

Time To Teach: A coach's primary objective should be to teach

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With no MLS games scheduled this past weekend due to the international break, I had a rare opportunity to go out and watch my 10-year old daughter play indoor soccer. It was her fourth game of the season, but the first game that I had been able to attend.

Like many house league teams across the country, my daughter's team plays a schedule of games over the course of the indoor season. With indoor facilities stretched to capacity, there is little - if any - time to schedule additional practices for the players. It is a less-than-ideal situation, because the vast majority of learning takes place in practice, rather than in games.

While my intention was to simply play the role of supportive parent, I realized very quickly that the players on my daughter's team were in desperate need of guidance. Not one to stand by and stay quiet, I offered some assistance to my daughter's coach. She happily agreed – thus promoting me from being an interested parent to coaching the team.

There was no time for anything but a quick warm-up with the ball; a hastily organized GK-3-3 formation (the only caveats being that when we had the ball, we were all attackers; when we didn't have the ball, we were all defenders) and then we were off.

The girls performed admirably in the first half. They held a physically stronger team to a scoreless draw, and managed to create a few half chances of their own. But it was clear to me that the players were blindly finding their way around in the dark, for lack of a better term – they didn't really understand what it was they were supposed to do on the field.

When I sat them down at the break, I told them that they had done a great job in the first half, and that in the second half I wanted them to focus on two things - controlling the ball and passing it to a teammate. The score was irrelevant to me; I wanted them to focus on doing the simple basics first, so that they could come away from the game having succeeded in executing one or both of those tasks, regardless of the final score.

We ended up losing the game 3-1, but that is beside the point. The girls did a much better job of controlling the ball and passing it to a teammate, and for that they got plenty of congratulations and a high-five from their stand-in coach. Despite the score, I wanted them all to leave the field with a smile on their face, feeling a sense of achievement.

For me, the problems we face in developing Canadian soccer were all encapsulated in that game. We weren't 30 seconds in before I wanted to ask the referee to stop the game and give me 30 minutes to actually teach the kids something.

At the age of 10, kids need to spend their time with a ball at their feet, learning to be comfortable in controlling it, manipulating it, passing it and receiving it. This is something that needs to be taught in a practice – where every kid has a ball – rather than in a game – where 14 kids are fighting for one ball.

During the course of the game, I asked the parents from both teams this question: If I were to take away 30 of your child's 60 minutes of game time, and replaced that with 30 minutes of practice and instruction, followed by 30 minutes of scrimmaging, would you be ok with that?

Every one of the parents nodded their heads. Which begs the question – why aren't we doing this? For many clubs, it comes down to a lack of qualified coaches.

If children are going to be taught how to play soccer, surely qualified coaches must teach them? Does it make sense to ask well-intentioned but untrained parents to take on that responsibility? How can they teach the kids if they don't understand the subject matter themselves?

All of the girls on my daughter's team take turns playing in goal. They rotate every half, the position. In the second half of our game, our goalkeeper – who is knee high to a grasshopper – was having difficulty taking goal kicks.

She simply hasn't mastered the technique of striking the ball yet – which is impossible for a coach to instruct during a game.

Our opponents were lined up on the edge of the box just waiting for our goalkeeper to kick the ball, knowing full well that she couldn't kick it over their heads. Sure enough, when she kicked the ball, it went straight to an opponent, who first-timed it into an empty net.

I suggested to my counterpart that perhaps we should implement a rule that on goal kicks, the opposing team retreats into their own half of the field, thus encouraging the goalkeeper to pass the ball to a defender. Once the defender touches the ball, the game is then live.

He responded that his solution is to have his 'best kicker' take the goal kicks, thereby relieving the goalkeeper of the responsibility.

Excuse me? How on earth is that going to help the goalkeeper develop her ability to kick a ball properly?

Imagine if a child were struggling to add numbers in school. Would the teacher ask the smartest kid in the class to do all of the math questions, thereby relieving the other students of the responsibility?

Of course they wouldn't - because the teachers are trying to educate their students.

If we changed the word 'coach' to the term 'soccer teacher', perhaps it would be easier to convince coaches that their primary objective should be to educate their players.