

# THE VOLUNTEER YOUTH COACH: AMERICAN SOCCER'S MOST WASTED RESOURCE

By Peter Pak, NSCAA Member since 2014, volunteer youth soccer coach and a Board member of the Colorado Rapids Youth Soccer Club.



**When I started playing soccer in the early 1970s, youth coaches were parents who had little to no knowledge about the game and volunteered to coach for their children's sake.**

**Today, soccer in the United States is in a vastly different place. Multiple generations of Americans and immigrants have created a soccer community that numbers into the millions of knowledgeable and passionate players, coaches and fans. Our fabric as a soccer nation is strong, dynamic and growing.**

Additionally, the demographic maturation of American soccer is bringing on board hundreds of thousands of former players who want to continue or re-engage with the game as coaches or volunteer coaches.

#### Consider:

- ✦ In 1974, there were 103,000 registered youth soccer players. In 2000 there were 3.0 million.
- ✦ In 1970, there were approximately 500 men's and women's college soccer programs. In 1999 there were over 1,500.

This data suggests we are in the early innings of this demographic wave as these former

players cycle into coaching, through parenthood or otherwise. With this cascade of players who had great experiences playing the game, we are exponentially increasing our base of qualified volunteer youth coaches.

It's logical to believe that a player who began as a youth and played through college is better positioned to coach kids than circa 1975 parents who had no knowledge of the game.

On paper, more qualified youth coaches should result in a systemic improvement in youth development.

But, is this actually happening?

Are we, as volunteer youth coaches, improving the system?

Or are we, as a group, actually underachieving?

Even worse, are we underachieving but believe we're excelling?

Over the past seven years serving as a volunteer youth coach, I've noticed some common themes that I believe hold us back from making the systemic impact we could otherwise have on American soccer.

Here are some observations and thoughts:

#### 1. Invest in the coaching experience

Teaching soccer to young players in a cogent and fun manner is easier said than done. Take advantage of coaching sessions offered by your club, the NSCAA or any other worthy group offering professional instruction on how to run training sessions. You will also find an unlimited universe of articles, videos, blogs and other resources covering everything from technical drills to how to communicate and convey messaging. You will not regret it and you'll be surprised by how much you will learn from the resources.

#### 2. Our shelf life is short but important

Many youth clubs have a policy of using only staff coaches beginning at the U11 level. So, while we get put out to pasture quickly, those early years are critical to laying the foundation for a player's entire soccer experience. Bruce Brown of Proactive Coaching points out: "Over 70% of kids drop out of organized sports by age 14. If you're coaching kids up until U11, you're responsible for an enormous portion of that child's experience as an athlete. You matter. And the environment you set will be a huge part of whether your kids continue to play as they get older." Think about that for a second.

Similar to how math and English teachers work to build core skills during elementary school, in soccer we're the teachers responsible for building their foundation which will allow them to have success later in their careers. It's not their U15 coach that's laying that foundation for our players. It's us at the U5 through U10 ages.

Claudio Reyna and others frequently cite the importance of having the best coaches focused on the younger ages. While he and others aren't necessarily referring to the age groups of volunteer youth coaches, the idea is the same – we have to get to our players earlier. And who touches players first? We do. We know that having a quality first touch is critical to playing good soccer. From a coaching perspective, we're their "first touch" and we have the ability (and even the responsibility) to shape them the right way.

### 3. "Development over winning"

This has become the fashionable and trending phrase of late – with good reason. However, I believe this mantra has lost its value. While everyone uses it, few actually believe or practice it. I don't believe this is a black and white concept. I think it's more gray, because there are valuable lessons in winning and losing, so I think the more relevant dialogue should be around *our process, our methods and philosophy* that then leads to results. I like the US Soccer adaptation of this concept which is along the lines of "winning is important, but player development is paramount."

Having said this, if there is any group within American soccer that should be espousing (and actually practicing) the ethos of development over winning, it's us as volunteer youth coaches. Wins matter for professional and college coaches, but at our level, we should ask: *What are we playing for? What does winning get us at our level?*

I recall vividly a U6 game involving my son. On kickoffs, the opposing team would touch it gently to a player who would first-time toe it on goal. When it resulted in a goal, despite no actual play of any soccer, their coach and parents would cheer loudly thinking they were successful. I thought just the opposite. *These kids have been robbed of the opportunity to play soccer* because they've been coached to toe it immediately on goal off a kickoff!

Scoring more goals (and said more directly, winning) was more important to this coach than actually teaching his players how to play the game. Why?

### 4. It's not about us as coaches

I believe a large part of the answer to the question of why winning matters to so many youth coaches has to do with personal ego. We live in a competitive society, and for many youth coaches it's more natural to use winning as an arbiter for success than to focus on teaching

fundamentals and laying player foundation. Therefore, we engineer our play, our rosters and our approach to win games – even at the U5-U10 levels. These attitudes also manifest themselves at the club level: *"We need to win because that will show that we're a better club than other clubs."*

Ego is killing our growth as a soccer nation.

### 5. A good coach

My college coach always told us, "There is no greater compliment than the recognition and approval of your peers." I've seen some really good volunteer coaches who invest a lot of time and passion in their coaching. A common denominator is that their sole focus is on building long-term player foundation, and doing this in a fun environment. Here are some qualities of coaches that impress me:

#### Commitment to technical foundation

There is a wide range of skill within our age groups, but seeing players trying to play technically and with purpose is an exception. Can our players dribble properly, receive and prepare a ball and pass with different parts of their feet? Are they confident on the ball and willing to create a solution when under pressure by finding space off the dribble or pass? It's easier and more comfortable to encourage kids to "get it out of trouble" and play it safe. If they lose it and the other team scores, who cares? Run it back to kick off and try again!

#### Playing different positions and playing time

Good coaches play players in different positions to provide broad exposure to the game. They resist the potential short-term pleasure of winning a game by keeping their best players in key positions. Similarly, giving equal playing time to all players provides the opportunity for each player to grow. There will be plenty of opportunity for them to fight for playing time as they get older.

#### Consistency

Nothing is more fun than to see a group that has a lot of solid players. This typically happens because "C" players have been turned into "B" players, and "B" players have been turned into "A" players. Perhaps the best indicator of a good coach is the ability to impact a wide number of players.

#### Effort

Whether a player is the most or least technical on a team, how hard players play says a lot about a coach. Because the concept of work ethic is transferrable to all pursuits of young people, it may be the most important quality coaches can teach players.

#### Fun

It is well documented that making it fun is the most important aspect of coaching at our age groups. It seems almost guaranteed that when you see a group of players having fun and playing with enthusiasm, they are a good team as

well. For me, the most useful coaching ideas involve nuggets of information that promote a fun experience for the players.

**If we as volunteer coaches can deliver a pool of players who a.) love to play soccer and b.) have a strong technical foundation for continued growth, we're heroes. Imagine if we engineered everything we did solely around these two simple goals. How much better would we be as a soccer nation?**

### 6. We have an important role

In addition to coaching players, we are key stewards of the game at this level and have a voice in the system. We can set the tone for expectations and philosophy with parents, our clubs and (most importantly) our players. If we focus on individual player development, fun and playing for the long-term, we've played a huge role in shaping our overall soccer community.

### 7. Measuring ourselves

Believe me, when our volunteer coaching careers are over, we won't remember any games our teams may have won. What we will remember, however, are the players we coached who have graduated to play in high school, college, and who knows, maybe even beyond. As great coaches look at their results over a long period of time, we as volunteer youth coaches should expand our own horizon when assessing our work. Don't look at your last game or even the past season. Look back after several years and ask: Are my players still playing? Do they play the right way? Do they love the game? Will they propagate the values we taught them as players and individuals? The answers to these questions will represent your legacy and impact as a coach, not the score from last Saturday's game.

**Somewhere in here is a Malcolm Gladwell story. It's visible and easy to see: Through demographics and the maturation of a soccer nation, there are more qualified coaches to teach kids at the youngest levels how to play the game. We teach them the right way by building technical foundation and inspiring a love of the game. The kids are better prepared to develop as they mature and, consequently, there is a substantially larger pool of high quality players. This leads to transformative player development results that manifests at every level of the game – youth, high school, college, professional and international. Along the way, American soccer becomes the soccer nation we always wanted to be.**

**Is all this possible from the grass roots levels of volunteer youth coaches? We won't know for the next 20 years, but we won't know if we don't try.**