

Did you win?

- A conversation show stopper

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I received this email from that U10 girls' coach I worked with; an update after their last game:

"Before our game on Saturday, I started off with telling the team that we were going to try something different today. They were going to coach themselves. I was going to watch, make substitutions and sometimes ask them questions when they came off the field. They were startled. At first they were smiling and happy but then realized that they were going to have to do all the communication. You would have been very proud of me. I think I made 3 comments the entire game!"

"It took the girls about 15 minutes to realize I meant what I said and I wasn't going to coach out to them; it was kind of quiet out there. But all of a sudden you should have seen the passes, the confidence and the plays that started to take place."

"During the game a mother from the other team must have been getting frustrated that their team wasn't doing as well as she thought they should. She yelled out "Shoot the Ball" when one of their players had it. She yelled it so loud that we could hear it on the other side like she was right next to us. I don't think I've ever heard someone yell that loud (except maybe me!). I thought to myself how annoying that sounds and how that player and/or team must feel hearing that command. One of the girls on our bench said, "How embarrassing". That was an "Ah Ha" moment as Oprah would put it for me as a coach."

"The end result was a win for us but you know what, that didn't even come up! It was the first time I didn't hear players talk about the score. They were talking about all the things we did well and what they noticed we could improve on."

"Over these past few months, I have changed my philosophy around and can now really measure what success is."

If we truly want to develop our players, we need to be brave like this U10 girls' coach and risk the final result. Sure, their team won the game but I have no doubt based on meeting the girls (and the fact that they didn't talk about the score) that the game would've still been a positive experience if it had resulted in a loss. She's given the game back to the players! Focus on winning too young and we miss out on critical skills

and critical players ... focus on the most skilled and “pigeon-holing” players and you risk limiting their overall growth potential. Focusing too much on the results increases the risk of players turning away from the game because of burn out soccer became a job and wasn't fun anymore. Focus on intent and you nurture their passion for the game!

Last summer I was on a stretch of traveling and missed one of my daughter's U12 games. I phoned her and started the conversation with “Did you have fun?” She immediately went into the details of a scenario where she took on a defender and beat her with the dribble; something that she had been struggling with and started to really focus on. I was so caught up by the excitement in her voice that I just assumed they won the game. We hung up a couple minutes later and as I continued my drive, I realized that I never actually heard about the final outcome. A little investigative work on my part, I found out from another parent that they had actually lost the game! Yet that game was a success because her game grew and she obviously had fun! I admit I got a good laugh at myself about that I realized that the win/loss mattered more to me! That's usually the case.

So as we prepare for the spring soccer season, taking care of paperwork, field assignments, rosters and uniforms, I suggest we all give our communication skills a tune-up. Take an honest look at your demeanor. Take a listen to what you're saying. Remember, it's not necessarily what you're saying; it's how you say it! These kids just want to play but they also want to please their coaches and parents! If the first words out of your mouth are “Did you win?” Or “Tough Loss”, it's a conversation show stopper. I love getting game reports from young children so I now purposely ask questions that prolong the answer to the win/loss question. Give them an opportunity to brag on themselves. Give them the chance to reflect on what just took place. YOU can spin a loss into a positive experience! OR, even better, allow them the chance to not talk about it at all! Most kids really don't want to analyze the game. They play because they like to play!

I hope you all enjoy the spring season. Remember, it's just a game and that most youth players recover from the loss by the time they get to the concession stand ... especially when they know they have unconditional love and support from their coaches and parents.

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