

Over coaching: An American Disease

By Daa Woog

Twenty years after American soccer took off in earnest, it still has not produced a world class team alone a world-class player. There are definitely cultural and geographic reasons for American soccer's failure to live up to everyone's (lofty) expectations, but American coaches themselves must share the blame. Some experts feel that American coaches have placed too much emphasis on winning rather than on allowing players to play for the fun of it. In the process, coaches have given players the impression that they, coaches, and not players are ultimately responsible for the decisions to take place on the field. Until coaches let go, players will never control their (and ultimately American soccer's) destiny .

The predictions have been made for years, with monotonous regularity: "The United States is going to be the next main force in international soccer." And with just as much regularity, the press has reported failure after failure on the international scene: The United States failed to advance in the Olympics, it failed to qualify for the World Cup (lost to Costa Rica), it fell to a small Mideast emirate. And after each failure, fingers are pointed: The selection process is wrong. There is not enough training time. If only there was a professional outdoor league... But, according to some of the top youth coaches in the United States, those critics are dribbling toward the wrong net. The problem, these keen observers say, begins right on the soccerfield: OVERCOACHING.

Quite simply, coaches do not permit young American players to develop as they should, because coaches have a misconception of what their role should be. John Cossaboon, director of coaching for the North Texas State Soccer Association, says there's "no question" that youth coaches overcoach. Furthermore, he says, it exists "at all levels."

Novices, according to Cossaboon, "feel they have to fulfill an image of 'coach' from their backgrounds in other sports, which often differs from soccer. Therefore, they over structure things. And the younger the age group, the more beginning coaches with no soccer background we have. "At the other end of the spectrum, Cossaboon sees "a lot of people with accents who come over and aren't really qualified to teach, which after all is what coaching is all about."

A quality coach, he says, is a person who "knows he doesn't need to speak to make himself heard. If he sees things need to be changed, he or she will make a suggestion. If things are going well, he or she will keep quiet." Education is the key to what constitutes proper coaching. Cossaboon would like to see each state set up a program to educate coaches.

"They can be taught that if you show up at practice, then divide the players up, give them a ball and let them play, you're doing a world of good," he says. "If you create intricate drills, with lots of structure but few touches on the ball, they won't have fun." Another state coaching director, Karl Dewazian of the California Youth Soccer Association North,

is of a like mind, but speaks about a different problem. “Most coaches think that by coaching from the sidelines, they help players out,” he says. “But they don’t realize their job is to coach during practice. A coach who yells during games is giving the verbal message that he hasn’t done his job well during the rest of the week.”

Sound takes awhile to get to the player, Dewazian explains. By the time a player hears a message, understands it, and starts to act on it, the situation has changed, so it’s either too late to act on, or incorrect. Dewazian adds, “A good player has to concentrate. He can’t concentrate both on the game-playing—and the coach—listening—at the same time. It’s physically impossible.”

Dewazian suggests that if coaches don’t believe this, they should try what he does during training courses: “We put coaches in players’ shoes, and give them the same instructions they might yell: ‘Run right,’ for example. ‘Whose right?’ they wonder; they get angry. Let’s face it, the game of soccer is just not conducive to sideline coaching.”

Like Cossaboon, Dewazian feels that education is crucial if coaches are to learn not to overcoach. This extended from writing articles in newsletters (including testimonials from youngsters who say the best coaches are those who don’t yell and scream) to actually sending coaches into classrooms, to understand that each child learns things in different ways. He is especially critical of foreign coaches who “often haven’t worked with youths at an organized level the way we do here. Many hired foreign professionals don’t have the energy, patience or understanding to teach kids in a fun atmosphere.

“Some coaching from the sidelines comes not from the coach, but from the parents,” says Cossaboon. “Coaches should get all parents off the touchline. The closer you get to the play the more emotionally involved you’ll get. I think every field should have a ‘spectator line’ five or ten yards back from the field.”

He also cautions that “money is being spent on the wrong items at the youth level. We spend money on trophies and fancy uniforms, but the most important item is the soccer ball. The more the kids use it, the better they’ll get. ” A third state coaching director, Ed Tremble of the Connecticut Junior Soccer association, discusses overcoaching from a third angle.

“We’re probably too tactical with kids 10-14 who haven’t refined their technical abilities yet,” he says. “We’ve got to emphasize the basics more in game-like situations. That means working with the ball on basic skills, but not in lines or with cones. That’s not game-related. A good coach should prepare his players to meet the conditions of a game during practice.”

Art Walls, the chairman of the USSR’s coaching committee and the Alabama under-17 boys state coach, is not an American, but he too is “a proponent of any move to de-emphasize coaching. Coaching is really exhortation, threats, a very strong form of persuasion to do the coach’s bidding, rather than education, which is debate and assimilation —and that’s not being allowed to youth today.” He sees many parallels

between soccer and American sports such as basketball and football, “where the coach can actually win games. I think a lot of our coaches have that attitude subliminally.”

Walls thinks a well-qualified coach is not necessarily one with an A, B or C license, but “a person who is well qualified to impart the knowledge he himself has.” And that knowledge should not necessarily be imparted during games. “it’s nice to have games where we keep score—we must be competitive-but we should have all the coaches in the bleachers, unable to communicate with their players at all,” he suggests. “That will force all coaching to be done during the week.

“We must define more accurately what a coach’s function is. Monday through Friday, he should teach soccer; on Saturday he should watch the fruits of his labor. If he doesn’t like what he sees on Saturday, he has to look and see whether his message- -or maybe his method—isn’t succeeding. “Too many coaches try to influence every action that takes place on the field. If they’re successful at that, they take away a player’s development of decision-making. If they’re not successful, they confuse the kids immeasurably.”

Don’t look at the scorebook, Walls suggests; rather, “look at the subtleties. For instance, do your players get to the ball at the earliest possible time? If that’s what you’ve been emphasizing, then you’re a successful coach.”

Walls also warns that it’s important to discourage any shouts by parents that are either critical or instructional. “The only thing I’d like to see here is ‘Come on Greens!’,” he says. “Kids should feel ‘Soccer is our game. We’re the ones who are doing all the running around.’ “The thing I hate most is when I see kids look over at their coach to tell them who should take a penalty or corner kick. That’s just not soccer. Bids should be able to make all their own decisions on the field.” One man who sees the results of overcoaching—though he’d prefer to call it “misdirected coaching”—is Roy Rees, the United States under-16 national coach. “Teams are too structured; the coach is too powerful,” he says. “There’s no room for imagination, for creativity or flair. It’s difficult to find any youngsters who are leaders, because their leadership qualities have never been allowed to emerge.” That misdirected coaching extends into another area too, Rees feels. “Because there’s an overemphasis on winning at the under-12 and under-14 levels,” he says, “coaches tend to pick the bigger, taller players who can prevail over smaller boys. They’ll win immediately, but in the long run that does untold damage to soccer in this country, because the smaller players or late developers get ignored. The be- all and end-all isn’t to win the local league or whatever. It’s to develop players so they can play the game well later on.

“I’m finding our best under-16 players are very competent, but predictable and stereotyped. They’re too tall and too fast. I sometimes wonder what would have happened to Maradona if he’d been an American player. He’d probably have been overlooked.” Overcoaching can take many forms: coaches and parents yelling from the sidelines; coaches trying to be too technical; coaches who try to impose their ideas, rather than teach them; coaches trying to win too soon. But whatever the form, the end result is the game, according to youth soccer experts. Overcoaching prevents young players from

developing their full potential. As a result, they don't get as much out of the game as they could—and the development of soccer in the entire country suffers.