

FIVE LESSONS

for developing a good environment for youth players

By Kyle Lubrano

Girls 12 Premier team in Maryland

Two years ago I went from coaching collegiate soccer to working with three youth soccer teams. Can you say “change!?” Creating a good environment for a college team is not the easiest task by any stretch of the imagination, but it is a little easier to create a family environment at that level than it is with a youth team. This might be because although a collegiate player’s family is marginally involved in the program, it is generally just the players, coaches and support staff that need to be part of your “family.” With youth soccer teams, you need to create an environment that is good for the players, coaches and parents, who are involved on a consistent basis. A youth coach cannot take the stance, “I do not deal with parents of players.” So where does that leave a youth coach? A coach must find a way to create a working relationship with the parents and the players and get them to “buy in” to the goals you are working toward.

Lesson No. 1

The apple does not fall far from the tree.

Generally, the parents that are going to give you a hard time are those of players who often are the least effective and most unfocused players. Those that work the hardest, are committed and will support you and your efforts are going to have parents who will do the same. If you find a hardworking, talented and loyal player, encourage them to continue their efforts and help them discover their leadership abilities. The players that consistently bring down the level of play because of their inability or attitude? Encourage them to find another place to play. They will not help you achieve your team goals and are generally not team players. Often times, their parents are a cause of concern and develop issues over a non-issue.

Lesson No. 2

Teach them the game, and then worry about your win-loss record.

I have seen too many teams in league and tournament play that have one big, fast and strong player up front that can go 1 v. 1 with my central defender, muscle through and score a goal. The coach is happy with the result of a 1-0 win, but the referee approaches my bench after the game to say, “Your team is awesome.” I love to win and am committed to doing all the things correctly to produce results, but receiving that referee’s comment is more of an accomplishment than a 1-0 win in which only

one player really had much to do with the win.

I train my team in an environment that is tough and grueling, where they learn to play the game of soccer technically, tactically and physically. They train as a team probably three or four years older than they actually are, and it has helped them become soccer players. That is more important to me than winning. I am committed to keeping the integrity of the game and am positive that in two or three years, my team will be beating teams that once beat us with one player.

seeing how all of the players work together and how well they play and socialize together, they now understand my mentality. The women’s game is very different than the men’s game. Women and girls need to feel socially accepted in order to perform at their best, so having a group that will get along with one another and you, the coach, is imperative to creating a good environment.

And although it is nearly impossible to get all the parents to “get along,” if you stick

At some point, size becomes less of a factor and tactical understanding and technical ability play a larger role in a team’s results.

At some point, size becomes less of a factor (we are a small team) and tactical understanding and technical ability play a larger role in a team’s results. Any coach can take one player and teach them to score goals, but can they teach a team to create a system to defend and score goals?

Lesson No. 3

Give them opportunities to see role models.

I coach a girls team. I am a firm believer in my players seeing other female players playing at higher levels or coming in to help me coach occasionally. I want them to know they can keep playing beyond club, high school and college or coach after they are done playing. We often seek opportunities to be ball girls for a local college team. The players get to be on the sideline with the college players, see the game up close and observe the level of intensity necessary on that level. For example, if a team is down 1-0 with five minutes left, they are going to holler at my player when the ball goes out of bounds and they need it to get it back in play to try and score. It has sparked even more interest with my team and they always are interested in watching a college or professional game.

Lesson No. 4

Create a family, and give them time together.

Chemistry is huge factor in the women’s game. I have often had parents approach me and say that at first they did not understand why I chose Player A over Player B, but after

to Lesson No. 1 you will have parents that all want the best for their children and will work with you and each other to create the best environment possible. Most of these types of parents are either established professionals or played competitive sports and really just want good opportunities for their children.

I have heard too many stories of a coach being fired for not winning or just not performing to the parents’ standards. I have to wonder if it is the coach or if it was the group of parents. The way I approach it is that there are a lot of talented players out there; if they have parents that are going to give you a hard time about everything, there’s another just-as-talented player with great parents. Often “addition by subtraction” is a good rule of thumb.

Lesson No. 5

Soccer, at the highest level, is still just a game and should always be fun.

I have had some tough conversations with parents and directors of coaching, and have often thought to myself “Is this worth it?” Then I get to be on the practice field with just my 13 players with no stress and it is fun. It is necessary to have those tough and uncomfortable situations to get your team or program to where you want to go, but everything always works out and you will have fun. The game itself is fun to play, to coach and to watch. Too often, we get wrapped up in the politics and drama. It is imperative to put out the fires immediately and get back to the fun of it all.