

Fun or Fear?

What Motivates Young Players?

“He has fun when he plays football (soccer) and that’s great. That’s why he can play as well as he does.” Henrik Larsson said this of Ronaldinho - ‘he comes in every morning with a smile on his face.’

Andy Barton, a sports psychologist, of the Sporting Mind clinic works with athletes across the board, including Premiership players and youth Academy players and here is his take on the state of youth soccer as he sees it.

His (Andy Barton) experience was that this love of the game was being squeezed out of players at an even earlier stage. “I get eleven year-old kids in here who are from academies – and they may be from Chelsea, Arsenal, from Brentford – and they have lost their sense of fun and enjoyment, and they’ve gained a sense of fear, because their fear is of whether or not they’re going to make it through the next year. So their mind goes from being this ten year-old who’s carefree – trusting their instincts, beating every player there is in sight, passing fantastic passes, scoring fantastic goals – to be going – “Oh God, I don’t want to miss this tackle. I don’t want to mess up this pass, I don’t want to screw up. I don’t want to look like an idiot in front of my manager.””

“There comes a point where they think that they have to take it more seriously, and being serious means being down on yourself, beating yourself up, being hypercritical. So you lose your carefree element because, well, if I’m being carefree I’m not taking this seriously enough.”

Simon Barnes in *The Meaning of Sport* says that ‘commentators say again and again: “And now it’s all about who wants it more.”’ Actually, the victory can often go to the one who wants it less: the one who can take the competition in their stride, with relaxed muscles and mind. The one who thinks it really is life and death can get consumed by the madness of the occasion.”

Too often when someone misses an obvious chance to do well (an open goal or an easy putt), it is often said that they lacked concentration, but the reality may be that they were trying **too** hard, tensed up, over-revved.

A nervous bunch of schoolboy soccer players were on the bus to play their hated rivals. The coach noticed the fear in the faces of his players. His message to them was simple: “you’re going to play for an hour. There will be 22 of you on the field. Each of you will have the ball for no more than 2 minutes at most; maybe no more than 10 or 15 touches. Make them count.”

It was as much what he didn’t say, as what he did; if you’re preparing your team for a great campaign, it’s best to keep it short. It distracts them from the scale of the task ahead, and gives them a sense of high urgency but low pressure.

Fantasy that is shut off too long from external reality risks degenerating into a self-deluding hell. Fun is a useful technique; not only to relax players in stressful times, allowing them to express themselves without excessive tension, but also intimidates the opponent to see a team perform so well without apparent effort. Fun has been seen as both a crucial form of release and of self-expression for the great players.

Is the youth soccer culture creating a fear-driven experience for the young players? Fear that they might not be good enough to stay in the team, fear that they are making mistakes, fear that interferes with their genuine enjoyment of playing. Are the pressures to make certain teams, to meet others' expectations to reach someone else's goals lessening the total experience of youth sports? What exactly is the purpose of youth sports and to what extent is this being realized? Does the early emphasis on competition drain the imagination, creativity, freedom and fun from the young athletes? Are young players playing *not to make mistakes*?

The previous excerpts were taken from the book *A Cultured Left Foot* by Musa Okwonga. It stimulated some serious thinking about what I am seeing today in youth soccer. My concern is that fun is being replaced by fear; fear of being left out, fear of making costly mistakes, fear that inhibits natural player and personal development. I recently read *Why Johnny Hates Sports* by Fred Engh and the combination of those experiences has triggered this reaction to express some thoughts. Some of what follows is taken from *Why Johnny Hates Sports*, some is my own thoughts and opinions.

Youth Sports

- Sports is the greatest tool we have in today's society to help children develop positive character traits and life values.
- All children must have a safe, positive and meaningful experience from sports
- Youth sports were intended for fun, relaxation and recreation

Primary goal is to make sure that the kids have a good learning experience, develop skills for whatever sport they're playing, and have a positive fun experience

I see 3 different concerns in the youth program:

1. Complacency – a place for everyone – a social-soccer situation
2. Excessive influence and pressure on the player that leads to fear, burnout and quitting
3. The need to play in a relaxed environment where personal and athletic development is emphasized and winning comes later

Complacency

I have previously written an article entitled *Playing vs Competing* where the emphasis was placed on the entitlement issue of pay-to-play. The evolution of social-soccer is based upon the premise that if you pay, we'll find a place and a team for you. We will make you feel as though you are the best, creating a false sense of identity.

With the current soccer culture, it seems that everyone can find a comfortable place to play, and feel good about themselves. However, what might be lacking in some of these situations is the drive to fight for a spot on a team. That same failure to fight for a spot on the team carries over into other areas of play as well

Complacency and entitlement have replaced competition. The end result is that players struggle to achieve when the resistances increase. What do they have to draw from? Having come through a youth system that provides a team for every wanting player, it becomes: write a check, show up and play me. When things don't go their way, they quickly and easily find another team to make it right. This lateral slide is what drains the competitiveness out of the player. Instead of staying and working harder, or playing better, or playing the way the coach wants, it's just too easy to leave, usually on bad terms, and ply your trade elsewhere.

Confusing Play with Competition

- Problems develop when we set goals for our kids without carefully taking into account the reality of a child's nature.
- Play provides children with the chance to learn independence, develop self-esteem, explore their physical abilities and have fun.
- Play covers everything from amusement to exercise to diversion.
- It's what we do for fun, enjoyment, relaxation, and stress-free pleasure.

Play vs Competition

- With organized sports, we have simply taken play, put it into an organized form, and added factors like skill development and discipline.
- We have now changed the nature of play into competition.
- Competition is a contest in which the participants seek the same objective.
- When competition dominates, then the original goals of play are eliminated for many

Competition

- Competition for children must first and foremost be enjoyable, challenging and fun.
- Children become more competitive as they grow and age. You can play while competing if you are also having fun
- Competition is a dual-edged sword. It can enhance play in some children and ruin it for others..
- Competition instilled with values of fair play, sportsmanship and ethics can build character that will last a lifetime

Excessive influence and pressure on the player that leads to fear, burnout and quitting

Why Kids Quit

- Sports are no longer fun
- Needs not being met
- Made to feel miserable
- Too much pressure on winning
- Coach presents negative attitudes
- Coach was a poor teacher, played favorites
- Took too much time and wanted to do other things

Burnout

- Growing weary of the enormous stress and demands placed on a person to perform at high levels
- Point of saturation, a vicious revolving door of never-ending sport seasons
- Children, and parents, fear taking any time off for fear of falling behind and/or being excluded from the team the following season
- Choosing to play only one sport early on deprives the child of the chance to experiment with other sports, to learn and develop a variety of skills, and to work other muscle groups.

When working under great pressure to perform, the conservatism of tactics will usually appear. When winning is the only option for survival in such a volatile environment, then questions of the beautiful game often go out the window. Managers become afraid to play flamboyant soccer for fear they may lose. Games played in that manner fall rather short of expectation

70 % of the 20 million children who participate in youth sports will quit by the age of 13 because of bad experiences - damaged feelings of self-worth - Frozen by the fear of making a mistake.

Too often promising young players fizzle under the strain of parents' expectations.

Problem areas when rushing young players to fast - playing 11 a side on full size fields too early -

- Children's legs are smaller and cover much less ground than an adult. The young children are exhausted trying to cover too much ground and they are not strong enough to kick the ball over the distance either. Forcing children to play on big fields really becomes an exercise in futility.
- Each time you add players and/or increase the size of the playing area, you automatically increase the variables involved – and in many cases exponentially!!! Thus, the mental capacity of the player is brought more into play and the cognitive ability is not even in place to handle most of what is needed. Failure and frustration results for many. It's not much fun!

The history of tactics is the history of 2 interlinked tensions:

aesthetics vs results (how it looks vs the outcome) on the one side and
technique vs physique (ball skills vs physical attributes) on the other.

When results drive the program, especially at an early age, the learning and developmental processes take a big hit. Creativity, imagination, risk-taking and personal expression are compromised to play in a safe and effective way. The greatest players in the world of soccer today grew up playing in the streets, without adult coaching and supervision, and learned to play by freely trying things without the consequence of making a mistake. Learning becomes greatly impeded when mistakes are not tolerated.

The need to play in a relaxed environment where personal and athletic development is emphasized and winning comes later

Soccer has a deceptive, and therefore seductive, simplicity. That which initially seems easy, become more difficult the deeper you explore them. Perhaps the greatest beauty of soccer is the sheer randomness that lies beneath its apparently sedate surface.

An accomplished soccer player must, together with adequate technique and specific mental and physical qualities, possess soccer intelligence, insight in the game, and recognize the ever-changing situation. He must be able to choose very quickly the most efficient solution out of the many possible solutions. He must do this with a free mind, not bound by fear of choosing wrongly. The essence of soccer is to think and play, to be relaxed enough to handle the pressures of the moment, but not become too wrapped up 'in the moment'.

If we start with the premise that it takes 10-12 years to develop a soccer player

The Learning Process does not have a Fast Forward button. It is a patient process over time that yields the best results. Children need to learn the game in stages and carry each stage of learning over into the next stage. Age-appropriate learning experiences set the tone for player development
Children need to learn the game and understand it on their terms. It must be meaningful to them. They must have involvement and recognize what is going on and participate accordingly

- **Some areas of concern:**
 - 1) Young athletes under-train and over-compete.
 - 2) Training in the early years is heavily focused on outcomes (winning) rather than processes (overall child development).
 - 3) In general, young soccer players require a certain amount of uninterrupted play. This allows them to experience soccer first-hand. They should be allowed the opportunity to experiment, and with that, succeed and fail. We are very guilty of over-coaching.

- 4) If a player starts playing at age 6, by the age of 16 to 18, he should be developed into a well-rounded soccer player. Unfortunately, due to our current system, children are dropping out in large numbers around the age of 12 to 14. It seems that we are running them off. Why? Maybe it's no longer fun and they have not gotten any better,

It is utmost importance to deal with the whole person, not just the athlete. When people are respected and treated appropriately, cooperation is at its best. In order to best treat people, we need to know as much about them as possible, especially in a team setting. Who are the high achievers and what motivates them? What is the 'pecking order' within the team? Every person is unique and thus must be treated as an individual. Do your best to get to know what makes them tick – what motivates them and what their fears are. Using the personality information listed here, we see 4 distinct personality types. Notice that the combination of high ambition coupled with low fear of failure, yields the best results. We must do our best to promote an environment that is challenging, fun and free of fear. Value the process, not the product. The process will last much longer than the end product. The work that goes into a project lasts within the person, it builds confidence and self-esteem.

Four personality types (A,B,C,D) with different strengths and performance anxiety.

A has great ambition and high performance anxiety

B has great ambition, but is not afraid of failing

C has little ambition, but is afraid of making mistakes

D has little ambition, but is also not bothered about failing

A is the type that is fine in ordinary league matches but fades when it really matters

B is, not surprisingly, the type who makes the most of his resources. **B** dares to excel when it really matters. In order to create a **B** culture, **we must stimulate ambition and reduce fear.**

The most common personality type by far – some 80 % - was type **A**.

How does a manager handle the 80% of type **A** personalities ?

Beyond the player there is a person who likes to be considered, he likes to be treated properly, and if you can get this kind of relationship in the right way then they will give everything for you. If you treat people well, they will respond to what you're asking from them.

How do we put the fun back into sport (soccer)? Notice the excitement generated during recess, the free play owned by the young people; this is what we need to put back into our sessions. The best coach has always been the game itself. Set up small-sided games with certain objectives/conditions, and then let them play. Look at the enthusiasm and energy generated by the game, let the play continue uninterrupted, and at the end allow the players to give feedback. Don't over-coach the session – make the necessary few points and leave it. End every training session with the players wanting to come back for the next one. It is our job as coaches to give the players the best opportunity to experience, enjoy and improve themselves through playing. It's not Boot Camp, try to create a recess-like environment and see if the fun doesn't return.