FOR THE PARENTS

Posted by STLCoach - 21 Feb 2011 05:15

How to navigate your child's path

By Christian Lavers

The choice of where to have your child play youth soccer can be very difficult. Multiple clubs, “select teams,” or leagues will tout their services or programs, often with promises of glory down the road. There is no shortage of choices for where your child can spend the next year of development – and in the United States, parents have more choice than in any other country.

The number of choices can be overwhelming -- especially to parents without a soccer background. When there are different people selling different services, often in different leagues, and all emphasizing the importance of choosing their club, it is no surprise that people make choices that they will regret in the future. This raises a key question:

How do I choose a soccer club for my child? While there is no easy answer to this question, there is one key principle that should guide your decision: the single most important external factor in any player’s development is the quality of the coach working with the player on a regular basis. The impact of this individual, especially at U8-U14, far outweighs the league the team plays in, the success of the team, or any other factor. Quite simply, great coaches at these ages help motivated players maximize their ability. Because of this huge impact and influence, consider the following in trying to evaluate your options:

* Being a great soccer player does not automatically translate into being a great teacher of soccer players.

* Beware of any coach who takes credit for the success of his or her past players; the best coaches understand that players earn their own achievements.

* Beware of any coach advertising the number of college scholarships their players have received, (and run the other way if they promise one to you).

* Though earning coaching licenses doesn’t guarantee a great coach, it does show effort on the part of the coach. (That said, a license does not certify honesty or integrity.)

* Be sure the “name” attached to the team will be the coach attached to the team; bait-and-switch is not uncommon.

* Is the coach offering a training-based program with appropriate training-to-game ratios (at least 3-1), or is the coach promoting a program overly emphasizing competition?

While these guidelines help narrow your choices, you may still have several options. If that happens, consider having your child attend a training session with the potential coach, and evaluate the session on the following criteria:

* Did your child enjoy the session, and does he or she want to go back?

* Is your child receiving coaching points that are detailed, personalized, and technical, or are they general, vague, and primarily focused on hustle and attitude?

* Are the players consistently engaged and active, with frequent contact with the ball?

* Does your child leave the training feeling that he or she has learned something new, or excited to try something new?

While the quality of the opposition in games and training gradually becomes more important as players age, (and is very important at U14 and above), these factors are far less significant when the player should primarily be learning individual technique and decision-making.

Unfortunately, no matter how much you research your decision, you may make a mistake -- the world is full of great salesmen. To minimize the impact of a bad decision, you must be able to recognize when the coaching your child is receiving is slowing their development. Without being a “helicopter parent,” be mindful when watching your child’s team play:

* Are players encouraged to solve problems and think, or are they simply running around and kicking?

* Does the team try to possess the ball (good sign), or do they seem in a rush to go to goal immediately every time they get the ball (bad sign)?

* Is coaching in the game given to players away from the ball (good sign), or is the coach joysticking the player with the ball (bad sign)?

* Is most of the coaching concerned with “working harder”? (What do you do when “working harder” is no longer sufficient because of a lack of knowledge or skill?)

* Does the team rely primarily on serving the ball forward to a fast player up front to score, and on a fast player in the back to cover for mistakes? (Very bad sign)

* Does the team play differently at the end of the season than it does at the beginning? Is your child a noticeably different (and improved) player?

While the focus of this article has been primarily on coaching, it is important to realize that if parents do not encourage self-directed play in the hours their child is not with their coach, to some extent the selection of a club, team, or coach is a moot point -- the player’s ceiling is already established.

(Christian Lavers is the Executive Vice President at US Club Soccer. He holds the highest coaching licenses in the United States -- the USSF "A" License, the USSF "Y" License, and the NSCAA Premier Diploma.)

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