

Stifling The Development Of The American Soccer Player

by Gary R. Allen, U.S. Soccer National Staff Instructor, US Youth Soccer National Staff Instructor and the Director of Coaching Education for the Virginia Youth Soccer Association

Sam Snow, the Director of Coaching Education at US Youth Soccer, recently sent an article to the National Youth License Instructional Staff. It chronicles the journey of Cherno Samba, a 19-year-old player in England who was considered a "phenom" at age 14, and the saga of his lack of success in the past five years playing with professional clubs. The article, although interesting, misses an important point. While it addresses significant issues concerning adult intervention (or perhaps "interference") in development and the psychological and societal ramifications, it fails to grasp an underlying issue that goes to the heart of the development of soccer players generally.

An obvious comparison can be made to a young "phenom" player in our own country, Freddy Adu. Both Freddy and Samba have attributes that enable them to stand out from their peers, and perhaps from players a few years older. It is easy, however, to overlook the fact that Freddy Adu's situation is unique. He developed his great skill and promise as a youngster in the streets of Ghana, where he played pick up games and had free rein to play. Now, however, when he appears to have grown beyond players his age, he has become the paradigm in the United States for the notion that the way to develop promising young talent is to identify players as early as possible and place them in increasingly tougher and more competitive situations. All of us hope that Freddy will develop into a great player, and, if he does, it will be predominantly because he is unique, with special gifts, and in large part because during his formative years in the game he was allowed to create and experiment, and was not guided merely to achieve results for a team.

Our current method in the United States to develop better players mistakenly focuses almost exclusively on the extraordinary physical maturity and technical ability of players like Samba and Adu. This thinking ignores perhaps the most crucial element in the total development of a soccer

player: the ability to read the game, the flow, and how to anticipate and adjust to individual opponents and teams. These are the intangible traits that make great players rise above others, and that players only develop over a long period of time with experience and experimentation.

We look at the European club models with their apprentice programs and reserve teams as the key to developing players, but we ignore the abysmal rate of the number of players emerging from these programs to be star players. There are some, but it is like gambling -- winning happens very sporadically, yet after an isolated win, people keep coming back again and again hoping for another win, losing and wasting much more than they gain.

The solution is not just to put "promising" young players in environments to play faster, as the mantra nationwide has been for a while. There is much more to the game than just playing faster against older, more mature players. It may even do more harm than good because the adjustments that these young players are required to make are strictly based upon having to compete in certain roles against bigger, stronger, faster and more accomplished players. These players are given roles that do not have so much to do with their development as how to use the one or two extraordinary abilities they have while masking their less-developed attributes. What is often overlooked is the fact that the adjustments these players are required to make, and their reading of the game, are heavily influenced by their particular physical, mental and social developmental stages at the time. While it sounds good to have a 14-year-old prodigy playing against pros, the reality is that such a player's problem-solving abilities remain those of a 14-year old. Therefore, the experiences and experimentation such a player uses may end up being just a form of survival and not true opportunities to grow and develop in an environment where failure fosters growth without dire consequences.

In these "high-level" "high-pressure" situations, the player is always competing, and therefore, relying primarily on his or her strengths, just to earn the right to play. The player is not necessarily

exposed to the well-rounded variety of situations that he or she might face playing against players with differing strengths and weaknesses. Instead of being able to experiment and really stretch him or herself, there is always present the consequence of failure, which promotes practicality, not flair, in his or her play. Thus, these environments, in many cases, are not really related to the player's ultimate long-term growth.

Many former run-of-the-mill pros profess that exposing these players to older professional players is good because it toughens the young players up. But these pros don't realize that they are often projecting their own past experiences upon the situation. Because they were strictly run-of-the-mill players themselves, in many cases, the main attribute that allowed them to survive at the pro level was a "tough" exterior. The true development of a player at the highest levels entails so much more than "toughness," and many players who have shown some promise early on have been "hardened" into unexciting, uninspirational, run-of-the-mill pros often suffering severe injuries early on in their careers.

"Street soccer" and "neighborhood games" are commonly extolled as breeding grounds for superior players. But do we really understand why these environments help create such crafty players? Soccer is a game that constantly changes, the ball is always moving and there are many contests, individual, group and team, all over the field. These myriad situations in each game require players to make adjustments. The real key to understanding what makes a player great is realizing that it lies in the unique adjustments and decisions he or she makes to solve the problems presented in a game.

This is one of the "truths" captured by the National Youth License (NYL). The focus shifts from coaching methodology to consideration of the mental, physical and social capabilities of different aged players and how this affects problem-solving. The whole course concerns providing appropriate sessions to allow players to solve problems for themselves. These "truths" about the

mental, physical and social capabilities of players do not magically cease being truths when players reach age 13. They continue to play an integral role in players' development throughout their playing careers.

Every former player I have spoken with who has taken the NYL raves that it is the best coaching course they have ever taken, mainly because of this focus on "problem-solving." The NYL touches a vital chord for all former players because each of them knows that the way they learned the game involved much more than just focusing on proper technique or training sessions. The effectiveness of the NYL approach is that it encompasses the very essence of the game of soccer -- a game whose look, feel and style is totally determined by the players playing it. It is all about players learning to solve problems for themselves.

This is why for teenaged players the concept of "guided discovery" is so important. Unlike other sports, we, as coaches, cannot be effective by merely teaching isolated techniques, particular team patterns to advance the ball, or giving each player a specific role to play or specific instructions to follow. We must focus on the long-term and intrinsic development of players, guiding them, but more importantly, allowing them, to think for themselves, to make their own decisions. This will enable them to have the tools to adjust and exploit a vast array of situations, in many cases, all in the same game. This is neither an easy nor a short-term learning process. The fact that we are dealing with pre-teens and teenagers further complicates the matter.

Forming "all-star" teams when players are too young or developing a whole system of "select" or "travel" teams before the teenage years is detrimental to the long-term development of players. In "select team" environments, where we place our kids beginning often at age 8, the players are chosen because of certain "perceived" strengths. If they want to play, then they are required to use the strengths for which they were selected, so that their team can win. Conversely, in the "pickup" game, players are constantly experimenting with different ways to solve problems with

and against different players, and though a failed experiment might cost a goal on a particular day, tomorrow is a whole new game. There is no season record (or disappointed adults) hanging over them.

Furthermore, when we use more "competitive" teams as our primary development tool, we never allow players to experience the joy and passion of the game, because all of our efforts are towards winning, promotion, State Cup and Olympic Development Program (ODP). Is it any wonder that we lose so many players as they enter their teen years and begin to realize that they can pursue a number of creative activities and sports of their own choosing, and don't have to play soccer because mom or dad want them to do so?

Players need time and opportunity to experiment, to enjoy the growth when they finally succeed at something they have been trying to do. We coaches often only see ahead a season or a year, and we are impatient for such growth to occur. We forget how we, as former players, were constantly learning and refining our games, and how often our greatest strides were made, not in structured learning environments, but in situations where we were allowed to experiment.

I remember when I was a freshman in college, playing varsity at a very successful Division 1 school. I was one of two Americans on the team. The rest were Brazilian, El Salvadoran, Israeli, and English. Some of the greatest learning experiences for me as a player that year did not occur in college training sessions. Instead, they occurred on Saturdays when many of us played small-sided pick-up games in a local park with Portuguese fishermen who were in port at the time. It is in this type of environment that players have the opportunity to truly learn how to play and adjust to many types of situations and players. Thinking and the ability to adjust take a long time to develop, with a lot of experimentation, and, yes, failure. But our culture won't allow the failure required to learn at any age or stage. We must always have immediate success.

After all, we need U12 National Champions, otherwise how will we be able to identify the players of the future -- winning is everything. Yet, in the 30-plus years that we have had organized youth soccer on a mass scale, we have not yet produced even one truly world class player! In the long-term development of a soccer player, winning in any particular season means almost nothing. It is the playing and experimentation that are almost everything.

I have spoken with many world-renowned soccer players and coaches over the 32 years I have been coaching. Basically, they all say we need the same things for America to become great at soccer. We need creative players who can play in unique ways, more quickly, and who can score. We recognize the need, and yet beginning at age 8, we force our young players into more rigid and competitive teams where they are recruited to play certain roles so that the "team" can win. We wonder why when we evaluate players at ODP tryouts out of 100 players we see five who have the beginnings of flair, but the 95 other players seem to be cookie-cutter players. When do we allow them to be creative? When do we allow them to try to solve problems in unique ways? When do we allow them to experiment and enjoy the game? When do we allow them the opportunity to search for and learn new solutions, and to do so again and again, thousands of times in thousands of situations? The answer is: we don't.