

Tackling Key Challenges in Modern Day Youth Ball

By Mike Voitalla

*I was part of a panel at the US Youth Soccer Workshop at the NSCAA Convention: "Youth Soccer in the Real World: Issues faced by a Modern Day Club Director of Coaching." Moderated by **John O'Sullivan** (Founder of the [Changing the Game Project](#)), my fellow panelists were **Sam Snow** (Technical Director, [US Youth Soccer](#)), **Charlie Slagle** (Former Executive Director of North Carolina's CASL), **Brett Jacobs** (Technical Director, Washington Timbers) and **Karla Thompson** (Technical Director, [Maryland Youth Soccer](#)).*

We have an ideal world of what we know is right for youth soccer players and we have a real world that we all live in: managing expectations, managing business, dealing with parents, said O'Sullivan as we launched into the discussion of some key challenges faced by youth soccer clubs, beginning with Winning vs. Development. ...

You want to try and win, but it's not must-win, said Snow. We want club administrators and parents to focus more on the process. So many moms and dads only look at the goals, the win-loss record -- the black and white. If you have a U-10 team, and you've been working on wall-passes, you explain to the parents what the kids are trying to do, and to cheer that. When coaches help parents look for some of the technical and tactical pieces they're working on, it helps the parents refocus.

Jacobs, who has also served as DOC of Michigan and Massachusetts Youth Soccer and in the Colorado Rapids youth program, said patience is the key.

Most of the time, youth soccer will not look like adult soccer as much as we want it to look like it, he said. The patience of understanding how long it takes to acquire the skill to play the game in an attractive manner with quality takes long time.

He recommends that coaches expose parents to the kind of soccer you're aiming to play when the kids reach the higher levels by, for example, e-mailing video of older teams playing high quality soccer:

That will help them understand how difficult a journey it is to get there. Why we play small-sided games. Why we emphasize possession, skill and technique. Why results aren't important at a young age because we have to work on those things.

Learning to play out of the back, having a goalkeeper roll the ball out to the right back means a team will give up goals and lose games. But if you show them big the picture they'll begin to understand the journey.

I shared what world **champion Shannon MacMillan**, Director of San Diego's Del Mar Carmel Valley Sharks, told me recently: No college coach asks, "Did you win a State Cup at U-9?"

On Coaching - O'Sullivan **quoted Theodore Roosevelt**: No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care. Slagle emphasized the importance of DOCs keeping a close eye on the youngest ages (You as DOC need to go watch U-6s, U-7s, U-8s.) and the importance of an age-appropriate approach: The teaching at the younger ages is easier. The actually managing of a team is more difficult [because of the vast variety of skill level]. I'd almost rather have a kindergarten teacher

learning how to coach soccer than a soccer person trying to learn how handle 5-, 6-, 7-, 8-year-olds.+

O'Sullivan emphasized the importance of coaches getting experience at all the age groups.

'A former college player shows up at your door and says, 'I want \$50,000 a year and I want coach your best 16s and 17s.' ò But you must be exposed to coaching every age. Because if you don't coach every age, you don't understand the development process except by what you went through.+

On Free Play ò 'I strongly encourage my clubs to have free play as much as possible for the younger ages,+said Thompson. 'Allow them to develop within themselves. That also takes the pressure off recreational coaches to have this elaborate lesson plan, and let the game teach itself. Sometimes we have to take the game away from the adults.+

Snow said, 'Parents need to be educated to understand that free play is actually a development component and when you are offering that at your club it's part of your curriculum by design over the course of the year.+

On **Containing Costs** ò Youth soccer, as we all know, can be ridiculously expensive. The panel agreed that parents deserve to know exactly what they're paying for.

'A lot of a club's costs are legitimate,+I said. 'We live in a country where, unfortunately, fields aren't free in most cases. There are field costs, referee fees, coaches need to be paid. We have to cut costs where we can, and the big one to cut is travel. The tournament industry is out of control.

'I have taken teams to tournaments and have seen players have great experiences, **but you don't need to go to a bunch of tournaments a year.** We can cut a lot of costs if you're not concerned where your U-12s are ranked.

'If you think you're U-10 team is the best in the world and think you need to travel to find competition, find instead some U-12 teams to play in your area. ò If you want a variety of competition outside league play, call some clubs in the area and set up some informal games.+

On the ranking of youth teams, Snow recalled when he was involved in ranking men's NCAA college teams for playoff selection. 'And that was difficult. Ranking U-12 teams in different parts of the country is just stupid.

'Rankings are another one of these black and white measures that a lot of people want because it's simple. Rankings for U-11 teams is not only ludicrous it's damaging to the overall development of our sport and to the kids. If you have people who participate in that, encourage them to stop.+

O'Sullivan pointed out that in a place like Los Angeles, you can get a good 30 games a year within a two-hour drive.+

Slagle explained how at CASL he organized festival events within the club, mixing players from the teams at different levels in an age group -- basically creating a tournament weekend atmosphere without the costs and other downsides.

'The parents weren't screaming from the sidelines because some of their kids' teammates were on the other team,+Slagle said. 'Be creative. Don't do something just because the club across town is doing it

and you're scared of losing players. **Believe in your program.**"

(Mike Voitalla, the executive editor of Soccer America, [coaches youth soccer for Bay Oaks/East Bay United SC in Oakland, Calif](#) and is a Grade 8 referee. He is the co-author, [with Tim Mulqueen, of The Complete Soccer Goalkeeper](#). Voitalla's youth soccer [articles are archived](#) at YouthSoccerFun.com.)