



### ***Why play is such an important aspect of developing creativity Letting your players explore, learn, and perform***

During my interactions with soccer teams and coaches in Tennessee, I have been startled by the increasing interest in creativity as a core element of a soccer education. This attitude demonstrates Tennessee is committed to become a world class soccer hub and one of the crown jewels in the budding USA soccer tradition. As I observed sessions, the coaches were working hard to bring creativity to their practice. Nevertheless, it struck me that there is a need to give the professionals the right tools and training so they are able to maximize the creativity of their players.

Coaching creativity need not be a difficult or impossible task. You could even say that it is child's play when you really think about it. We must remember there is a long and entrenched tradition of stifling creativity in the US Soccer culture. This is not a malaise that affects the USA alone. Even in my home continent (Europe), some traditional clubs have successfully coached the creativity out of their young players by giving them endless drills and rules to follow. Soccer is the poorer for such approaches. I came to Tennessee with a view that the only way we could bring glory to this emerging soccer tradition is to encourage creativity.

### ***What does encouraging creativity mean?***

Let us first get the misconceptions out of the way. There is a place for techniques, tactics and physical fitness in soccer. Let us not kid ourselves: an overweight, out of shape soccer player is never going to win the world cup no matter how much creativity they have. However, it is a given that these things are always part of the soccer education. What I am suggesting is we add something more. Players should be encouraged to build their imagination and creativity by actually allowing them to play the game. You cannot learn soccer by studiously examining a literature review of the game. That is for academics. The soccer players must be allowed to play.

Players must have innovative strategies for dealing with problems in the game. Why not allow them to solve those problems? We have small sided problem-solving games for that very purpose. A player that has been exposed to the rigors, risks and challenges of dealing with the field in match play will develop that sought-after quality called flair. Nobody wants to watch robotic players who occasionally score goals by following dogmatic schemas which were developed 20 years ago. Remember that we in the soccer family have a responsibility to engage with our audiences. How are you going to get the fans engaged if you are churning out unimaginative, uncreative and thoroughly dull players?

### ***Players with flair are the real deal***

Unless you have been living under a rock, you cannot fail to recognize names like Lionel Messi, Diego Maradona, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Pele. These are the legends of modern soccer and they are partly admired because they have that special quality known as flair. Fans are no longer interested in predictably mediocre performances. The only firm prediction in any game should be that players will bring something new and exciting to the game. Now think about this: all those soccer legends did their time and produced their own inspiring stories...but we now have to produce the generation that will take their place.

This is precisely why coaches must prioritize the creativity aspect of soccer education. We really have no choice but to let the players play and inspire every ounce of imagination and flair that they can muster. I know for a fact the coaching hours have increased with time and yet the quality of the output is not always increasing. That alone is already a warning sign something is not quite right. We have to be able to show results for the valiant work that we are doing as coaches. Even the lay people are beginning to catch up on the fact that soccer is increasingly becoming a boring endeavor for many young people. The kids do the same things over and over again, until they eventually decide to do something else that is a bit more exciting than soccer drills. Perhaps this is why large percentages of players drop out of soccer by the age of 13.

### ***Do not lose the power of deliberate and spontaneous play***

We know that all animals (including humans and non-humans) learn through play. The lion cub will never learn to stalk unless it stalks its playmates in childhood. Likewise, the child that rarely gets in contact with the ball is unlikely to ever develop into a soccer genius. Soccer is a 'doing' game as well as being a thinking game. You have to get those players on the field, as many times as possible. If you want to get them creative, you must also allow them to play spontaneously and solve the problems they encounter. You the coach then step in when the player indicates through communication or even through their progress that something needs to be addressed.

Creativity calls for expression and expressiveness. When we talk about physical literacy, some coaches mistakenly consider this to be a call to arms for all the gym rats out there. Physical literacy is about preparing the player's body so that it is able to execute the moves they need to execute in order to solve problems on the field. Physicality is not a stand-alone objective of itself when it comes to soccer education. Yes, you need to be physical, but physical fitness is not the sum of soccer.

### ***From the basics and towards creative output***

Ensure that your players know the basics about how soccer is played, the rules of the game and have bodies that are prepared to play. Then, you should step back and let them play in small sided games that challenge their problem-solving capabilities. As they learn to solve problems, they become better and unique players. Think of this in terms of training a great singer. The late Aretha Franklin knew how to sing, but there are many other people who know how to sing without reaching the greatness that she achieved. You can learn all your notes, scales and build up your stamina but if you don't have that special quality...nobody is buying your stuff.

Above all, empower your players to solve problems. Let them know they can, and should, do it because they were born with the insatiable curiosity to learn they have all shown with waking, talking and reading by the age of 6. Quite often, the fear of the unknown holds back potential stars. They think the game is only for some strangely athletic people from exotic places. I am here to tell you that there is a Ronaldo, Messi and Pele in Tennessee today. All we have to do as coaches is to ensure that that hidden star comes out and shines in this sport. Expose the players to the challenges of playing the game and you will be surprised at what they can achieve.

### ***Here are three key ingredients for coaching creativity***

If you really want to coach creativity through play, make sure that all your sessions incorporate three critical elements. These include "engagement", "interest" and "curiosity". These elements all basically drive towards a situation of accelerated and enhanced learning where nothing else matters but learning how to play soccer. It is the high art and science of the game. By creating the right conditions and providing the right support; you can create an environment in which all these elements are present. If we do this we will produce legendary soccer players of our own here in Tennessee.