Navigating The Maze Of Youth Soccer

By Gwynne Williams

Youth soccer has developed into a thriving industry in the time that I have been in America. There are now over 11,000 youth clubs that are all developing players in some shape or form. The best players that these clubs produce will go on to play in college soccer and an exceptional few go on to play professionally.

Over the last twenty years youth programs have seen tremendous growth in organization, coaching development, technical development of players and an enormous growth in developing facilities. All this has resulted in a rise in the level of play on the field and greater competition has resulted from more players playing the game.

When players like John Kerr, Kasey Keller and John Harkes were able to play in the top league in England it was considered an amazing feat. They were indeed soccer pioneers. Today it has become no big deal when you read that another American player has signed with a top European team. We seem to take it all for granted and may wrongly assume that it has become easier.

Women’s soccer at college and professionally has seen the US leading the way for a long time. Some nations have caught up on the female side to make it more competitive but we are still the leading force in women’s world soccer.

When I arrived in the US there were very few professional youth coaches working full time in the game. Today many of our youth programs have full-time professional coaches. These coaches tend to be former players and parents of players that are now students of the game. They are continually trying to improve the product on the field and themselves as coaches.

Until recently soccer was not a year round sport for the top players. It was just another sport that needed to be fitted somewhere into the annual calendar. Youth soccer has only moved to a ten-month calendar for the elite players in recent years.

Sport science has assisted the learning curve of all coaches and helped confirm that skill acquisition in the main occurs between the ages of eight and thirteen in soccer. The best coaches understand this is the window where technical development is fostered. Good coaches place a greater emphasis on learning how to play the game right because it is what will be important in the future.

Lesser programs and coaches place their emphasis on winning at these young ages. They place a higher emphasis on athleticism, particularly size, strength and speed. These qualities are game changers in children before puberty, no question.

However, in the long run relying on these attributes alone will not keep the players winning or even playing. Once players come through puberty if the skill is not there it is too late.

Having missed that window of opportunity you cannot go back.
So I ask you, would you want your son or daughter to have a bag full of medals (usually plastic or cheap metal) from the days that they were 9,10,11 and 12 or prepare to compete for medals where it really counts and still be in the game? So let us get to the “soccer maze.”

Your child enters the soccer maze usually as a young player in a recreation program and the twists and turns through the maze are many. There are traps and cons along the way that lead to wrong turns and frustration and even dead-ends where giving up seems the only solution. Over 70% of players that enter the maze will not play competitive soccer beyond middle school age. They disappear from the game forever. The aim is to navigate the maze and come out at your desired exit level based on what you want from the game. Supported by the level of skill you have acquired. Simply put, to reach your soccer goals. Only players that have been taught properly and have kept matters in perspective will come out of the door marked, “Only college players or higher can exit through this door.”

With all the growth in the last twenty years the game is in danger of over saturation of endless games and tournaments and an unrealistic pressure to win meaningless games. The United States Soccer Federation created their “Development Academy” in an attempt to reduce players playing too many meaningless games. This sadly is a drop in the proverbial bucket as this only affects seventy-two clubs and only four teams within those clubs. Leaving well over 10,000 clubs on the outside. The girls do not have any club soccer being run by USSF although the ECNL program being run through US Club Soccer is trying to fill a void for the girls.

Development is a long process and there are no short cuts to success and player’s all develop at different rates. Some programs prey on finding parents of players that have a checkbook or credit card that do not know the maze. Unfortunately there are too many of these programs. They try to sell you a “bill of goods” under the pretense of aiding you through the maze. This usually goes along the lines of:

- Our program is better than the one your in.
- Our coaches will make you a better player.
- You will enjoy yourself much more with us.
- By playing with us you will get greater exposure to higher levels including colleges.
- You cannot reach your potential unless you’re with a club like ours.

Their list goes on.

It is easy to become confused by the sales talk. Especially when they’re telling you that their grass is greener. It is easy to get pressured into buying the dream.
No question you want to help your children make good choices and get through the soccer maze.
You as parents and your child may have high aspirations (and I hope you do.)

Firstly let me tell you that not every program that calls itself “elite” is.
Elite is a very miss-used word in the soccer maze. If you were not elite before joining them do you really think that just by joining them it will make you elite? If it were that easy I’d join.

Please be wary of clubs that do not have a recreation feeder program. This means that they cannot develop their own and rely on poaching from others.
Our club results against top teams is a testimony that we are competitive and our clubs philosophy of building from the bottom is steadily helping us develop along the right lines.
The “cannibal coaches” want to raid neighboring team’s best players to give themselves a better chance of winning in that moment. They never seem to want to take the lesser players and make them better- funny that! They do not know how to develop nor do they have the desire to do so. It is simply about winning for them. It’s about them and not the players.
With these programs your only there until they can find a better player to replace you.

This is common practice for the professional giants of the game. The Real Madrid’s and the Manchester City’s can afford to spend billions to buy themselves a winning team However even they are not guaranteed success by these methods. Also remember that they play in La Liga or the Premier league and not youth soccer.

I am not suggesting that we are perfect by any means but we are striving to be so.

Let me talk about the myth of gaining greater exposure to higher levels of the game including college teams and beyond by playing for certain clubs that believe they are favored. (The chosen ones!)
This is sadly one of the most abused gimmicks in the soccer con book.
No college coach is seriously looking at players until they are fifteen years or older. So your ten year old will not be on their radar screen no matter how good they are.
It is true that girls do not change much from about fifteen through eighteen and college coaches can see the consistency that comes with a lot of girls. Boys however are a different story. A good player at fifteen may only be an average player two years later. It is very hard to predict which boys will rise up and which will not.
I was a college coach in a good program for thirteen years and speak with some experience here. I have a National Championship ring to back it up as well.
College coaches will go to the far corners of the world to find a player, I know I did. They leave no stone unturned. If you can play they will find you. Playing a few minutes and sitting on the bench for most of the game will not make you a better player. Better to play more minutes in a lesser team.
There are not enough players to fill the demand of college soccer places. Hence schools bring in students from other countries by the plane-load. You need to know where you want to go to school and if you have a realistic chance of playing at the school. 

So if your child is under fifteen years of age and you hear that playing for this team or club will change your soccer life forever, alarm bells should be ringing. I have been fortunate to coach many college and national team players and I can assure you that the vast majority of them got there without jumping from club to club. In fact it is a warning sign to a college coach when looking through your soccer resume, if they see that you have bounced from club to club. They are interested in loyalty and knowing that you will be with your team through the bad times as well as the good.

I was once the Alabama State Director of Coaching, and just before I left Alabama the Girls Under 15 National Team played the Under 18 Regional Training Center in Dallas.

There were two girls from Alabama on that U15 team. Amazing for such a small state to have two girls starting for the national team.

The two girls that I reference have been harassed and invited to join bigger clubs from neighboring states since they were ten years old.

My advice to their parents was always stay with your club if your daughter is happy with the coach (it’s an important relationship) and they enjoy being with their friends.

Some of these clubs would make statements like ‘You don’t need to travel 3 hours to Atlanta for training, just be at the games.’ What does that say about the club that is trying to recruit them? It shouts loud and clear to me that we don’t care about your daughter’s long-term soccer career but would appreciate her helping us win right now.

Hear is one of the girls from Alabama with Sydney Leroux. Taken at a National Team training camp in Los Angeles.

This could be one of our girls in the future.

Fortunately these two girls are very sensible and are driven to be good players. They are supported by parents that did not understand the soccer maze but were concerned enough to seek advise. These two girls may never play for the full
national team, time will tell on that. However I can say with certainty that they will continue to grow as people and players. They will have very successful college soccer careers if that is what they wish and will give their all to stay in the national team spotlight.

Another trick in the soccer con book is the suggestion that a club has influence with a certain college coach (or several of them) and that their recommendation will guarantee a soccer scholarship.

Please understand that a college coach only wants players that will keep them in a job. Therefore they are only going to give scholarship money to players they feel will give them the best chance of achieving success and assuring they keep their job.

In reality a college soccer coach does not have much money to give in scholarships. Schools have much more in academic money. A college coach has to have the soccer scholarship money playing on the field and not sitting on the bench. So my advise to all players, is to make sure the grades are good to compete for the academic money.

In the event that you are good enough to be offered athletic money – wonderful!

Also note that most schools do not allow coaches to combine athletic money with academic money and as I stated there is much more academic money available to students.

I met many youth coaches that felt that they had a player that would warrant soccer scholarship money and not one of them persuaded me to go against my own assessment.

They simply do not understand the college game or the reasoning behind what makes a college coach decide which players will be offered scholarship.

So what can you do to get more exposure if you feel that you are a good player and would like to go higher in the game.

I call this my 10%ers rule.

In sports, as in school, roughly 10% of the participants at any level are too advanced for that level and need to be pulled out, permanently or periodically, and challenged at a higher level. Otherwise, they will not reach their potential.

Schools do that with their gifted programs. At each school, around 10% of the students are identified as academically ‘gifted’ through testing and are taken out of the normal classes for more advanced learning. And 10% of the so-called ‘gifted’ students are classified as ‘exceptionally gifted’ and 10% of those can be further classified as ‘genius’ and so on and so forth.

If we keep plucking the top 10% from each level, no matter how high that level is, and provide a ‘next level’ for these new 10%ers, it will allow the very best to reach their true potential. If, however, we stop at a certain level and say that’s enough, we are denying the 10%’s of that level a chance to reach even higher.

In soccer, it’s the same. It doesn’t matter how high the playing level is at a league, any league, it’s a safe bet that roughly 10% of the players in that league are not sufficiently challenged. No matter how successful a team is, there will be at least two players on that team that need a tougher environment at times in order to reach their potential. Programs such as the ID2 or the ODP do exactly that, namely, identify the 10%’ers and provide
them a platform to improve even more. It doesn’t matter how good the team’s coach is, some of the players are not extended enough through league play alone because most games are just too easy for them. That’s where these types of programs can play a role and fill the gap. Hence, it should not be assumed that the Development Academy or the ECNL can replace these select programs on their own. The 10%er’s in these programs still need to reach their potential. In a soccer sense the national teams are the top of the soccer pyramid for the top of the 10%ers.

I have written this letter to share with you my opinions based on my experiences and to make you think about what your child seeks and how best you can be a support to them. There is no question the relationships between you, your child and the coach are paramount to successfully navigating the soccer maze. Game results under the age of sixteen are not of significance. How you play and train is. In all my days of coaching and playing I have discovered that there are only two types of coach in soccer. One that wants to win games for themselves, they will sacrifice all before them to achieve that aim, and the coach that cares about development of the player as a whole. This coach will place a higher emphasis on learning the game for the future. They still want to win but do not sacrifice a players learning just to gain a result. They are interested in the player as a person as well as a player. It is no coincidence that winning often appears on the horizon for this type of coach in the end because they have developed players that have the necessary skill set to stay in the game. These coaches are patient and produce players that can solve soccer problems.

So in closing I want you to know that your soccer club and our coaches do care about the development of all the players. That is why we have different levels of soccer. Some players only want to play a few months of the year just for enjoyment. Others wish to be more challenged, and for them there is the competitive level. Even within the competitive level there will be change from year to year as players reach their plateau and others develop. I have seen players play on the B and even C teams until they go through puberty and suddenly take off and become A team players. They are able to do this because they were nurtured in the right environment and not pushed beyond their limit to soon. That only leads to frustration, burnout and dropout. This journey through the soccer maze is not a sprint, it is a marathon and I trust that this will help you stop and think about how to assist your child through the soccer maze.

It truly is a player’s game and you along with us need to keep them having fun, being appropriately challenged and guided through the soccer maze.

Keep the ball rolling,
Gwynne Williams