
Why Winning Isn't a Priority in Youth Soccer



"Winning is not everything? What a bunch of junk."

I remember uttering those words in my mind many years ago after listening to the usual coaches' meeting before the season started. I thought to myself, "If winning isn't everything, then why do they keep score and why does this youth league have tournaments at the end of the season?" When I walked out of the meeting I knew that EVERY coach had the same thing on his mind. They were already planning their "killer tactical plans" for their Under-12 [soccer](#) team.

Think of this mistake as a process, kind of a life cycle that many good coaches go through. Remember most of us start out as bad coaches. We don't really know what we're doing, we just know we are trying to get to a certain point. Along the way and through the years we just kind of figure it out. We go through coaching education, certification, watch videos, read books, watch other coaches, and rely on what we learned as soccer players. Eventually we become pretty good at what we do.

The problem that evolves in this pattern is the natural cycle of the parent/coach. We generally start out with our children at a young age. We teach them basic technical skills and focus on the simple things. We expose young players to the game by having fun, but at the same time teaching the basic skills that make them a skilled individual player.

Now the little ones start to mature, the season rolls on, and here is where the poison starts to trickle in to our coaching: Our human nature.

Resisting the Urge to Win

Human nature is the one thing that is very hard to change. However, to be a truly great youth soccer coach we must learn how to overcome our [desire to win](#), or at least win at all costs, which really is a natural behavior.

Our job as youth soccer coaches is to teach young players individual skills and make sure that these skills are not only taught, but also repeated to the point that they become instinctive. We should make sure the young soccer experience is fun and well rounded.

Moving a weak offensive player to the forward position is easy to do when you are up 6-0. However, making this move when you're losing 3-2 is seen as suicide by many. But if you are not allowing rotations on your young teams, you are doing the kids a disservice.

Spending a great deal of time on technical skills is easy at first. However, when we start to lose games we feel we are weak on tactical strategy and we have a tendency to make practices all about tactical work. The much needed "technical training" just seems to disappear.

Here are a few things that add to this difficulty.

- Parents, a HUGE contributing factor, want their child to be on a winning team. If a team is losing all their games, it's not their child's weak technical skills that are the problem. It is the coach and his game plan that is causing us to lose.
- We as coaches/humans want to win or be successful in the eyes of others. Unfortunately this is often based on what people see as the public grading--the win/loss record.
- We often don't sit down with all the people involved and communicate what our goals are for the season. If only a few parents understand that we are not there to win but to learn, then it simply will not work.

A truly great youth soccer coach understands his job is to teach his young players individual technical skills. Our job is not to teach a 10-year old extended tactical vision for the game, but instead give him the mastery of the tools that it takes to play the game. The creativity and vision for the game will only truly come once this process has ended and they can focus on the GAME as a whole. It's hard to be creative when you keep tripping over the ball while dribbling.

Yes, we do give them some basic vision points for the tactical side of the game. However, it does no good to try and teach them a play that has one player feeding in a ball 30 yards, while another player receives it and finishes, if neither can complete the basic skills to make this play happen.

Many of our technical foundations are thrown out the window when the season starts. We start focusing on scrimmages, set up, positioning and plays. We start lecturing 9-year olds about the "thirds of the field", forgetting that all they are looking at is the ball at their feet.

Coaches have a natural human nature to win. That does not make them bad people, just bad youth coaches. Most of us want to succeed at what we do; we just often define the "definition of success" incorrectly.

Until we can break this cycle of winning at all costs and pressured competition, our kids will continue to suffer. Until the definition of "success" in youth soccer is redefined, there will be kids that are being set up for failure at the expense of adult winning.

Why Can't We Do It?

In order to make this work, everyone has to buy in. There needs to be a strong message--preferably in writing--that explains this trend and how every person contributes to this problem.

Everyone from the program director, to the coaches, the parents and the players need to understand the definition of a successful youth soccer program. A simple **parents meeting** at the beginning of the season is not enough. Often many miss it and many players will only have one of the parents attending. There needs to be a strong written summary of your goals and all should read, sign and return.

Everyone should realize that while some tactical education will be covered, it will be age appropriate and more on a general, basic and visual understanding level. It should be understood that younger player development will be largely technical-based and competitive games are simply a place to try our newly learn technical skills, not a measure of results.

I will warn you that this is easier said than done. It often takes years of coaching before we realize what we are doing wrong. We when finally realize this mistake we now face the daunting task of selling this theory to inexperienced parents and coaches. (A job no one really wants.)

A Step in the Right Direction

Youth [soccer](#) has finally been facing up to these problems around the world. Many international development programs and U.S. Youth Soccer programs are slowly getting this message out to clubs, leagues and coaches. However, this powerful message seems to fall short when it comes to reaching the parents. Coaches must humbly face this reality and focus on moving this message to the parents. Without the parents buying in 100 percent this movement will fail.

I have had the pleasure of working with many soccer programs and players from around the world. It always amazes me at what a poor job the leagues do at communicating these critical points to parents, and coaches as well. A short parent meeting or a 10 line code of conduct will never get this point delivered. Developing a full and thorough plan and getting 100 percent on board is the only way it will work.

You will always find some youth coaches that somehow justify themselves around this basic youth soccer principle. They will still wear their "badge of victories" proudly and debunk this essential and critical understanding. Remember they are not bad people, just bad for youth soccer. They can't help it, it's their nature.

Sadly we as soccer coaches must come to grips with the fact that we are not training a winning team for our sake. Our job is to help young players by teaching them individual technical skills. We then graciously turn them over to another coach hoping they are better with what they have learned.

Young players will remember a good soccer coach for the rest of their lives. That is what we as coaches call our reward. Not winning.

Why Coaches Should Have a Parents Meeting

coaches should communicate effectively with both players and their parents.

By **Marty Schupak**
[Youth Sports Club](#)

When most youth coaches think of preseason preparation, they envision grueling [conditioning](#), long stretching sessions, creative new plays and strategies, understanding team dynamics, and attending league meetings. One topic that belongs on that list is what I call a "parents meeting."

Each sports season, I organize a parents meeting before we step on the field. I make this meeting a requirement and ask that at least one parent from each family attend. During the meeting, I lay out my goals and expectations for the season and explain to parents how I run my practices. I always leave a fair amount of time for a question-and-answer period. In anticipation of the parents' meeting, I print a handout of approximately three to four pages, which lists all of the members of the team and coaching staff, each player and coach's phone number, a brief list of my coaching philosophies, and some organizational items.

People might say, "Well this is only youth sports. It's not high school." This is true, but I have learned over the years that a parents meeting will make for a better run season for the kids, the parents and the coaches.

One of the key topics I cover during a parents meeting is how I expect players to arrive at least 45 minutes before the start of a game. It's important to set this expectation early and also to explain that you are especially appreciative to parents who have very busy schedules

either with other children or with regards to competing priorities (karate, music lessons, [school work](#), car pools, etc).

I also like to address what is most important for the parents. In youth football, playing time is an issue and an explanation from the coach should be covered. Many football leagues will have their own playing time requirements and if yours does, explain the policy to the parents.

In [soccer](#), playing time as well as position play are two of the biggest concerns to parents. In recreational soccer, playing time is usually dictated by the league policy. If you are coaching in one of the more competitive travel soccer teams, you must detail your philosophy and tell the parents outright that some players will be playing more than others. As far as position play, you can let parents know that you will try to be a little flexible but cannot guarantee anything.

Another important point I like to cover is that because of my own busy schedule, I cannot run a taxi service for any players. Parents must be at practice five minutes before it ends. When I first began to coach, I never addressed this and after each practice I had a car full of players to drop off. As coaches, this cannot be part of our jobs for more reasons than one.

I also explain that I'm willing to address any complaints parents might have during the season under one condition. I developed a standard policy of not taking any complaints for at least two games. This cuts down on a lot of phone calls and most of the times a complaint by a parent about playing time is taken care of by the third game.

Since I instituted this policy, I have had only a handful of complaints (and that covers the last 18 years!). It's a long way from when I [first started](#) coaching and I would go home to be greeted by two or three messages on my answering machine.

As a coach, there are a lot of responsibilities and I try to cut down on the phone calls as much as possible. One system a lot of people use is the phone chain. This is effective only some of the time. Another system I use which is similar is the buddy system.

At the beginning of each year I ask for a couple of parent volunteers to help with the phone calls. Then I assign each player a buddy. So if there are 20 kids on the team, there are 10 pairs of buddies. The first thing I tell them is that if there is any question on practice time or location, call their buddy before they call me. And if their buddy isn't home, call someone else on the team list. And make sure you utilize emails but do not count on them alone.

If it is raining, I call my two phone volunteers and divide the calls in half. Remember, each player has a buddy so they should never make more than five calls and maybe a call back to me. Any system you try isn't fool proof and during the course of the season, you can expect your share of calls.

Getting players to practice on time is a key to any youth sports team. In soccer, try giving the players numbers as they come and No. 1 will be the first player in all shooting drills. In [football](#), the first three players to arrive at practice will be team captains for that particular practice, will lead the team in warm ups and get a star on their helmet. Explain this at the parents meeting and I guarantee they will make an effort to get their kids to practice on time.

Once I began running parents meetings, I found that complaints were cut down at least 50 percent. Remember, you are volunteering your time and you have a right to make the season run as smooth as possible for yourself, and that's the way you want it to be for your team as well.