



Some observations on the changes in youth education

*"My position is this: street soccer is the most natural educational system that can be found." 6
Rinus Michels*

By analyzing street soccer yourself, you will conclude that its strength is that it is played daily in a competitive form, with a preference for the match on all sorts of 'street playing fields', usually in small groups. Rarely in street soccer do you see youths busy practicing isolated technical and tactical drills. No, it is always the competitive form, where youth players learn from their mistakes, unconscious of the technical, tactical, mental and physical qualities they are developing through the scrimmages being played.

Playing soccer every day ensures this development. It is a process where it is not necessary for adults to be present. You also learn the team tactical principles without effort through playing the game. Your teammate, higher in the street soccer hierarchy, forces you to comply...

In African and South American countries, where the conditions for street soccer are favorable, you can immediately notice that youth players have a head start. They go through a more varied technical and tactical development within their own experiences. Therefore, the "feeling" for the game is also better. They find their motivation on the street to play the games over and over again, no matter how simple they are. Even if there is only a wall at their disposal... 6

There is an argument that street soccer today is no longer possible. "Automobiles now drive where games were once played. The playgrounds are used as hangouts for older youth with other interests. Open grass fields are now dog parks. The conditions for street soccer in many countries are less than ideal." 6 Add bicycle unfriendly suburbs, the need for permits to use public fields, the managed schedules that most children have today and spontaneous play of any kind, let alone street soccer is hard to imagine.

In spite of all of these obstacles, which are solvable, there's another reason why street soccer doesn't enjoy the same popularity as pick up basketball. In his book, *How Soccer Explains The World*, Franklin Foer observes:

But for all the talk of freedom, the sixties parenting style had a far less laissez-faire side too. Like the 1960's consumer movement which brought American car seatbelts and airbags, the soccer movement felt like it could create a set of rules and regulations that would protect both the child's body and mind from damage. Leagues like the one I played in handed out "participation" trophies to every player, no matter how few games his (or her) team won... Where most of the world accepts the practice of heading a ball as an essential element of the game, American soccer parents have fretted over the potential for injury to the brain. An entire industry sprouted to

manufacture protective headgear... Even though very little medical evidence supports this fear, some youth leagues have prohibited headers altogether.

This reveals a more fundamental difference between American youth soccer and the game as practiced in the rest of the world. In every other part of the world, soccer's sociology varies little: it is the province of the working class... Here, aside from the Latino immigrants, the professional classes follow the game most avidly and the working class couldn't give a toss about it. Surveys, done by sporting goods manufacturers, consistently show that children of middle class and affluent families play the game disproportionately... That is, they come from the solid middle class and above.

Observing youth soccer in America it is very difficult to argue with Foer's assessment that it is solidly a middle class sport. And the middle class brings it's values into the picture. Middle class values don't see street soccer as a legitimate educational method. It is recess as opposed to physical education. Children need to be taught and teaching should be done by experts. Few would argue that over the last 30 years children are being "taught" almost everything at increasingly younger ages. Soccer instruction now begins with four year olds, so that the children will have an advantage as six year olds. This need to get ahead brings with it the fear of falling behind and the need for accountability that only expert instruction can prevent and provide. This type of instruction leaves no room for the trial and error system of street soccer. Middle class values are in conflict with the basic ideas behind a street soccer culture. The following are a few ideas that demonstrate the conflict between the two.

One of those basic ideas in the street soccer culture is that you are assigned a role by a better player and are expected to play it for the good of the team, see Michels above. Such an assignment runs counter to the idea that every child needs to learn every position. This democratization of the team, where everyone is a jack of all trades and a master of none, is best achieved by an adult outside of the game itself. A responsible individual, (the coach) that can ensure that each individual child's needs are being met at every moment. In street soccer you fill the position that you are best suited for at the moment in the context of the team. While this position can change from game to game and team to team the purpose is always the same, to get the best out of each individual possible at the moment.

This brings up another difference. In street soccer children have to learn patience, to wait for their turn, that they are not entitled to lead, make decisions or even be listened to simply because they show up. Leadership is earned through competition within the pecking order inside of the team. Younger players in street soccer would wait their turn when they would finally be able to lead the group, and there are no guarantees. In the democratization of the soccer children don't have to learn patience, they are guaranteed their turn their time in the spot light. Whether it's a [turn](#) to be captain, to play center forward or to take a shot at goal middle class children learn that hard work and patience aren't really necessary.

Not only does everyone get a chance, but no one fails. The mantra, "Everyone's a winner, no ones a loser" is a benchmark in recreational soccer. The idea is to help build every individuals positive self esteem. No one can leave the game or practice feeling bad. In street soccer every game resulted in a winner and a loser and every one knew who was who. Failure was a common

experience, as it is in life, and children learned early on how to handle the disappointments. Children learned self respect instead of self esteem.

A huge difference here is that in street soccer no standings are kept. You can lose this morning and win in the afternoon. Disappointment is only temporary and is forgotten within minutes of the end of the match. But in today's soccer society standings can be kept and the failures are cumulative. They are carried along all season. An eight year old will be reminded in November about a game they lost in September and how important that is.

This emphasis on self esteem brings up another difference between the cultures. If there really are no losers then why try at all? Since giving less than your best receives the same reward as giving your best why go to any extra effort? The implication for children is that mediocrity is acceptable and makes developing soccer skills a moot point. (Coaches often complain that getting children motivated is one of their biggest problems.) The bar of acceptance is set to the lowest common denominator and the children in the top percentage will be affected the most. In street soccer it's peers that will decide what is and isn't acceptable and it will be based on each player's contribution to the game. Nothing politically correct here but an honest assessment from those that it matters most to. (Children can be cruel and lack good judgment about how to express themselves. This can be especially true when there is too big a gap in the [levels](#) of talent. But with proper guidance they can learn some basic lessons about relationships, such as working together with limited resources, a positive, instead of simply placing blame a negative.) Each child has the opportunity to decide for themselves how important the game is and how involved they want to be.

But if the children set the bar of acceptable behavior how will they be held accountable? Can children really be trusted to guide the educational process? This brings back the need for educational experts yet also sets up the conflict between a [coaches problems](#) and the players problems. It also highlights the conflict between real and pretend leadership. Leadership involves a lot more than calling heads or tails or leading a set of stretches. Some ten year olds feel comfortable leading eight year olds, after all, they've been there, done that and the chance to show off their expertise is irresistible. But many parents can't trust that their children will be given the correct instruction by another child or see fail to see the benefits that their child will have when given the opportunity to do so themselves. Yet these are often the best coaches and examples for younger children to have. Someone with real empathy for the problems. Finally, the bottom line comes down to realizing that children need to learn how to *play* before they can play soccer. Physical activity, free spontaneous play, is rapidly disappearing as an activity of preference for youths much less meeting the demands of soccer. To think that adults are the best resource to teach play to children is questionable at best.

Many of today's parents live with a fear that their child will be left behind, that they will lose control. Learning in street soccer is subtle, control is exercised by peers. There is no adult to report that "today Jimmy learned how to dribble with the outside of the foot. He's getting better. Thursday we'll work on shooting." This type of reassurance is comforting to any involved and concerned parent. But, in a pure street soccer culture, most parents have no idea of what is going on. This part of childhood belongs to the child. Reports to parents were brief and to the point, "I was with the guys, we played some, it was good. What's for dinner?" Not the type of things that

involved parents want or expect to hear. These parents want accountability and guarantees which is difficult to demonstrate in street soccer

One way to bridge this cultural gap is through the use of soccer festivals or [tournaments](#) with an individual winner. These play days give the game back to the children yet allow adult supervision from a distance. Ages can be mixed so that one week the ten year olds are at the bottom and the next they're at the top. Leadership can be learned from the position of the leader and the follower. Children can learn new tricks and ideas from a wide variety of sources. New faces bring fresh challenges and problems.

Without question, the vast majority of American youths playing soccer today have never experienced street soccer. Yet, this concept is not foreign in American culture. Millions of adults today remember "the good old days" of sand lot baseball, pick up basketball and neighborhood football games. Games, and childhood's, built exactly as Michels outlines above. Older players organizing the teams, coaching the younger ones and having the opportunities to lead. Children had a responsibility to the game and each other. Play brought everyone together, and it took everyone together to play. Sadly, today's soccer children are denied this. What was good enough for the parents is not good enough for the children. Instead, they are getting something that is supposedly better, after all, we wouldn't knowingly create something worse. In the world of adult supervised soccer control and accountability have been gained for the adults. But what has been lost is the sense of accomplishment and the entrepreneurial spirit for the most important people involved, the children.