

STREET SMARTS

Proponents believe unstructured play will foster creativity in American soccer players

By Roni Mansur

Why is now the time to bring "street soccer" to the United States?

In the aftermath of the 2006 World Cup in Germany, sports critics and pundits were quick to condemn the disappointing performances of the U.S. National Team. This after many of these same experts jumped on the bandwagon in 2002, prophesizing the dawning of a new era in American soccer after the U.S. side shocked the entire soccer world by making it to the quarterfinal stage of the tournament.

Although the 2006 performance was widely characterized as an underachievement, it did unveil a larger symptom plaguing American soccer. This symptom was masked largely by the unexpected feats of 2002. Steve Cherundolo, the right back on the 2006 Mens National Team, pinpoints this symptom: "I think on the whole, myself included, we weren't clever enough on the ball; we didn't create enough chances for our forwards."

This lack of cleverness on the ball or creativity is an intrinsic characteristic of the way soccer is played in the United States at all levels. At the professional level, only a handful of American players can be characterized as creative, and none of them perform consistently at the highest level to be considered a world-class creative player.

Most of the creative players in Major League Soccer (MLS) are foreign imports. It is widely recognized that great strides have been made in U.S. soccer during the last decade; however, it is imperative that this symptom be addressed now, so American soccer has a chance to ascend to the next level during the next 10 years. The root of this symptom can be traced to the way in which American youth soccer players are coached and developed

and the absence of street soccer in the American youth soccer environment.

The street soccer concept needs to be incorporated into the nation's youth soccer coaching philosophy and methodology to help foster creativity and imagina-

the game from age 4 or 5 though their late teens. This foundational structure typically is provided by local youth soccer clubs, school teams, colleges and universities. This structure, usually absent or fragmented in many of the developing nations in Africa,

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tion as we develop our next generation of soccer players. Coaches can take steps to incorporate this concept into soccer practices and games.

What is street soccer?

Street soccer refers to the various kinds of pickup soccer games played in parks, gyms and in streets and alleys around the world. The defining characteristic of street soccer is that it is not organized. Players show up at the "field" and two teams are formed from the players available. Two "goals" are set up, the goalposts often being made from t-shirts, bags, rocks or sticks. And, of course, a ball or representative round object is required. Everything else is negotiable, such as the boundaries and even the rules. There is no referee. There usually are no fans. There is no coach. It is soccer in its most basic and unadulterated form.

How is the development of young soccer players in the United States different from that in other top soccer-playing nations?

There are several key elements that exist in the youth soccer structures of top soccer-playing nations. First, there is a basic structure that enables young people to play

Asia and Latin America, no "x" exists in American youth soccer.

Secondly, the leading soccer-playing nations have an effective process to identify and develop top young players. In most of these countries, the youth academies of professional soccer clubs identify and recruit talented players from their local communities. Regional and national teams typically are selected from the pool of players in these academies. In the United States, the Olympic Development Program (ODP) selects regional and national level players from open tryouts, which typically draw players from the top local youth soccer clubs. These youth soccer clubs are independent organizations and not affiliated with any professional soccer clubs, colleges or universities.

The key difference between the youth academies of professional clubs overseas and youth soccer clubs in the United States are the goals and objectives of the two feeder systems. Most top youth soccer clubs in the United States seek to win state cups and tournaments as early as the U-10 and U-11 age groups. In doing so, they often sacrifice individual player development. In contrast, there is a longer-term vision at the

youth academies. Individual player development is the focus in these organizations because the primary objective is to develop each youth player as an individual in order to discover the one or two players who can progress to the next level and become professionals for the club. For instance, the goal of the soccer academies in England is to develop the next Steven Gerrard or Wayne Rooney rather than win the FA Youth Cup every year.

Finally, young players in the top soccer-playing nations have sufficient opportunities to experiment with the game without adult supervision. In most countries around the world, pickup games and street soccer are a way of life, and these young players play soccer almost every day. This is where many of the developing nations make up for the lack of a formal structure. It is in this aspect that youth players in the United States are disadvantaged compared with their global counterparts. U.S. soccer experiences are almost always supervised and controlled by adults.

What are the implications of the absence of street soccer in America?

The absence of street soccer leads to a key difference between American youth soccer and other nations' programs. Around the world, young soccer players come from all socio-economic backgrounds. Young players face no significant financial barriers to entering the sport because they always can play street soccer with some friends as long as they have a ball and some space.

However, because of the absence of street soccer in America, youth soccer is a primarily middle- to upper-class sport. Low-income families confront significant barriers to entry because it costs \$300 to \$500 per year for a young player to play for two 10-week seasons with the local town team. The cost of playing for a youth soccer club ranges from \$800 to \$1,500 per player annually.

Young soccer players from low-income families are excluded at a very early age, which is unfortunate; many of these players come from immigrant families whose home countries have a rich soccer culture. A further consequence of this situation is that it reduces the pool of potential players from which top talent can be identified and developed.

As a result, the existing American youth soccer structure is supported largely by middle-class adults, who volunteer count-

less hours as coaches and spend a considerable amount of time and effort supporting their children's interests. However, most of these adults did not grow up playing or watching soccer and only have a cursory understanding of the game. More important, most of them do not fully grasp the fundamental differences between coaching adult and youth sports.

As a consequence, the mantra of playing for the team and achieving results is imposed much earlier in American youth soccer than it is in top soccer-playing nations around the world. And it typically is done at the expense of creativity, skills and independent decision-making, all of which are es-

and basic structure for youth soccer in this country, but in doing so, and in the absence of street soccer, we as adults have wrested control of the game away from the kids. Structure makes us feel more comfortable that real learning is taking place. However, the highly structured environment that exists today is not optimal for having young players learn the game of soccer and fall in love with it. It is time for us to give some of the game back to the kids. It is time for us to foster and encourage creativity, as coaches, parents and fans, by creating an environment where creativity and imagination flourish on the soccer field.

Creativity is the heart and soul of soccer. It is what makes fans gasp in wonder

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sential components of individual player development. Teamwork and results are important aspects of team sports and of American culture in general, but these elements should be secondary to individual player development at the youth level of any sport, including soccer.

It is this difference that enables youth players around the world to have more time to develop their creative tendencies and become more clever with the ball before they learn to play in a structured team environment. It is much easier to encourage a nine- or 14-year-old soccer player to be creative than a 22-year-old.

American kids are in no way less creative or less capable than young players in Brazil or Italy. It's just that most of them don't play soccer enough, and their only opportunities to play the game are in a controlled environment where most coaches, intentionally or unintentionally, suppress their players' creative instincts in order to achieve the best outcome for the team.

Why should street soccer be considered and what are its benefits?

We have created a strong foundation

and amazement. Creativity is Ronaldinho making his trademark lightning-quick outside-inside move and leaving yet another hapless defender in his wake. It is Maradona dribbling past two defenders and slipping a no-look through pass to his fellow striker when everyone else on the field and in the stands thinks he is about to shoot for goal. It is the 10-year-old girl in Cambridge, Mass., making up her own spin move during a game.

At the youth level, creativity draws young players to the game and makes them fall in love with it. If nurtured appropriately, it elevates the technical and tactical aspects of the professional game to a higher plane, to that point where it becomes "The Beautiful Game."

Creativity is difficult, if not impossible, to teach. It can only be encouraged by providing an environment that helps foster it, one that rewards risk-taking, imagination and inventiveness - an environment where creativity becomes almost instinctive. That means establishing a street soccer environment.

Around the world young soccer players can be found kicking anything that re-

seems a ball every chance they get - alone or with siblings or friends. They come up with crazy moves; to dribble past their older brothers and sisters. They go to the park or meet their friends on a quiet street to play after school and on the weekends. They are exposed to players of different ages and skill levels on a daily basis and learn how to play with and against them. They learn how to deal with other young players and resolve conflicts without adult supervision. They do this in an environment that is forgiving and relatively stress-free. Nobody remembers that you goofed up a crazy move if you make a great pass the next time you have the ball. Most important, there is no coach or adult yelling from the sidelines if you make a mistake.

This street soccer environment is crucial for developing youth soccer players. It enables them to try new things and be clever on the ball while having fun. It gives them the opportunity to stabilize their skills, develop at their own pace and build confidence. It exposes players continually to solving soccer-related problems on their own, which helps them develop their independent decision-making skills through trial and error. But most important, it allows young players to enjoy the game for what it really is - a game.

With a solid structure in place and burgeoning interest in soccer among young boys and girls, now is the time to incorporate the concept of street soccer into our youth development program. It is the missing element in the American youth soccer setup.

What are small-sided games and what are some of their benefits?

The leading youth soccer organizations in this country - U.S. Youth Soccer, NSCAA and AYSO - have followed in the footsteps of the soccer federations of Holland, France, Germany and Brazil and taken steps to embrace and promote small-sided games for youth players. These organizations recommend that the 11 v. 11 game format should be applicable only for players above the age of 12; U-6 players should play 3 v. 3, U-8 players 4 v. 4, U-10 players 6 v. 6, and U-12 players 8 v. 8. It also is recommended that these small-sided games be played on correspondingly smaller field sizes.

Soccer and child-development researchers consider the small-sided environment to be developmentally appropriate

for young soccer players. It creates a fun environment where kids are able to get more touches on the ball and, as a result, have more opportunities to score goals than they would in an 11 v. 11 format. This increased participation also provides more opportunities for players to practice the key technical skills of dribbling, passing, tackling and shooting. In addition, players' tactical development is accelerated; in small-sided games, they are presented with a variety of soccer-related problems more frequently and they have to make independent decisions. Furthermore, the smaller games also help develop the players' mental skills. In particular, they teach players to maintain focus by not dwelling on mistakes that

coached just as effectively through small-sided games. In addition, using small-sided games in practice sessions offers several added benefits - they allow players to learn in more realistic and game-like situations. They have more touches on the ball and usually have more fun.

The next step coaches can take is to adopt and promote street soccer within their teams and local communities. There are many reasons why it will be challenging to bring street soccer in its purest form to the United States, but there are several ways to incorporate the concept of street soccer into coaching sessions and methods.

One such approach is to dedicate a portion of every practice to street soccer.

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would distract them from being ready for their next touch on the ball.

The move to small-sided games for younger players is a positive one, but it has not yet been embraced and adopted at the grassroots level in several states.

How is street soccer different from small-sided games and how can coaches incorporate street soccer into American youth soccer?

The small-sided games concept offers many benefits, but it still represents activities that adults control and direct. This is the key difference between street soccer and small-sided games. In street soccer, there is no adult supervision.

The first step coaches can take is to understand and promote small-sided games in local youth leagues so young players can have a developmentally appropriate environment in which to play soccer. They can take this one step further by incorporating the concept of small-sided games into coaching sessions instead of using old-fashioned drills in which players wait in line for their turn to shoot on goal or dribble through cones. All the techniques and tactics that are taught through drills can be

During this segment, the coach steps back and gives control of the game to the players, who become responsible for setting up a game themselves. The coach may even decide to bar players from using cones and pinnies for their games, instead allowing them to figure out on their own that their sweatshirts and water bottles make fine goalposts and sidelines.

This approach can be disconcerting for coaches accustomed to maintaining control and structure. It can be unnerving for a coach to take a back seat and simply watch the game, not say anything, make any coaching points or settle disputed calls. They may feel disengaged from the practice and feel that they are not contributing to their players' development.

However, this uninterrupted street soccer game is one of the most effective teaching tools available. As the saying goes, "the game is the best teacher." In addition, coaches can take advantage of this opportunity to take a step back and observe their players in a non-competitive situation to better understand their strengths, development needs and interpersonal relationships.

This approach likely will make many parents uncomfortable as well. As adults, we typically equate structure and control as necessary elements to learning, especially in the United States. As a result, coaches will need to educate parents about the benefits of street soccer and the need for unsupervised play to help foster creativity and imagination among young soccer players.

These street soccer sessions also represent a great opportunity for the players to learn about ownership. The game they just set up and are playing truly is their own. The coach is there to tend to injuries, but nothing else. The coach may decide to join the game, but only under the condition that he or she is treated the same as any of the other players.

Another potential benefit of this approach is that it teaches young players to become more independent and helps them learn how to set up a soccer game without adult supervision. This may seem trite, but most of our young players are unable to organize pickup games themselves. Their concept of playing soccer is either going to practice or playing a game, both of which are supervised by adults.

Having our young players realize during practice sessions that they can easily set up and play soccer without any help from adults may encourage some to call their friends and meet at a field to play soccer after school. It's a long shot, but with enough support and encouragement, maybe someday soon we will see some of our kids playing pickup soccer on their own. This is the probably the closest we can hope to get to a street soccer environment in the United States.

What else can coaches do to encourage creativity among our youth players?

A street soccer environment needs to be supplemented by coaches who truly believe in and encourage creativity. It is easy for coaches to say that they embrace creativity. Its like motherhood and apple pie - everyone agrees that it is the right thing. However, what this truly means is that they must be willing to make creativity a higher priority - even above the results of a game and the teams win-loss record. The implication is that they must be willing to lose games as a team to encourage individual player development and creativity.

In youth soccer, the physical and technical development of young players can vary considerably, even within a particular age group. For youth soc-

cer coaches who are interested only in winning games, there is a tactical formula that works effectively for teams with physically dominant players. This involves playing long passes to a big and fast forward to create breakaway opportunities, which usually leads to goals. Although we should encourage effort and trying to win games, we also should be concerned about the manner in which players achieve their objectives.

Coaches should not use tactical approaches that increase the likelihood of winning games at the expense of the players' long-term development. Coaches who insist on using an approach that is too physical will be putting their players at a disadvantage in the long run, when opponents catch up in physical maturity. Players should be encouraged to play with creativity, inventiveness, effort and good technique, and they should be congratulated when they display these characteristics, even if the result on the scoreboard is a loss.

Coaches also must understand that creativity can't be taught, and that it only can be nurtured in an appropriate environment. Glimpses of creativity occur fairly often during youth soccer when an idea for a "crazy" move pops into a young players head and they try something new. Coaches need to understand that players usually will fail the first time they try something new. They probably will fail the next few times as well. Coaches need to be able to see what the players were trying to accomplish and encourage it.

This approach requires a considerable shift in mentality for a majority of American youth coaches. It's a potential roadblock that should not be trivialized. What this means is that when a player tries a no-look flick with the outside of the foot but totally misses the ball, the coach must recognize the idea and applaud it: "Nice try, you'll get it next time."

However, most coaches rather would use such an incident to make a coaching point and instead show the player how to receive the ball and pass it square to a teammate to keep possession. In doing so, the team benefits, but that moment of inspiration and creativity is lost from the game. Intentionally or unintentionally, the coach has discouraged players from trying that move or anything similarly creative the next time a "crazy" idea pops into their brains.

Bringing the street to America

The need to encourage creativity at the youth level is of the utmost importance for the individual development of young soccer players. The shift in the philosophy and mentality of coaches to prioritize creativity over results, and not clamp down on it, is especially necessary because American children do not grow up watching soccer on television or at stadiums nearly as much as those in virtually every other soccer-playing nation. This puts them at a distinct disadvantage in terms of not being able to learn and mimic skills and moves executed by top-class players. What they are left with is their natural creative tendencies as kids, tendencies that must be nurtured. Coaches should consider the concept of street soccer as a means of providing an environment that helps achieve this objective.

By incorporating street soccer in our youth-coaching philosophy, that 10-year-old girl from Cambridge who came up with the idea for her signature spin move while playing 1 v 1 with her younger brother now has the opportunity to practice it on her teammates during the street soccer portion of her practices. Once she is comfortable with it at practices, she can try her move during an actual game. If she fails to execute it and falls down, she won't be yelled at by her coach for losing the ball, but encouraged to try it again.

She'll continue to be encouraged by her coach each of the next eight times she tries the move and fails. She perseveres and on the 10th time she tries the move, she actually pulls it off. It becomes the move that her teammates try to learn from her. It becomes the signature move that she uses when she plays in high school and college and throughout her soccer career. And it becomes the move that one day she will teach her kids and grandkids. ~

Editor's note: Roni Mansur is a nationally licensed coach in the United States and has been coaching soccer at the youth level since 1999. A former collegiate player at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, he is the Director of Coaching at Cambridge Youth Soccer, an organization with more than 800 players and 70 coaches, in Cambridge, Mass., and coaches a U-11 girls travel team and U-6 boys and girls. In addition, he is a manager in the Strategy and Operations practice at Deloitte Consulting LLP.