

Youth soccer programs under scrutiny

ARE YOUNG SOCCER players getting too much too soon? The issue is raised nearly every day, as soccer information streams across my desk daily.

The stack of papers on my desk ranges anywhere from the dreaded soccer tryout announcements (in which clubs engage in fierce competition), to the under-10 teams who have recently returned from a three-day tourney in Kentucky, to the under-14ers who have just spent two weeks touring Scotland, to the Olympic Development players who can brag to their friends about their trips to Dallas and Toronto.

These, of course, are fictitious stories, but not far from the truth. The more you win, the more places you go, the more recognition you get.

And with the recently completed Wolverine 12 Tournament, one of the largest age-group soccer tournaments in the Midwest, I wonder if it's time to take a deep breath, pause and discuss where the sport is headed (in preparation for our hosting the 1994 World Cup).

Recently appointed U.S. National Coach Bora Milutinovic made an interesting comment to Clive Gammon of Sports Illustrated (in the July 1 issue) that hit home.

"There's a huge difference between real learning—learning and becoming part of the game—and formal team training," said the 46-year old coach. "My boys have missed out on that learning and love, too. Everywhere else in the world, until maybe you are 10, you play only for enjoyment with other kids. Even right up to 15 you polish individual skills on your own. Only then does team coaching come into it."

WHEN WAS THE last time you saw a group of kids go down to the neighborhood schoolyard and play a pickup game?

If anybody knows, let me know so I can cover it.

A kid can't make it in today's competitive age-group soccer world without sparkling new uniforms and fancy bags. You're not a soccer player unless you travel to out-of-town tournaments and stay at the Hilton. And a young, aspiring soccer player cannot exist without being enrolled in a summer camp or going indoors in



Brad Emons

the winter.

But the biggest prerequisite to becoming a good player is having a parent willing to either coach, drive you around or chaperone you.

Former U.S. National Team captain Rick Davis, in town recently to conduct the Chiquita Challenge, soccer's version of Punt, Pass & Kick, sat down with me for nearly 1½ hours to discuss this subject (ironically, at the Novi Hilton).

Consider the 32-year-old Davis an authority on the sport.

He played alongside Pete and Franz Beckenbauer when he was with the New York Cosmos. He's played professionally indoors and is a member of the U.S. Soccer Federation's Board of Directors.

DAVIS resides in Federal Way, Wash., with his wife, Kelly, and their four children (two boys and two girls).

My question was simply: Are we on the right track?

"What Bora said is very true," Davis said. "My upbringing was different than most. In 1966 people looked at me as a freak because I played soccer, but I was really an active kid. I did everything in sports that was outdoors. Soccer was just another sport. The only thing we had to contend with in southern California was the rain."

Davis grew up in Claremont, Calif., a suburb of Los Angeles, where he lettered in seven sports in high school. He was voted All-State in football and soccer, as well as excelling in baseball, track and tennis.

"Unfortunately today, a kid's first exposure to soccer is their father, their mother or their father's friend," Davis said. "The single most significant area that we're lacking in this country is coaching, number one. The second thing is officiating, which I don't think is really as important as far as coaching in terms of growth. But it's still important."

Davis' first three coaches as a youth were foreigners.

"I was exposed to knowledgeable coaching and I was lucky in the respect," Davis said. "My first coach was a gentleman from England, and he had the game in his blood. My second coach was from Germany, and he was familiar with it, and understood it. My third coach was from Italy. I was able to take things from all three."

"MY FIRST REAL American-born coach, and I don't mean a derogatory sense, came in college (Santa Clara University)."

Davis said the key to good coaching is "knowledge and understanding."

"It obviously helps if you've played," he said. "But just because you don't play doesn't mean you can't coach."

Davis spends time at home coaching his 7-year-old son Hyam Christopher.

"It's a very relaxed atmosphere. I'd be a different kind of coach if I was coaching a national team or a college, as said. I might be a Bobby Knight-type. I don't know, I actually have no coaching experience."

"But what I see right now is that we don't teach fundamentals. The bottom line is that the basics are forgotten. That's why I got involved with the Chiquita Challenge. It teaches basic skills and it forces kids to learn. Soccer has never had things like that. It's also creating awareness for the sport."

Davis said there has to be a "happy ground" in terms of being devoted to the game.

"I don't profess that a kid has to be playing soccer year-round," he said. "Seven to nine months a year is plenty, but that's only if they're getting good, quality instruction. Maybe practice twice a week, but on my own with my friends five or six times per week."

"SOMETIMES IT requires travel, but the main thing is to play more regularly. Right now the high school season is not enough. Only 3½ months is too short a season, and colleges have the same problem."

Can proficient players, considered for national teams, stay sharp in their own environments?

"I often see that problems exist

when players go away to the National Team and then come back," Davis said. "The level is not good enough, but they still have to be challenged and pushed. They need some kind of stimulation, not on all-star teams, but on teams of equal challenge."

"Patience is the biggest key, according to Davis.

"We want everything right now, and it's not going to happen," he said. "It takes time for individual development."

He also said that FIFA, the world governing body for soccer, must make some subtle changes in the rules "or the game will die."

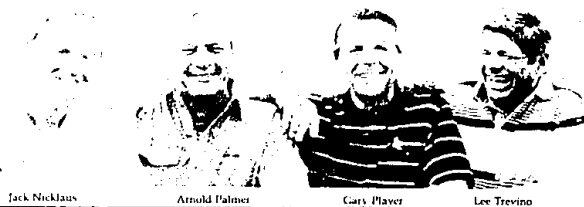
"The game is crying for change,"

he said. "There haven't been any changes for 150 years. It's become stagnant, too. The American point of view, of course, is more drastic."

Obviously, Davis would like to see subtle changes in our youth soccer system.

My views are more drastic. I want it to happen right now.

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