

US National Teams Program

POSITION STATEMENT

‘Playing to Develop’ versus ‘Playing to Win’

‘Learning versus Winning’

Issue

In youth soccer circles today, an over emphasis is being placed on winning. It stems from social pressure in America where we are expected to be the best in everything. We glorify winning and first place finishers. The emphasis in sports on winning is out of balance. Witness the increase in violence at youth athletic events. In sport, we are obsessed with the outcome rather than the process. As long as we win, we are happy. We evaluate coaches only on their win-loss record. What about enjoyment of the process, the journey, the experience and its ultimate influence on us as people, coaches and athletes? What about evaluating coaches on the improvement, growth and development of their players? After all, we can’t control the outcome, but we can control the process.

Recommendations

Admit that we’re obsessed with winning. When Suzie comes home after her game, the first thing we ask is did she win and the second thing is did she score a goal? Reframe the way we look at sport. Suzie, “how was the game today? Did you have fun? Did your team play well? How did you play? Did you do some of the new things the coach asked you to try? Are you hungry?”

In youth soccer, the priority for coaches and players should be on individual player development and learning. Set age and ability specific technical, tactical, psychological, and physical goals to aid in optimizing player development. This will provide coaches a framework and structure to follow. These goals also provide an alternative for coaches and parents to measure achievement and development of their players. For under 14 and younger, the primary objective of game participation and training is to provide the players with learning opportunities. Teams should “strive to win,” but this should not be the focus of any training sessions, half-time talks or player motivations.

At the age of 14 and above, careful consideration needs to be placed on balancing instances where in addition to developing as individuals and a team, finding ways to win also becomes part of the overall objective. One of the biggest obstacles in women’s athletics is that young girls are socialized not to be competitive. **By all means, ‘teach players to compete, to compete hard, to compete to win, but don’t have winning be the only measure of success.’** Choose which tournaments and games are to be played to learn, and which are to be played to win. It is not in the best interest of the players’ development to have a schedule where the sole purpose for participation is winning. Individual and team improvement and peak performance should be the measure of achievement, rather than winning or losing.