

"Tips, Themes & Things" Coaching Essays

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Measuring Success in Youth Soccer

by US Youth Soccer Technical Department

Too often in America, a professional sport model is used in measuring youth sports success. Youth soccer is not immune to this misapplied standard. For soccer, the situation is made worse by a desire of many adults to use measuring tools from other sports. In fact, it is maddening to many adults that soccer is not as black and white as with some sports in judging successful play. Many team sports played in our nation are statistically-driven and coach-centered. Soccer is neither of those!

Indeed, just like the Laws of the Game, our sport has many shades of grey within it. As a player-centered sport, some coaches become disillusioned as they learn that they are the "guide on the side" and not the "sage on the stage". Too many soccer coaches bring a "Pattonesque" attitude to the youth sport environment. This coach-centered perspective has been handed down to us from other sports and coaching styles of past generations. In many sports, the coach makes crucial decisions during the competition. In soccer, players make the primary decisions during the match, and the coach's decisions are of secondary importance. Anyone with an ego-centric personality will find coaching soccer troublesome.

The other significant group of adults at a youth soccer match is parents. They, too, often have their view of the match colored by the professional model and by a view of coaching that is portrayed in the media. Although this is changing, the majority of parents watching their kids play soccer have never played the game. Statistics show that most of today's soccer parents never played any team sport. So, their only exposure on how to measure sporting success is gleaned from the sports media. The sports media predominately reports on adult teams at the collegiate and professional levels. These adult measurements of team performance should not, and can not, be applied to youth sports.

The analogy can be made to a youngster's academic development in preparation for work in the adult business world. While the child is in primary and secondary school, the corporate world measurements of success are not applied. Those business assessments are not yet appropriate because the school-aged student does not yet have the tools to compete in the adult business

environment. The knowledge and skills to be a competitor in business are still being taught and learned. This holds true in soccer as well! Soccer is an adult game designed by adults for adults to play. Adults enjoy the game so much that we have shared it with our children. Yet adults err when we bring our adult performance and outcome-based thinking into the developing player's world.

So, how can we measure success in youth soccer? How do parents know if the team's coach is doing a good job of teaching soccer to the players? How does the novice coach know if the kids are growing within the game? US Youth Soccer recommends the following short-term and long-term guidelines:

- **Short-Term Measures**

- **Fun.** Do the players smile and laugh? Do the players look forward to playing? The first question from the player's family should be, "Did you have fun today?"
- **Fair Play.** Does a player demonstrate by words and actions a sense of sportsmanship?
- **Laws of the Game.** Do the players know and follow the rules of soccer?
- **Health and Fitness.** Are the players physically fit enough to meet the fitness demands of the game? Are they developing good nutrition and hydration habits befitting an athlete?
- **Friendships.** Are the players creating new friends within the team and with players from other teams?
- **Skills.** Are the players demonstrating a growing number of ball skills and are they gradually becoming more proficient in those skills?

- **Long-Term Measures**

- **Commitment.** How do the players answer when asked at the end of a game, "Did you try your best?"
- **Roles in the Team.** More important than learning a position, are the players learning about positioning? Knowing where the right back or the center forward spot is on the field is important, yet learning how to move tactically within the game is far more important. Do all of the players get exposed to playing all of the positions?
- **Leadership.** Are players being given the opportunity to take on leader roles and responsibilities? Are the coaches and team managers teaching leadership?
- **Tactics.** Are the players experimenting with new tactics in matches? The coaches must teach new tactics to the players in training sessions and then allow them to try out the tactics in a match, regardless of how that might affect the outcome!
- **Retention.** Do the players come back year after year?

Statistics, won-loss-tie records, goals for/goals against, saves, number of corner kicks and so on are straightforward ways to measure what happened in a game. Those unfamiliar with soccer find the use of those measurements comforting as they help them define a sport they find confusing. Yet those measurements fail to show the complete picture of a skill-based, open-

ended, transitional sport with no timeouts. There is an immeasurable organized chaos factor in soccer.

The bottom line is that statistics in soccer are largely meaningless. From this thought springs the reality that soccer perhaps is the cruelest of team sports. It may be the only team sport where a team could have the majority of ball possession, outshoot the other team, and still lose the match. If you have played soccer long enough you have been the team that was much better than the opposition and lost. You have also been the team that was outplayed by the opposition and won. The won-loss record does not accurately show how the game was played, how the players performed, or how well the coach prepared the team to play the game.

Scientific research has concluded that it takes eight-to-twelve years of training for a talented player to reach elite levels. This is called the "10,000 Hours Rule", which translates to slightly more than three hours of practice daily for ten years (Ericsson, et al., 1993; Ericsson and Charness, 1994, Bloom, 1985, Salmela et al., 1998). Unfortunately, parents and coaches in many sports still approach training with an attitude best characterized as "peaking by Friday", where a short-term approach is taken to training and performance with an over-emphasis on immediate results. We now know that a long-term commitment to practice and training is required to produce elite players in all sports.

It is certainly the stance of US Youth Soccer to focus more on match performance than outcome; yet this is not to say that players should not strive to win. There is nothing wrong with winning! Trying to win is desirable and praiseworthy. It means trying your best. Indeed trying to play your best (match performance) often leads to winning...but not always! Remember, the outcome of the game is not a reason why kids play. Players and coaches should diligently work to improve their performance. This is the drive for excellence, as opposed to success.

Trying new ball skills, new tactics, a new set play, or a new formation will cause errors during matches. Yet if the players do not feel they are allowed to try out these new talents in a match, when will those talents become a part of their game? The sounds coming from the spectators at a youth match should be cheers for when a player tries something new. Parents can measure their child's success in soccer by the improving athletic ability of their child, by the growing confidence and self-reliance of the player, by the emergence of refined ball skills, by the opportunity afforded by the coach to play in different positions on the team, by the taking on of leadership and responsibility, by the demonstration of fair play, and by the smiles. Parents will know that there is a chance for success when they see the players and coaches striving for excellence!

About this Article

This article was provided by Sam Snow, Director of Coaching Education for US Youth Soccer. It was excerpted from "Vision: Youth Soccer in America", which was written by the US Youth Soccer Technical Department staff. This document discusses the leading research regarding why children play organized soccer, and applies these findings to define developmentally-appropriate measures of success for youth soccer players. We encourage you to download the complete "[Vision](#)" document (available in PDF format).



US Youth Soccer is a non-profit educational organization whose mission is to foster the physical, mental and emotional growth and development of America's youth through the sport of soccer at all levels of age and competition. US Youth Soccer registers over 3,000,000 youth players between the ages of five and nineteen nationwide, over 600,000 volunteers and administrators, and more than 300,000 coaches annually. For more information about US Youth Soccer, be sure to visit www.usyouthsoccer.org.