

Player Development in The United States: Maintaining A Perspective

U.S. Soccer believes that first and foremost youth soccer is a sport that players should experience and enjoy as a game with a focus on individual experimentation and development. U.S. Soccer encourages creating soccer environments that will help promote the players' lifelong love of the sport. These environments should allow for the creativity, spontaneity and experimentation that the game of soccer naturally encourages. Too often, children are put into situations where development is secondary and winning is a priority, which leads to burnout and stifles individual skill development.

We believe that a player's development is enhanced when the short-term goals of a coach are pursued within the perspective of the player's long-term needs. The following is a two-part commentary on the importance of (1) Having continuity and perspective in player development, and (2) Allowing children to experience soccer as it makes sense for their age and level of soccer maturity. Part one addresses the theoretical stages of player development and how each successive step is built upon the foundations established in the previous stage. In the second part, the current Men's National Team coaching staff comment on the charge of their specific age group, and how it fits into the overall United States Men's National Team program of development and success.

The development of a player spans three general stages:

- (1) Youth level (ages 6-12)
- (2) Junior level (ages 13-17)
- (3) Senior level (ages 18 and older)

A player's chances of success at the Senior level are greatly enhanced by mastering the building blocks of soccer that are best addressed at the Youth and Junior levels. At the Youth level, ball skills, enjoyment of and experimentation within the game are key for a player's development.

At the Junior level, ball skills, enjoyment and insight into the game, with a gradual introduction to fitness, mental toughness and results. At this point, any success in winning matches should begin to be the product of a consistent and systematic approach to the game that focuses more on player development than on team-building. (The theory being that individually competent soccer players that are placed together on a team are more prepared to win than well-organized players who are unable to stand alone on their soccer abilities).

At the Senior level, players need to use all these qualities together, along with a commitment to excellence, in order to figure out how to win. If a player skips a step at the Youth or Junior levels, he will find success and enjoyment more difficult as he moves toward the senior level.

At the Youth and Junior levels, there are several points to address when discussing how to achieve these goals:

- (1) The game is the best teacher - let the kids learn from it by setting up opportunities for them to play
- (2) Allow kids to learn in environments that are sensitive to age and abilities (emotional and athletic) and that offer a variety of experiences.
- (3) Age and ability competition is a central element in a player's development.
- (4) At the youth level, a competitive environment is not a result-oriented environment. The differences must be clear. A competitive environment at the youth level encourages decisions from player and coach alike that focus on performance rather than results. (Favoring ball skill and inventiveness as the means to find success within the rules and spirit of the game)
- (5) At the junior level, technical skill and attacking soccer are still important themes, but now there is a greater focus on developing players' insight into the game by emphasizing the role of the game itself as a forum for learning. (Still focusing on the performance, rather than the result)
- (6) At the youth and junior levels, matches are important as a means to player development (enjoyment, ball skill, insight, fitness), not as the aim. The usefulness of the game, in this respect, can occur in many different forms, from the 4v4 to the full-sided match model. Even at the Senior level, the game still offers opportunities for growth – only the weight of balance between factors such as enjoyment, ball skill, insight, fitness and results shift more toward the latter.

A GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF A YOUTH SOCCER PLAYER IN THE UNITED STATES

Youth Level

At the early levels of youth soccer ...

“Kids are just getting to know the game; they’re exploring, checking things out, feeling their way into the game. They may wave to you in the middle of the game or spin around, with their arms out, at midfield because of some sudden, mysterious inspiration. They want to run, to chase, to kick, to be with their friends – and to follow the ball wherever it goes (and who can blame them!) During these years the kids should touch the ball as much as possible, learn physical balance, learn to guide the ball with both feet, and start kicking with some accuracy. When they play games, they should absolutely be left alone: the field should be their world, on the child’s terms. These years should be about FREE PLAY with the world’s favorite toy (the ball) and about falling in love with the game.”

--- Mass. Youth Soccer Association

At the latter stages of the Youth level (ages 8 to 12) the goal is to provide training and game environments that promote the continued growth of ball skill, an increasing game awareness and an appreciation for taking calculated risks in the attack through the 3v3 to 8v8 game model. The small-sided game model is an effective method for developing ball skill and game awareness because it increases opportunities for players to have contact with the ball and to both attack and defend without the tactical regimentation that can occur in 11v11 soccer.

Games are a forum for players to test their ball skills and game awareness, and should be considered an additional means of development, rather than the objective. Results become important as they give the players a competitive focus in the match. Coaches are encouraged to promote soccer that:

- (1) Is free flowing,
- (2) Is coach-guided, not coach-directed,
- (3) Demands that all players on the field – regardless of their specified position – participate in defending and attacking.

Junior Level

As the players graduate to the junior level, they should be comfortable with the ball and have an insight into the game that will allow them to deal with the increasing pace of the game (both in athletic speed and speed of decisions). The goal at this point in a player’s development is to begin expanding his understanding of the game as much as his technical and game maturity will allow. Again, this is accomplished through the small-sided game model for practice (up through 9 v. 9 games) and the full-sided game for matches. The graduation to the full-sided game model should be a logical and subtle step. The ideas and principles that apply to the smaller game models continue to apply to the bigger game. The outcome of the game is still largely determined by ball skill and game insight.

Senior Level

If a player has been exposed to a program that is able to address his/her needs and abilities over the long-term, this player should be prepared for this next stage of the game. At this point, winning is the purpose of the game. The emphasis is therefore to have players pull together all the components of their game in order to be as competitive as possible (both as an individual player and as part of a team) and get a positive result in individual matches. If their ball skills are insufficient, or they lack basic concepts of team play, they will struggle to have a positive impact on the game. Ill-prepared players will have difficulty continuing their soccer careers at the higher levels. At the Senior Level, the performance should determine the result. While there is still a measurable focus on development, the emphasis is now more on insight and team concepts, rather than individual development of ball skills.

The following is a commentary by the current age-group National Team coaches on:

- (1) The balance between developing soccer players and winning matches at their particular level within the National Teams programs, and
- (2) How the age-group fits into the larger National Teams schematic.

Under-14 Boy's National Development Program, by Manfred Schellscheidt The current U-14 National Program is the first contact a player will have with US Soccer. These players then graduate into the U-15 Boy's Program. The goal and emphasis with players of this age is placed on development of skills and a deeper understanding of the game in a competitive, fun environment in the company of the most talented players that we can find.

We like to strike a good balance between training and matches, in which the players learn to take their cues and clues from the game. As attack and defense are in constant battle, the game has the power to teach and reveal itself to each player. There is plenty of action in the basic units of the game (1:1, 1:2, 2:2 and other small sided games in even and odd numbers) building up to the full-sided game.

The hope is to create originals, not clones. We simply follow this simple principle: The game/competition sets the demands and the player responds (Here is the problem. Find the solution and try to execute that solution). Players are encourage/allowed to experiment and explore the game with the help of the coaches that understand the game and work well with kids. In this environment, there is plenty of room for trial and error.

Putting children into the straitjackets of positional play too early only destroys their instincts to be involved in the game. As they mature and are capable of keeping track of more things that are occurring on the field, we can increase the number of players that compete against each other. As they move to the full-sided game, the goal is for all the players to be able to keep track of all the other players on the field, and then to deal effectively with the situations that evolve out of these relationships. Under these conditions, time and space can be created or eliminated based on how effectively players are able to cope with the conditions of the game. It is all about ideas and developing the right attitude. Great skill begins with a desire to be master of the ball, and/ or the key elements of the game and we try to encourage each player to be a master of the ball.

Looking back at the past U-14 camps, there is reason to believe that this approach works. There have been some highly attractive, very competitive soccer played by these 13 year-olds that was refreshing to watch. With constant care in the years to come, these young players have the potential for a bright future. The Under-14 National Camp occurs in August of each year. The past three years the camp has been held in Massachusetts.

Under-15 Boy's National Team

by Ken Lolla

Each year we welcome a new age group mostly of players who come from the U-14 National Camp. We work with this group for a one-year cycle with an emphasis on speed of play and the ability to solve problems in competitive situations. In general, most of our players have a good starting point athletically and many are technically sound in slower games or isolated situations. When we increase the demands of the game and the speed of play, many have a hard time mastering the ball, staying tuned in, seeing the game and making sense of their plays. By being in the company of better players and faster games, these aspects improve dramatically.

In our training sessions we play small-sided games with different demands and challenges that we ask players to confront. The games are fast and to keep up with the speed of play, good technical ability and good habits on and off the ball are necessary. We ask the players to stay tuned in mentally, to read the game and the demands of the game and to make decisions that help their team win. We want their individual personalities to grow and for them to begin to solve problems as a group. Therefore, we give the players some freedom to make decisions, to solve problems, and to experiment with the game. We are more concerned with them developing into better players who can figure out how to win than with telling them exactly what to do. In this sense, we do not put a big emphasis on the results, but rather on how they are progressing as players. At the same time, we do provide them with our tactical insights and feedback, and we give them starting points for dealing with certain situations.

Our events have varied in numbers from 4-6 per year consisting mostly of training camps and competitive domestic and international events. Over the past three player cycles, the U-15 group has traveled to compete in tournaments in Mexico, Bolivia, France and Germany. Domestically, the teams have competed against U-15 regional teams, older regional teams, the U-17 US National Team, and MLS teams.

Under-17 Men's National Team

by John Ellinger

The Under-17 program is a result-oriented developmental program. Result-oriented in the sense of qualifying for the FIFA Under-17 World Championship, and developmental in the sense that players are prepared to be successful at the next levels of MNT programs and are prepared to enter college or professional soccer.

To this end, the U-17 National Team Program has entered into a new stage of player development with the increase in numbers in the residency program from 20 to 30 players. This allows us to bring in more players from the age below our main birth year (the main birth years for the U-17s are the even birth years). These players can now stay beyond the U-17 WC and work towards early high school graduation, work to prepare for development with the U-18 MNT, work to prepare to enter the pro soccer environment or work to enter the college soccer environment one year early.

Our soccer curriculum combines a variety of experiences that (1) prepare the players for the specific objective of the World Championship qualification and success at the World Championship, and (2) provide them with an environment that allows them to hone the skills needed to be successful at the next levels of elite soccer. The players must compete daily for their spots, and they are given challenging levels of match competition.

The Under-17 MNT plays matches to build toward two events: the CONCACAF Qualifying Tournament and the FIFA Under-17 World Championship. In the first year of residency (even-numbered years), the team travels to three or four international tournaments, as well as a foreign trip to the country that will host the next world championship. The team is in the full-time residency program so they train together year round, usually practicing during the week and playing games on the weekend. Domestically, the team plays a mix of matches versus international teams, pro teams, college teams, older club teams and older MNTs.

Under-18 Men's National Team

by George Gelnovatch

The primary function of the Under-18 Men's National Team is to identify potential Under-20 caliber players from this age group and to provide soccer opportunities for our players to develop and prepare for the U-20 National Team. The U-18 age group will eventually provide more than 50% of the player pool for the next U-20 group. As a result, U.S. Soccer has recently expanded its full-time residency program to include eight 1987 birth year players. We expect this group to form the core of the next U-18 player pool.

Because this age group does not have a World Championship, the challenge is to set up environments that come close to replicating that type of environment for the players. The limited time that the team is together places constraints on what the players can realistically accomplish. Therefore, we try to put the players in as many challenging matches as possible. We consider the time in the Under-18 MNT to be a transitional phase of development between the Junior and Senior levels of development.

In the U-18 program, the players come together for four-to-five events per year over a two-year cycle that ends with the players moving on to the U-20 age group. Each nine-day domestic camp will have 3 or 4 matches against competition ranging from a top youth club or ODP teams, to other US National Teams and MLS teams. Both the practices and the matches are used to evaluate the players and provide information to the coaching staff regarding personnel, as well as player development issues. Each year ends with a top-level club or international tournament in either Europe or South America. We approach these tournaments as our own qualifiers and world championships. Our hope is to provide enough quality events to prepare these players for their next step in international competition.

Under-20 Men's National Team

by Thomas Rongen

The Under-20 team is similar to the Under-17 team in that it is a result-oriented developmental program. We are preparing players to be successful at a World Championship and to be successful at the next National Team level.

Much of the development at the U-20 level is about competition and "intensified preparation for the next level" (i.e. the Olympic team, National Team and/or a professional career). It is important that we find players who show the characteristics that will help them advance to play at the next level. We want to help these players mature as adults so they can handle any environment. We need to instill the belief that these players can win at an international level against the competition that they will see in the future. In this way, they learn to win in a manner that will be successful at higher levels. The more we can expose them to quality competition, training and coaching, the more we improve player development.

The challenge at this age group is blending collegiate players with young professionals. Our players are competing against international teams whose entire rosters are made up of full-time professionals in some of the world's best leagues. We must create opportunities that replicate a professional training and match environment. Currently almost 50% of this team's player pool is comprised of professional players as opposed to ten years ago when there were no U-20 professional players. As time goes by, we would expect more young players to be professional at this age.

Similar to the Under-17's, the Under-20's use each two-year cycle to prepare for two events: the CONCACAF Qualifying Tournament and the FIFA World Youth Championship. The Under-20's typically take two to three foreign trips a year, participating in at least one high-level European tournament. Several domestic training camps are held throughout the year, where the competition ranges from A-League teams to foreign clubs to MLS Teams to regional teams and other U.S. National Teams. Due to the make-up of this team, it is often difficult to hold training camps where the entire compliment of players are available, as the college season begins as the MLS season ends.

Under-23 Men's National Team

by Glenn Myernick

The focus of the Under-23 MNT program is to develop the professional player in preparation for representing the U.S. at the Olympics and potentially playing for the full National Team. In our current system, many of the players enter this age bracket as college players and become professionals while still in this age group. As our system evolves, we would expect that more players entering this age group would be professionals – similar to the U-20 age group.

Providing a variety of international competitions and contributing to their growth as pros is a vital component of this program. For those players who have been members of our youth teams leading up to the U-23's, continuing and building on their international experience is important. For those just arriving on the National Team scene becoming comfortable and familiar with the various styles and tempos of international play is a must. The components of the game are the guidelines at every stage of development. From the U-14 program to the MNT, the incrementally increasing focus is results. Game management and adjusting tactically to achieve results becomes more important than substituting to provide experience for younger players.

The Men's Olympic Soccer Tournament has evolved into a professional competition for players under the age of 23 with the addition of three "overage" players. The focus of the Senior Team is results. Therefore the U-23 program is a significant link in the development of our players and teams.

The Under-23 MNT puts its focus on preparing the team for the Olympics and the players for the pro ranks and the Men's National Team. As the Olympics approach, the intensity of the camps and the number of the camps increase, building up to the Pan-Am Games, the Olympic Qualifying Tournament and the Olympic Tournament. As this pool of players is made up almost entirely of professionals, this team holds fewer camps than any of the other YNTs. This team typically participates in European tournaments against other similar age National Teams, as well as holding domestic training camps that usually include games against MLS teams and other National Teams.

Men's National Team

by Bruce Arena

Player development occurs at every level. The objective of the Men's National Team is to achieve results in international competition, and to develop players for the international arena. For this reason, there is a close relationship between the Men's National Team and the U-23 team, and at times, the U-20 team. Players at the Men's National Team possess the technical, tactical, physical and mental tools to be successful, but some players simply lack the international game experience. Development at the level of the MNT is achieved through competition – players playing in games and gaining experience at the various levels from international friendlies and competitions to World Cup Qualifiers to the World Cup itself.

The four-year World Cup cycle builds toward World Cup qualifying and the World Cup, and the team's schedule follows that pattern. The first 18 months after the World Cup are used to identify players, and then as qualifying nears, the player pool is pared down and focus moves from player identification to qualification. A large training camp is held in January of each year, and once the MLS season begins, the MNT activity slows down in non-World Cup, non-Gold Cup years. In addition to friendlies, the MNT also participate in the CONCACAF Gold Cup, World Cup Qualifying, and the FIFA Confederations Cup. The U.S. usually plays 10-20 friendlies a year; typically the majority come against teams from CONCACAF, CONMEBOL and UEFA.