

Sent to Play on the Other Team

Josef San Dou

The star player on the soccer team that season was my six-year-old son, Jack. As the team's coach, I once made him play on the opposing team. I have been asked, why did you do that? And what happened when you did?

In our soccer league, the teams of the same age group often have their practices at the same time. Ours is U-6 team with players from age four to six. We usually use the last 30 minutes of field time to play a scrimmage game with another team. As unofficial games, scrimmages are another form of practice, but of course with a more serious feeling tone about them than when the team practices by itself.

This particular day, we were going to play scrimmage against a team we had beaten every time we scrimmaged that season. It also happened that this team was short of players that day, something that had never happened before. We could not have a scrimmage if one of the teams was short of players.

I explained to the boys and girls on my team that the other team needed one more player. I asked which one of them was willing to play on the other team so we could have our scrimmage. No volunteers. So I told my son Jack to go over to the other team. He didn't want to, but I pushed him to agree. He went grudgingly.

Once the game got underway, Jack played just as if he were playing on his own team, giving it his best. History was made that day: his goals won the game for the other team, its first-ever win. Afterwards, Jack got an unhappy earful from his teammates. Even his then-four-year-old sister, a first-year soccer player and spectator of the whole event, gave him a chiding look for causing his team's defeat. With all that pressure, he was very sheepish about it afterward. I just smiled to see all the commotion. Later, I pulled Jack aside and mentioned to him that he did a good job and had played really well. He seemed to feel better about it.

That other team had a lot more experience with feeling sheepish, but not about winning. With no wins in their record till that day, it was always obvious to me how discouraged its members felt before a game. It was great for them to win that scrimmage, and to have the encouragement that came with it.

And that kind of encouragement is what my coaching philosophy is all about. It explains why I chose Jack to play on the other team when no one would volunteer. The way I put a team together is based on balance of strength, and I want to have two teams with equal strength. Although that day was the only time I sent a player over to another team, I work for such balance in all our games. I don't want other teams to feel discouraged that they lose all the time. It is an attempt to shift the strength when things are out of balance. That way, all the kids from both teams can have an enjoyable and exciting game.

The last official game of that season happened to be against this same team that Jack had played for. But this time, Jack played for his original team. By half time, we were up 4-0 with Jack doing most of the scoring. I held Jack back in the second half and let others play. This way, both teams had an exciting game in the second half. The game ended with a tied score. I was happy to see both teams having fun. Even though there is score-keeping, I want to keep the balance between the two objectives of having fun first and then hopefully winning the game.

The players' experiences and perspectives are not the only thing to balance: there are also the parents and the grandparents of the players. They want a good game, too. They come to root for their kids and they want them to be successful. Understandably, they don't want to see their kids cry when they fail.

For teaching soccer skills to kids aged four to six, I have only two expectations: that they learn the correct kicking techniques, and that they learn to kick the ball to the right direction. You know, sometimes they kick the ball to their own goal! It takes practice. Coaching is like gardening. You plant the seeds in the ground by teaching the kids the right kicking technique; you water it by regular repetitive practice; and then you hope they will continue to grow and produce beautiful flowers that are going to bloom some day.

Just as each kind of plant is cared for differently, the way I deal with each player is also different. I evaluate each player's strengths and weaknesses and try to empower them from there. Some players learn faster than others, but I believe each player has his or her time to bloom. This past fall season, we had a player who didn't do anything but play with the grass both during practice and during the game. Her parents were so discouraged that they wanted her to quit after our second game of the season. But with eight games to go, I encouraged them to give her a chance at least till the end of season and see how she did. So, she kept coming to practice, and in the last two games, she came around and played really well. Both she and her parents were really happy about it. Their patience paid off. I was proud of her.

Patience is another important element in teaching these kids in the early years of playing. The principle is really the same as for gardening: to patiently water the seeds and young plants so that flowers can bloom someday. In its own time, the flower will bloom.

In a way this is really my approach to life, including the way I manage at work: I identify the strengths and weaknesses of each person and assign them at the right post so things work effectively. Well, it is like any sport, say football: you cannot expect a lineman to play as a wide receiver or vice versa. But if everybody plays according to their strengths and plays in the right position, you will have a good team. I am biased of course, but I think we also have a good team in the department where I manage.

My motive for having a good team is really to have a good time. When I was growing up in Indonesia, I played soccer almost every day. Between chores we had to do, playing soccer was our main avenue to have fun. Winning or losing are just byproducts of the game. If you win, you win, and if you lose, you lose. We didn't really emphasize winning or losing. We just had fun.

In Indonesia back then, we didn't have a system like here in the U.S. Starting kids playing soccer at very young ages in an organized league is an excellent system. But the system will work only if we are patient and realistic about kids' ability and timing of development. Quite often, parents have unrealistic expectations. Understandably they want their kids' team to win. But in my opinion, this makes it hard for kids. This will be even worse if the coach has the same mentality. Let the kids grow and as the saying goes, winning is not the only thing.

The focus of the game should be enjoyment of the game itself. If you play without any pressure or expectation to win, most of the time you will win the game. When you try to play with the intent to win, more often you lose the game, and quite often it hurts more. It's better to approach the game just for the love and enjoyment of the game itself. It's like watching the flowers in your garden. Of course you want them to bloom right away, but that's not going to happen. Just enjoy the moment and in their own time, the flowers will bloom. As I say often, winning or losing are just byproducts of playing a game. It goes back to balancing the team, having the enjoyment of enjoying the game, rather than the winning of the game. That's the real win.

My son Jack has never asked to be sent over to an opposing team since that day when I forced him to. Just as in any sport team, there is a tribal energy in a team, a sense of belonging there, especially because they practice together so much. In his team's case, with Jack being the best player, I found they relied on him a lot. So it was a good opportunity for them to have to do without him that day. They got to rely on themselves and have a chance to break the habit of relying on the star to win the game. When we take the star out, we can see others develop. And that's what this soccer gardening can do really well, when we approach it with the aim of keeping the strengths and weaknesses balanced: Develop our kids so they can bloom.

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