

"Encouraging Your Child to Become a Better Player"

There is no doubt that today's young athletes are not as likely as we were to just go outside, duke up some teams and play a little ball. Everything today is organized, structured. And while that may seem to be OK, it does not help in the development of our players. The best young soccer players today -- Landon Donovan, Freddy Adu and Jozy Altidore of Major League Soccer and Theo Wolcott and Cesc Fabregas, to name a couple of international stars -- all have one thing in common: they practiced on their own.

Mia Hamm, the greatest female soccer player ever (and in my opinion, the pound-for-pound best player ever to lace up a pair of boots), was noted for her individual workouts.

Today's youth rely on adults to organize and conduct all training sessions. That, then, becomes the only time they practice their soccer skills.

I've told the following story to some of the coaches of the teams I train: Back when my girls' team was at the U-12 level, I told my assistant coach to just follow my lead. My 15 girls were standing around, chatting, waiting for practice to start. I had placed the scrimmage vests on the ground and there were plenty of soccer balls by the goal. I picked up a ball, tossed it in the direction of the group of girls and said, "here you go." I turned around, as did my assistant, and we began walking toward the parking lot. The girls were dumbfounded. "What do we do?" they asked in stereo. I turned and said, "Well, let's see. We have two goals. A field. A ball. Hmmm. You got a game." We turned and walked closer to the parking lot. "What game? What are the teams?" and on and on the questions came. They were so used to me and/or my assistant telling them what to do that the idea of them controlling the practice session was, well, just not cool!

Soccer is a sport that can be practiced alone because the main skill all soccer players must possess is BALL CONTROL -- dribbling and juggling.

Claudio Reyna, captain of the New York Red Bulls, former captain of the U.S. National Team, and regarded as the best American soccer player ever, was quoted in the U.S. Soccer Federation's Guide to Player Development as saying: "Ball control is the most important skill a young player could learn. Controlling the ball will simply make the game easier to play."

As team-oriented as soccer may seem to be, it is individual-inspired teamwork that leads to success.

It is so important for kids to practice on their own and to become confident in their own individual skills. Dribbling is simple to practice. If you don't have cones, any stationary item can serve as an obstacle. Set up a slalom course and dribble through the course in the following fashion:

- with the right foot only
- with the left foot only
- with the inside of both feet only
- with the outside of both feet only

Learn different moves -- scissors, or what I call, "Foot-Around", the Maradona, the Side-Step, the "L", the "V" (if your child trains with me they will know these moves). Make up your own move: Arsene Wenger, the coach of English powerhouse Arsenal says: "Young players need the freedom of expression to develop as creative players...they should be encouraged to try skills without fear of failure."

Watch a Brazilian player with the ball at his feet. Brazilians such as Ronaldinho, Ronaldo, Kaka, Robinho, et al, are creative because as children they practiced without that fear of failure. They had fun. Encourage your child to do the same.

The same holds true for juggling. Go to www.youtube.com and type in "soccer juggling" in the search box and you will find incredible videos of players working the ball. There's even a video of a contest between U.S. Women National team members Casey Noguira and Tobin Heath (a New Jersey native, by the way). Both girls attend North Carolina University where juggling is an integral part of the women's team's practice agenda. In fact, UNC members are required to juggle with all 14-body parts. Those players who trained with me this past winter practiced the 14 body part juggling. For the record, the 14 body parts are: head, shoulder (2), chest, thigh (2) and laces of foot (2), inside of foot (2), outside of foot (2) and heel of foot (2).

Juggling can be a fun individual practice. If your child is under age 8, begin with a thigh juggle. Juggle once with the thigh and catch it. Practice combinations such as "head-thigh", "head-thigh-foot", etc. But whatever they do, encourage the freedom of creativity. The beauty of soccer is in the individual play. And the best way to become a better player is to practice on your own.

April Heinrichs, former National Team player and coach, notes, "In soccer, to be deceptive and creative with the ball is critical. To be competent with the ball, spend a lot of time working with it."

The ball, say many, the great female soccer player ever (and in my opinion, the pound-for-pound best player an elite soccer star, should be your best friend.