

November 13, 2008

ESSAY

Remembering the Joy of Just Playing

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WEST NEWBURY, Mass. — The girls finished their soccer season on an autumn afternoon in New England with only their families and a border collie in attendance.

The final game took place a few days before the presidential election, yet there was already plenty of hope as the players chased after the ball and attempted, with varying degrees of deftness, to put it in the back of the net.

They have time to get it right. The girls were playing in an under-12 league where the emphasis is on exercise, fundamentals and sportsmanship rather than all-affirming victory.

But the coaches still took it to heart, one of them being me. I have been coaching my two oldest daughters and their peers for nine seasons now. Along the gesticulating way, I have lost some of my zeal (I used to force Zidane videos on them), but none of my appreciation for being able to share a slice of their lives and teach them a game I was once convinced I knew a great deal about. That belief is no longer bedrock, and I now know that having played goalkeeper as a youth and having covered Real Madrid and Barcelona and a couple of World Cups as a journalist are no passports to a winning record.

For a simple game requiring little equipment, soccer can be a cipher: one where the chemistry set can start producing ominous smoke in a hurry and one where pushing the buttons that worked last year does not mean they are going to work this time around. All sportswriters should really be required to run this gantlet, because even if we know that we could never play like the people we critique for a living, some of us are convinced deeper down that we could coach like the people we critique for a living.

Somewhere in my shaken soul, I might still believe it. But for now and surely quite a bit longer, I'm settling for surfing the Internet for shooting drills, rolling out the balls and reading the minds and motivations of preteens, which seem much easier to decrypt than the intangibles of the age group that comes next. I have coached the under-8s, the u-10s, the u-12s and the u-14s, and the u-12s feel like a happy way station before the climb grows steeper.

The girls are old enough to grasp some essentials of the game, and fast and coordinated enough to make the essentials look pretty good at times. Yet they are still young enough to place their trust happily in adult authority without a lot of talking back, or even nonviolent resistance. The fact that puberty usually has not quite kicked in yet also seems to help with the concentration. U-14 practices can screech to a halt as soon as boys (boys!) come within periscope range of the field.

U-12 practices are more likely to break down over the sudden emergence of an Australian Shepherd or, in this semirural part of the Northeast, a horse. But the u-12s quickly get back to playing the game, and they can still shake off defeat with a lot more equanimity (and dignity) than their coaching staff.

I drive off clenching the steering wheel as if I am on a mountain road with no guard rail, replaying the second-half substitutions in my head. They drive off in the back seat of the family van, already living and laughing in the present. That is as it should be. Making the playoffs is nowhere near as important as making the effort or getting a cider doughnut afterward. And though I can get wrapped up in the formations and the standings, the real reward for me over the last few years, other than getting to spend extra time with my daughters, has been plunging back into the pure waters of sport.

Way down here at this unsullied level, you remember why you fell for it all in the first place. There is the empowerment of mastering a new skill, the sense of belonging to something just a bit bigger and the elemental thrills of chasing and being chased.

There is also the eau de cologne of freshly cut grass that does not yet smell like the opium of the people. Back at the surface, it is too easy to keep running into the oil slicks generated by big money, doping scandals, exploited prodigies and tribalism gone too far. But way down here, at the end of another up-and-down season where no jobs or business plans were on the line, it feels as if there are still values worth transmitting; still plenty of sport for sport's sake and fun for fun's sake to be had.

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