

# US Women's National Teams Program

## Adult Politics: The Games Parents Play

### Issue

As the sport of soccer continues to gain in popularity throughout the United States it is important to monitor the effects of this growth. As we have already witnessed, growth in any sport in this country can bring about both positive and negative ripples, especially given the emphasis our society places on sports. College basketball for example has increased its fan base dramatically in the past two decades, but this exposure has also taken gambling to a new and dangerous level. For every new and exciting development in a sport there also can be a new and often disturbing challenge that must be overcome if the sport is to continue to move forward. Soccer has its share of challenges for the future. In fact, one could argue that soccer might have more challenges than any other sport at this time, since it is one of the fastest growing sports in the country. One challenge that is becoming increasingly alarming is the role of the parent toward their soccer-playing child. These are the new millennium soccer Moms and Dads. While most parents have generously given their time to become coaches, administrators, referees and supportive fans for the benefit of their children, many others have become overly involved in their children's soccer life to the detriment of his or her development and the game. These parents put too much pressure on their children in the hope that they will make a national team or earn a college scholarship. Instead of parents taking a supportive role they become agent and negotiator sheltering their children from the true lessons that the game can instill. Lessons like overcoming adversity, taking responsibility, setting goals, working together for a common cause, and respecting authority to name just a few. The results are young players who cannot think or act independently, lack creativity and ultimately who lose their love and desire to play the game.

### Recommendations

#### Adversity = Growth

In the recently released children's movie, *The Emperors New Groove* there is a scene in which the prince and his sidekick Pacho are trying to escape their captors. At one point they find themselves bound together back to back on a log heading down a river. The prince, who is facing the opposite direction, hears the rush of a waterfall approaching and exclaims, "let me guess, we're heading for a huge waterfall," Pacho replies matter of fact, "yep." The prince says, "sharp rocks at the bottom," Pacho replies again, "yep." The prince says calmly, "Bring it on!"

#### "Bring it on!"

Like the prince, young players need to be able to embrace adversity whether this is a difficult loss, being cut from a team, accepting a referee's decision or even working out difficulties among themselves. At the very least they need to be able to handle it in a positive, independent way. Parents can and should be the guiding influence in teaching their children how to handle adversity, but they should not take this responsibility away from the child.

The only way young players can embrace adversity is through practice.

Nowadays, we more often see the opposite. When a team loses a game by what is perceived as a bad call by the referee, the parent goes and screams at the referee. Instead of young players taking responsibility from the loss, they end up blaming the referee. When players are cut from a team, the parents blame the coach. Instead of the players learning what parts of their game need improving for them to reach the next level, they end up blaming the coach, or the parents switch the player to another team.

Children follow the lead of their parents!

For many of us we see adversity as something that must be avoided at all costs. It can be painful in the short term, but tremendously beneficial in the long term. It is the special person who can react to adversity and truly learn from it. Parents must help guide their children through adverse times being careful not to stifle their ability to turn a negative situation in to a positive one. The individuals who have learned this are much more likely to reach farther than anyone thought possible. Every player that has made a career of professional sport or who has made a national team has suffered through their own share of adversity. Parents must think of adversity as an opportunity for their children to grow.

Wear Their Boots

Before saying anything to your child on the field think first about how it would affect you if you were playing in the game at that time. Put yourself in your child's mind, see what he/she sees, hear what he/she hears and then ask yourself how would you respond.

Feel the Love

“To play the game is great! To win the game is greater! To love the game is the greatest of all!” This quote is on a plaque inside the lobby of the famed Philadelphia Palestra. It says what most elite athletes already know. In developing their children in the game of soccer the best parents can do is to help instill a love for the game. No athlete ever made it at the highest level without a real and undying love for the game. The love is what makes players train hard, the love is what makes players sacrifice for, the love helps players overcome adversity and the love makes them reach for their dreams. This love cannot be coerced, pressured, or forced. It must be nurtured and has to develop through both positive and negative experiences.

Pop the Questions?

Have your athlete ask themselves these three questions after each and every game:

1. Did I work hard?
2. Did I take responsibility for my actions?
3. Was I positive with myself and my team?

If they can answer yes to all three of these then they were successful that day regardless of the score or amount of playing time. Parents influence player development as much or more than coaches do. Are you stifling your player's development?

## **Rationale**

In every sport athlete matriculation beyond the age of 16 greatly diminishes. For some, this will be their last organized health-full experience in life. Sports is and should be about participation, enjoyment, team cohesion, challenges, adversity and yes – competition! Sports mirrors life and life mirrors sport. However hard we try as coaches or parents we cannot control the outcome of a game or life's challenges. However, we have a large window of opportunity to influence how our children and athletes respond to life's ups and downs. Sport instills a sense of physical strength, self-esteem, empowerment and the mental ability to deal with disappointment. Players will make mistakes, they will experiment, they will fail and they will succeed. Between the white lines, let the game be the teacher.