

KINDERSOCCER AND OTHER OXYMORONS:

HOW TO TEACH THE YOUNGEST KIDS TO PLAY

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This is an edited excerpt from the book *Single-Digit Soccer: Keeping Sanity in the Earliest Ages of the Beautiful Game*, published in August 2015.

YOU'RE NOT JUST GETTING OLDER. KIDS PLAYING SOCCER ARE GETTING YOUNGER.

A few years ago, Xavier University coach Ron Quinn got a call from U.S. Youth Soccer Coaching Director Sam Snow, who told him the national office was getting a bunch of inquiries about how to get players involved in soccer at age 5, 4, 3 and 2. Quinn's mission, should he choose to accept it: Figure out the best way to do it.

Quinn did indeed accept it, and he shared his thoughts at the 2014 NSCAA Convention at a presentation called "Kindersoccer." Frankly, he seemed a little queasy at the notion of herding 3-year-olds into any sort of conventional soccer environment.

"This is not soccer," Quinn said. "This is human growth and development." And that's not a bad thing.

The upshot is this: Don't expect to teach soccer skills to U5 and below. Definitely don't pressure them — it'll backfire and burn them out. "Soc-

cer" at this stage is just "play." Full-fledged games, with one ball for several players, will eventually bore those who don't have the ball. The goals should be fun and maybe teaching motor skills along with learning to listen and learning from observation.

Naturally, not everyone followed Quinn's prescription. He showed a clip of a 5v5 game in which the kids looked overwhelmed and the parents looked intimidating. The age group? U3.

Another video showed a more positive approach. A 2-year-old enjoyed mimicking Mommy with a soccer ball and kicking it to her. The same kid had tried a "game" but hated it — one ball for so many people!

U.S. parents in particular may be suckered into the mythology of starting early thanks to one major sports celebrity — Tiger Woods, legendary for his golf-

ing prowess as a toddler. But Woods was playing an individual sport. Getting a kid to swing golf clubs is in many respects the same as getting a kid to kick a soccer ball. The 3-year-old Tiger Woods wasn't thrown in against other people trying to take away his golf ball. He could just enjoy it on his own.

Besides, as Quinn pointed out, Greg Norman started at age 15 and had quite a golf career himself. And Norman was a top player well into his 40s. As of this writing, Woods hasn't won a major since he was 32 (2008 U.S. Open).

So early starts are no sure bet for success. But is there actual harm in trying to play more seriously at a younger age? Perhaps. Trying to teach at this age can be counterproductive. By telling a 2-year-old how to do something, we short-circuit the part of the brain that makes decisions. Creativity is a big part of soccer. So once again, the Tiger Woods example doesn't apply here.

Quinn's not just speaking from experience. He cited a 1991 study by M.A. Nelson with this abstract:

All children should be allowed to participate in sports, but children's mastery of developmental skills has significant impact on their potential for success. No relationship has been demonstrated between skill training in early childhood and later development of sports skills. Infants should have an unstructured, safe play environment. As children grow to late childhood, their developmental skills improve, and training programs should reflect those changes.

Even when kids start playing actual games, they're going to see different things than we do. Quinn dug up a terrific ad for the grocery store chain Publix — the corporate tie-in was the bountiful snack table assembled for the kids — in which a nervous father watches his son's first game. The kid is totally lost. He falls over. He picks up the ball. He stares up at the sky (Dad peeks up as well to see what got his attention). He tries to kick the ball and whiffs. Dad goes over afterwards, expecting to console his kid.

*"Did you watch me?"
"Yeah. Are you OK?"
"I was AWESOME!"
We've all been there.*



Continued >> 10

ABOUT THIS AGE

Kids at U6 and U7 have a short attention span, a lot of energy, a short attention span, not much of a concept of "team," a short attention span, a fragile psyche, and a short attention span.

I've coached a player who would run around with his fingers at the sides of his head, mimicking a bull. Another player had a placid, pleasant look on his face at all times and seemed blissfully unaware of the soccer game unfolding around him. Another player required supervision to keep him from running after the ball into the street. And still another had a diagnosed special need.

We in coaching don't talk much about how to handle these kids. But NSCAA conventions occasionally offer exceptions. In 2013, Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer Technical Director Mike Barr led a session called "Understanding Players with Disabilities," addressing players in the special-needs program TOPSoccer and in general rec play. The bit of advice I took from the session: Look at the child, not the disability. It sounds obvious until you realize you're not doing it.

And some TOPSoccer tactics are needed in general recreational soccer. That was a takeaway from a 2015 Convention session led by Libby Anderl, a former college soccer player at the University of Indianapolis. We're seeing kids in rec soccer today with "invisible" disabilities like OCD or ADHD. Anderl's advice: Give visual cues and keep these athletes engaged.

Simply put, with autism diagnoses on the rise and families with other issues looking for good recreational options, we in the soccer community need to start paying more attention.

"GOOD" PLAYERS

What about the "good" players? You have to be patient with them, too.

An athletic kid may dominate a 3v3 soccer game. He may bully his way into the mob of people fighting for the ball, come out with it, and blast it into the net. When the other team gets a breakaway, he may sprint back and steal the ball. I once had a player who volunteered to play "defense" — he would steal the ball, then shoot from midfield. More often than not, he scored.

If all you care about is that kid's domination of a U6 game, your job is done. But that's not much of a goal. If you're not encouraging that kid to pass the ball around to (A) help others have fun and (B) develop more skills, what are you teaching? And what are the other kids doing while he's doing long-range target practice?

A bigger challenge is keeping those kids interested in practice. A lot of the "drills" we're taught to run as U6/U7 coaches are actually little games that don't closely resemble soccer. Those games work wonders for those who haven't caught the full soccer bug yet. The kids who already consider themselves full-fledged soccer players

will need some extra challenges. But there's only so much you can do to teach one-touch soccer to players who still need help tying their shoes.

So you have to find subtle ways to give the "good" players extra challenges. Encourage them to do something faster, or maybe with their left feet instead of their right.

PLAYING "UP"

A friend and fellow soccer coach emailed me just after the start of a season. His younger son had gone to one day of U5 activities and found that he was a good bit ahead of everyone else. Could he drop by my U6 practice to see if that was closer to his level?

Sure, a little informal visit to U6 wouldn't hurt. The player's mom brought him out to my practice, and he enthusiastically joined in.

Fifteen minutes later, I stepped over toward his mom. "Tell your husband to write the commissioner now. He *NEEDS* to be playing at U6."

He spent the next three years gaining a reputation in the age group as a player who deserved special attention. He was fast, he was strong, he had good control of the ball, and he had a bit of tactical sense on the defensive end especially.

Had he stayed with his own age group, he could have relied on his speed and strength to win the ball, kick it forward, and score goal after goal. Playing up forced him to use his skills and learn new ones.

To no one's surprise, he claimed one of the under-age slots on a U9 travel team. "Playing up" may have kept this player interested in the game. Dominating the action gets boring after a while, and some kids enjoy the challenge of playing older kids.

REALITY CHECK

Your child might be what we call a "daisy-picker." And that's OK. She'll be in good company.

"I didn't touch the ball once," one player told the *Los Angeles Times* about her youth experience. "I picked daisies and waved to my mom."



"I didn't touch the ball once. I picked daisies and waved to my mom."
— Christen Press

That player? Christen Press. At Stanford, she won the MAC Hermann Trophy as the top college player in the country. By that time, she had worked her way into the U.S. national team picture. She played professionally in Sweden and scored goals at a ludicrous pace. She was a starter for the USA in the 2015 World Cup.

The goal at this age is "physical literacy," as John O'Sullivan explains in *Changing the Game*:

Physical literacy involves learning the ABCs of agility, balance, coordination, and speed so that children possess the ability to move confidently and appropriately on the field or in the arena of their chosen sport or activity. The goal is to increase ability in all types of athletic activity, for the science shows that when children become more competent, they participate more vigorously, play for longer durations, and perform better.

As a parent of a young child, it is imperative that you put them in an environment that teaches the movements and skills of physical literacy. This does not mean only organized sports programs. This can be backyard play, running and jumping at the playground, swimming or sledding with the family, or riding your bikes.

You can't make an elite player at age 7. But you can instill some good exercise habits and perhaps a love of the game. Or you can mess it all up and make the experience miserable.