

Playing versus Competing

By Terry Michler

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This is a very interesting topic that needs to be explored in more depth. In a recent article in the **NSCAA Soccer Journal**, Jay Martin does a great job explaining the importance of competition, as opposed to just playing. With the current soccer culture, it seems that everyone can find a comfortable place to play, and feel good about themselves. However, what might be lacking in some of these situations is the drive to fight for a spot on a team.

That same failure to fight for a spot on the team carries over into other areas of play as well. Just after I read the article, I listened to an interview with Sigi Schmidt, coach of the Columbus Crew. He was talking about the youth system in his organization and was saying that competition, more than coaching was the biggest difference maker.

When kids play, but don't necessarily compete, how can they maximize their developmental potential. Every time a player trains or plays a game, they have the opportunity to compete. At all times they can compete internally to become better. Complacency and entitlement has replaced competition. The end result is that players struggle to achieve when the resistances increase. What do they have to draw from? Having come through a youth system that provides a team for every wanting player, it becomes: write a check, show up and play me. When things don't go their way, they quickly and easily find another team to make it right. This lateral slide is what drains the competitiveness out of the player. Instead of staying and working harder, or playing better, or playing the way the coach wants, it's just too easy to leave, usually on bad terms, and ply your trade elsewhere.

Why is it that the emphasis world-wide has been to explore the under-developed countries for talent? Is it that these potential players have more of a desire to improve themselves, raise their standard of living, to get out of their surroundings? Obviously they are more driven to compete for the opportunity to improve themselves and to have a better life. No one can argue those points. It seems to be a concern throughout the soccer world that the young players of today and tomorrow are not as driven as players in past times. Opportunities today afford more luxuries and sometimes that can become a deterrent to hard work.

To be perfectly honest, it seems to me that players today just want to be like everyone else. No one seems to want to be better. Seldom do players take the initiative to stand out, to be the difference maker. Maybe we have brain-washed the team concept into them so much that we have taken the individual drive to stand out from them. The social aspect comes into play whereby the very good players don't want to leave their friends behind, or for their friends to realize that they are not as good, that they have fallen behind. Today, seldom do you see players play up in age. We do not place players by ability level, but by birthdate. The very good players need to be challenged constantly, they need to be in competitive environments where they are not the best and must work very hard to keep up. We must continue to raise the bar, not lower it.

When we accommodate the very good player into a team to help the team win, we shortcut that kid's potential to improve. Actually, we shortcut every player in that team and their collective ability to improve when we compromise the development of the player for the good of the team. Many a team is carried by the strength and talents of that one very good player. We need to realize that the very good player needs to be challenged by those who are better than he is. In Europe, and I am very familiar with the Ajax Youth System, the determination is ability, not age. Players play where they will best develop, and develop more quickly and consistently. The competition within the team for places demands that everyone be at their best all of the time. If players were evaluated regularly and moved up or down based on that evaluation, I think we would see more interest and effort by everyone. Complacency sets in when there is no repercussion for lack of progress. If everything is the same for everyone, why try harder. If the rewards are equal for all, where is the incentive, the motivation to excel? When we reward mediocrity, we fail to challenge and push the higher end. The top comes back to the pack and everybody is basically the same.

When you combine good coaching with a high level of competition and integrate that into a well organized training plan, then you have a chance to get the best results. Regular evaluations serve as a motivational tool whereby the players know that they must be accountable and must continually work and maintain their position in the team. We must reward performance and achievement over effort. Too often we all hear the cries of "good effort" when

the reality is that it went miserably wrong. We cannot continue to neglect when it goes wrong and we must reward it when it goes right. The reward of doing it right must become the 'carrot' to push the high level of consistency that is lacking in our top players. A top player must be 'on his game' as often as is possible. He must compete within himself to achieve a high standard and not settle for the on- again, off-again type of performance. In reading some early history of Wayne Rooney of Manchester United, it seems that he dominated every team he played for – always playing up in age. He wanted to be the best – all the time – every time he played. The greater the challenge, the higher he raised his level. Competitors never want to lose and they take losing very hard. They are winners and they pay the price to be winners. Whether it's being in the middle of 5 vs 2 or the biggest Cup Final, the true competitor will find a way to win, to the best of his ability. It won't be for lack of effort, he will leave everything he has on that field and play with all his pride to come out on top.

To wrap this up, I don't know the answer to this because our soccer culture has created this situation over time. First, I think we need to recognize the concern and start addressing it in the best ways possible. The **Soccer Journal** article opened with a college game between 2 highly ranked teams. One team was obviously very skillful, loaded with talent and the other team was also very good, but not quite at the same level. At the end of the game, the skilled team played a good game, but the other team won 3-0. They competed better throughout the game and during the course of the game, there are many, many moments where the rewards go to the one who competes the best. It's always the little things that, make the biggest differences - a hard, timely tackle, the right pass at the right time, the full length slide to tap the ball in at the back post, staying with your mark and shutting him down. The mindset of the competitor is that he will give everything that he has to have a chance to win – no ifs, ands or butts!

I do think we need to look closely at what we reward and our team and player selection. The concept of Showcase events is a good example. Showcase events can very much be a "look at me" time – I can dribble or pass or juggle - but at what expense to the overall development of the player, the team and ultimately, to the game. Pay more attention to the players in Competitions where the reward is for the team – State Cups – Challenge Cups – where everyone has a vested interest in the team doing well. Reward those who find a way to win when everyone is focused on the same prize.

Players know how to impress in tryouts as well. They know what looks good and gets the coaches' attention. If we had the players compete versus 'show off', maybe we could have more teams that compete. Certainly we all want skillful players, but how many times do we get beat because 'we just came up a bit short'. What might be the difference in being 'a bit short'? Maybe that little extra effort at the right time, or the unrelenting desire not to lose, or the burning desire to win – does it come down to competitor vs player? We want players, but what we need are players who compete.

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