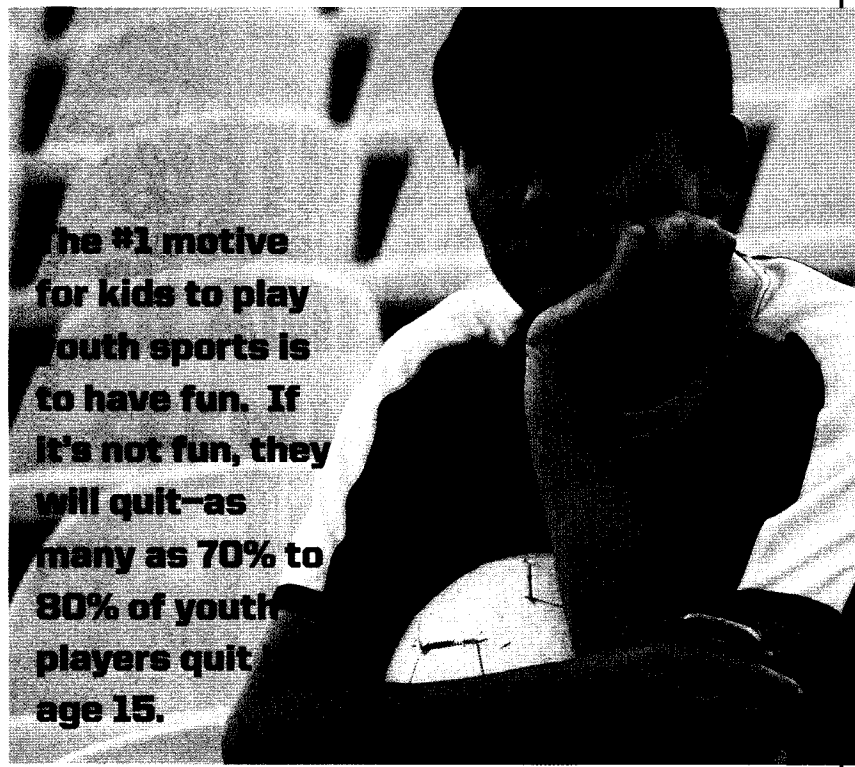
- ➔ **Many kids in America do not play pick-up soccer or work on their own to improve technical ability.**
- ➔ **We as parents and coaches are putting way too much pressure on young kids in sports and focusing on product rather than process-driven and developmentally sound skill acquisition. The #1 motive for kids to play youth sports is to have fun.¹ If it's not fun, they will quit—as many as 70% to 80% of youth players quit by age 15.²**
- ➔ **American players are, in general, lacking in skills and creativity. Skill development is a critical piece of having fun—it is more important than winning, even among the best athletes.³ If they are not given opportunity to play freely, to make mistakes and to try new skills, they won't develop properly, and again, they will often quit.**
- ➔ **Families are paying too much and travelling too far seeking the "best experience." Sports families are "stressed."**

POINT #1

The fast, techno-driven, highly scheduled society in which we live does not allow much time for free play. We are uncomfortable sending our 8 year olds off to find a pick-up game. There are numerous and broad demands on our time and our children's time. Simply said, they have easier and more attractive options than to step out the back door, juggle, kick with both feet against a wall or gather some friends for free play. Additionally, it's hard to fit something creative and playful in between the structured sports practices, meals, homework, piano practice, video game time and social networking. In the past, I questioned my children's motivation and why they have no drive to improve. I even asked myself what I could do to fuel the fire, a laughable self-inquiry because I cannot fuel their fire. Internal motivation is just that—personal grassroots, found and set aflame inside one. We can, however, create an atmosphere that makes it more likely that the kindling will catch fire—more on that in a minute.

POINT #2

Our generation of parents has gone to the outer limits with competing through our children. If you have not heard of *Changing the Game* by John O'Sullivan, please look it up online or view his YouTube TED Talk video because he is spot on. No mincing words, we need to back off.



Kids cannot perform to the best of their ability when they are being yelled at, over-coached, queried endlessly by parents or ceaselessly criticized regarding their performance. Three years ago I was standing at my younger son's game when a new parent to the neighborhood stood next to me. His family had just moved here from France. He asked, "Why do all the parents here come to games and practices? Why do you do this?" In other words, this is their game, why all the parents?

I have a theory about finite fire between parents and children. When parents are the ones getting psyched up and analyzing performance before and after the game, it steals from the child's pot of energy and self-talk time. There is no room for their own passion to grow. Moreover, and more specifically, soccer cannot be learned when a child is being told what to do on the field during the game. They simply can't concentrate and relax. Coaching is for the coach and is for halftime and practices. Parents need to be a cheer-only, watch-and-enjoy section. As I was once told, go to your child's game and act as if you were watching a play. For me, this took a chair and constant self-talk to achieve, but now is just my "way of being" as a spectator. Players can't fully give themselves to the game, try new skills without fear of failure and figure out all the tactical and decision-making nuances of soccer with someone yelling at them. It simply does not work. What an irony—all the "constructive" sideline yelling is actually acting in direct opposition to improvement in soccer.

Because of us crazy parents driving overzealous, over-coaching, pressure-producing programs, kids stop enjoying the game. Skill clinics are available for children as young as 6 years old. This is where we can lose all developmental appropriateness with the game. At young ages, kids should all have a ball and they need to be engaging in fun activities. But we are not coaching in a way that makes kids want to stay with soccer. We are too competitive too early. Let them have fun. Let every kid have a ball, be childlike with the activities, and they will "have a ball" and return the next season or year to play again.

What we are doing in so many cases is not enjoyable or passion producing. No fun, no internal motivation, no self-directed, Coerver-driven backyard play, no chance for 10,000 touches a day.⁴ No high number of touches means no sense of capability in the game. Because we are teaching our feet to be like hands, if we cannot develop a sense



Futsal is one foundation from which we can build this new culture.

of ease with the ball, at some point it becomes less than enjoyable and discouraging as a child ages, and back around the circle we go. Soccer needs many, many touches on the ball for a player to become facile. Sometimes the number of touches a player gets during a full-field game can be counted on fingers. You cannot get the necessary touches from practices or games alone at the youth level in America, even if you are following developmentally sound ball-to-player ratio guidelines. You need to practice on your own, and there we are back to Point #1. Going in circles.

POINT #3

Many players get to 12 and 13 years old, begin playing on the big field, and do not have anywhere near the necessary technical ability to deal with what the larger game requires from a technical/tactical sense, often because of points 1 and 2. Coaches may introduce more sophisticated activities and become easily frustrated because the players simply cannot make the passes and control the ball in a way that facilitates the lesson. Players become frustrated and the game is no longer fun. Attrition, attrition, attrition.

POINT #4

So many parents are feeling the necessity and pressure to put their young players in Academies and Cup programs outside of the community. Soccer has become a hard, confusing and expensive road to navigate, especially if you are in unfamiliar sports territory. Many of these programs cost into the thousands, not including tournament travel fees. Many weekends are spent away. Practices are sometimes on the other side of a city, an hour away, multiple times a week. Premier programs should be, in general, for the best players around age 12 and above in a town. If the community programs for young players are quality, stay. Let the kids be with their friends, close to home. If not, find a developmentally sound program that has a good chance of keeping your child in the game. Is it fun? Are they learning? Is competition and cutting of players being applied too early? Some Academy programs are very good and developmentally appropriate. Be discriminating and ask questions. Let players develop and play with their friends in an atmosphere of learning and fun. When a player rises to the next level, and if it fits for that family, move on to a higher level of competition and practice rigor.

A coaching colleague of mine from the UK recently asked, "What is all this about soccer burnout?" He did not understand because, as he describes it, his youth was spent playing soccer up to four hours a day. He never felt anything close to burnout. His reasoning? That he played less than a mile down the road and rarely travelled. And without all that money and travel he *still* became a professional player who is *still* greatly impassioned by the game. Here, parents are being influenced to bring young children out of communities and into training and Premier programs that are very expensive, not all quality, require heavy travel and do not just select the top players—instead adding B and C teams into age groups. Burnout, frustration and family stress become more likely.

Thus the conundrum—attrition of players; parents way too involved and too emotional and co-dependent on their child's performance; too much travel; too much money spent; coaching and programs putting emphasis on winning at too young an age and lacking developmental appropriateness across the board;

players lacking skills, not enjoying the game and quitting. Yes these are all generalizations and there are many exceptions. But, we know these facts to be true in general for soccer right now in America, and for many other youth sports.

THE ANSWERS:

KIDS START PRATICING ON YOUR OWN! PARENTS QUIT PRESSURING! COACHES START EDUCATING YOURSELVES! PROGRAMS MUST BE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE!

All easier said than done, of course, but the direct approach is laudable. However, we have a swarm of Premier programs and Academies already in place. We cannot impose the internal soccer fire in our children. It's hard to change our daily routines and scheduling and seemingly impossible to turn back the technological freight train that so encompasses our time. But we have to change something. Thankfully, I believe some pieces are coming together to save us all: parents, kids and coaches. At the very least, they can show us the way forward, and once we see the results, we may be able to change our behaviors as parents and coaches, and players may feel that pull of intrinsic motivation inside once again and stick with the program!

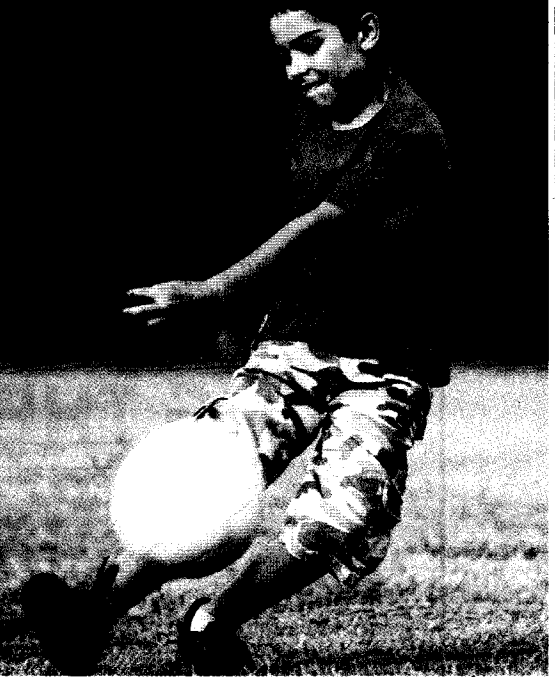
Futsal is one foundation from which we can build this new culture. Futsal, like soccer in a cauldron, demands quick, controlled touches, constant heads-up play, quick decision-making, all players constantly transitioning between offensive and defensive scenarios. The 4 vs. 4 (or even 3 vs. 3) plus goalkeeper numbers promote learning of the basic diamond and triangle tactical play. The rule modifications allow the game to have relatively few and short stoppages. Touches on the ball are increased exponentially per player. It is a terrific training game for players at all levels. Many of the world's top players, particularly in Spain and South America, credit playing Futsal in their youth with providing the outstanding skills they now possess. America is now catching on from the top levels of play in our country on down to community programs.

Take this great game of Futsal and make it "Free" Futsal, our pick-up game. Schedule it, make it cheap and close to home, monitor it for safety then step the heck away and just watch. This game will teach the players if we let them think without interruption, play without criticism

and support without pressure. Futsal inherently has many of the necessary elements critical in the larger game. Last summer our community played silent Futsal. Kids grade 3 through 8, across all skill levels, played in mini Futsal World Cup format each weekday night. NO coaching allowed, only positivity when appropriate and encouraging loads of improvisation. No parents saying anything much more than “great job” when and if it’s true. Three weeks in and we had kids sneaking in extra nights because they wanted to keep playing. The improvement in soccer savvy was obvious and the positive, impassioned atmosphere was palpable. We did it again this winter. Organize Futsal opportunities and then step back to see what happens. Coaches get a break, parents have the opportunity to take the pressure off themselves and improve relationships with their kids, and players are set free. Smiling and playing at the same time—who knew?

Thus, I propose a “pick-up scenario for the new millennium.” Have youth players play uncoached, parent-silent Futsal. For every season of coaching and competition, let there be opportunities for free play. Let these be the seasons for rejuvenation, thousands of touches, finding your inner fire, trying new skills, being creative. We schedule it and get them there, make sure they are safe and then let them be. Am I copping out by not asking for a change in the larger general culture—fewer activities, less technology, parents all signing codes of conduct (great idea and we are working to educate parents, but not enough), all coaches with licenses and proper developmental education (tough road with parent coaches but we are working on this also)? Truth is we need to have a multidirectional approach and come at this issue from both an educate-the-parent-and-coach-centered perspective and from a realistic what-can-we-do-right-now-for-the-kids-and-the-game stance.

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Let's play “Free” Futsal—like the improv experience of classical soccer theater. Balance the yang of on-season competition and instruction with an off-season yin of free expression. Or, work it into the on-season. Players can decipher some of the intricacies of play if you just give them a bit of time and space—literally and figuratively. In soccer, after all, it's so much about finding space. And for our modern American millennial children, we may just need to organize the time. We organize the “pick-up,” close-to-home, inexpensive, grass or hard surface. Take the Futsal gift from our soccer superiors in other countries and make it an American youth development standard at every level—free, unpressured, competitive, yet highly enjoyable, play. Points 1, 2, 3, 4—check, check, check, check.

Resources:

- ¹ Ewing, M. & Seefeldt, V. (1989). Participation and attrition patterns in American agency-sponsored and interscholastic sports: An executive summary. Final report Sporting Goods Manufacturer's Association (North Palm Beach, FL: Sporting Goods Manufacturer's Association) As cited from Youth Soccer in America – How do we Measure Success? US Youth Soccer. (2012)
- ² Merkel (2013). Youth Sport: Positive and Negative Impact on Young Athletes
- ³ Ewing, M.E., & Seefeldt, V. (1990). American youth sport participation. American Footwear Association, North Palm Beach, FL. Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA). As cited from Youth Soccer in America – How do we Measure Success? US Youth Soccer. (2012)
- ⁴ Townsend (2014) Practicing Perfection by 10,000 Touches for These Football Times, part of The Guardian Sports Network.