

Winning and Development: Are they compatible?

Can we truly focus our efforts in youth football on developing players and yet still win matches? For us, the answer is a resounding YES!

For years the debate has swirled. Are coaches in the Academies, Centres of Excellence, and community youth clubs and programs in the business of winning matches or are we employed by our respective clubs to develop young players to become future professionals? The question as posed presents a dilemma for most of us. Why is the question ever asked?

The question arises because far too many coaches put themselves first above their players. Such coaches need to be seen as successful; by having a high percentage winning record; to gain as many victories as possible. Their ego orientation to youth football does not serve the needs of young players. This type of coach uses players to serve his needs.



Many years ago we were dismissed from an Academy program because the team lost 0-1 in a match where the opponents were physically bigger and stronger. The opponents played a very aggressive game with little skill and tactical understanding. For us, the game was an opportunity to learn some valuable lessons from the process of the match. For our ego- and win-focused employer the result was an opportunity to dismiss coaches who did not prepare players to satisfy his needs.

We could have structured our team to win that match. However, we stayed true to our values and principles; development comes first!

Alternatively, there are many coaches, both paid and volunteer, who place far greater emphasis on 'player development.' It seems these coaches have misunderstood the objective of the game: to score goals! There's a reason there are goals at each end of the field.

When we go to either extreme of the 'winning – development continuum' the player is the one who loses. In the middle of the continuum is the position that we develop

winning players and teams through a systematic and purposeful player development program. This is our approach and it's based on the value of developing excellence in young players – on and off the field.

Both of us have been involved in all levels of football during our careers. At the top end we were expected to win matches. Additionally, both of us have spent many years coaching youth players with the emphasis on developing the skills, attributes, knowledge and understanding that are required to become an elite footballer.

We believe that development and winning are compatible. For us, the primary role of the coach is to develop and prepare players to meet the demands and challenges that the game and opponents present. Thus, coaching focuses on the process of development and preparation. To successfully meet the demands and challenges of elite football takes many years of systematic, purposeful and focused development.

While development is of long-term duration, match preparation takes up the period between matches, usually on a weekly basis. In the larger scheme of development, match preparation is one small part of the overall picture. In the youth programme our focus in a particular week of training is that of meeting the continued need of the development program. We just happen to be in a certain week of the total curriculum. This approach is especially so with the younger players in the Academy.



During the week of match preparation we also spend some time with an eye to the challenges our opponent will present to us. For us, the challenges we are confronted with become opportunities for growth and development. What can we do, how can we perform to successfully meet those challenges?

There is an interesting irony in all of this. The better we develop and prepare our players, the more likely they will perform to their present potential. The more consistent the performances become both within matches and across matches through the season, the more victories are experienced. Through a focus on the process we enable the result of winning. We stay true to our values and develop players who are capable of consistently performing at a high level and as a consequence, win matches.

Thorough development and preparation produces winning footballers!

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