

# Fun & Games-Are Parents Getting Their Money's Worth

By, Sam Snow

M.A. - Physical Education

Is it possible for youth players to have FUN at a training session playing games? Can the parents feel like they are getting their money's worth from such a coaching approach? Will players develop their talents if FUN is the centerpiece of each training session?



A fun environment during training sessions helps to open a player's mind. The misconception some coaches have is that if a team training session has fun at its center then nothing productive is being done; that the mood of the session is laissez-faire. This may be true of the coach who has lost control and succumbs to the plea to "scrimmage." Of course the players make this request when the training session is dull and too work-like. Unfortunately very few coaches try to correct it. The majority take the easy way out by simply organizing eleven-a-side games. This is in no one's interest. The majority of the children will be uninvolved for long periods, their contact with the ball will be minimal and they become bored. All players, no matter what age they may be, want to have fun playing soccer. For children this is doubly true. Players learn more when they are having fun and are engrossed with the challenges of a proper training session. A training session can be organized, purposeful and still be fun.

Misbehavior is indicative of a training session riddled with drills. Drills are a death-knell for a coach during a team session. Drills have players in lines waiting for their turn to kick the ball one time and then go to the back of the line. Naturally the players get bored with this approach to coaching. They then divert their attention to non-soccer matters or they get into pushing and shoving matches to butt up in the line in order to have another chance at touching the

ball. Additionally drills do not require the players to make decisions. Player decisions turn into tactics as the players' age. Thinking is a critical part of becoming a good soccer player. Players who anticipate the action not merely react to it! Using drills stifles development, leads to player dropout and dulls player creativity. Finally there is little transference from drills in practice to a self-reliant player in a match.

Activities instead should be done at a training session. An activity involves all of the players in action and thinking. An activity may have many soccer balls involved not just one with players standing and waiting for a turn to kick it. Here are the questions a coach should ask to determine if the exercise you have planned is a drill or an activity.

1. Are the activities fun?
2. Are the activities organized?
3. Are the players involved in the activities?
4. Is creativity and decision making being used?
5. Are the spaces used appropriate?
6. Is the coach's feedback appropriate?
7. Are there implications for the game?

Using activities that are "game-like" at training sessions helps to develop skillful, physically fit, tactically aware and passionate players. First a coach needs to know the difference between practice and a training session. Practice is something players should be encouraged to do on their own time. This can be a player alone or with one or two friends. Practice is rote repetition; i.e., the player kicking the ball against a wall. There is value in practice. Players do need repetition to learn a technique. However, when the team is together the approach must be to have a training session. A training session is dynamic, involves correct feedback from the coach and activities. A good coach during a training session **avoids** the three Ls. The three Ls are

- Lines
- Laps
- Lectures

A good training session involves decision making by individual players and groups of players. Coaches can use a variety of "game-like" activities to create a challenging environment during training where learning, excitement and imagination are present.

What we should teach players is how to think flexibly, to be mindful of all the different possibilities of every situation and not close themselves off from information that could help them. Being mindful, using imagination and creativity to learn what works best for you, is what makes the difference between an average player and a champion. When players see that there's more than one technical or tactical solution to each situation, they become mindful.

But many coaches and players operate mindlessly, pursuing routines (drills) rather than looking for new details around them. It's important for players to be in control of their game and the way to control is to be in the active process of mastering some aspect of soccer. It's in the mastering that the



mindfulness comes to the player. If players and coaches realize that much of the burnout they experience is the result of mindless over rhythmization (drills), turnover goes down by a third. Soccer development can be simply a matter of setting and solving problems. Clearly the coach who can set problems and also guide a player towards appropriate solutions has an advantage. But any coach with imagination can set problems and guide players towards possible answers.

Younger players learn to play the game by playing small-sided games with fewer and simpler rules. Try to conclude each training session with small-sided games. This could be anything from 3 versus 3 to 8 versus 8. Small-sided games should take place during the last ten to twenty minutes of training, depending upon the age group. The training session will go from simple to complex activities.

- ◆ Warm-up (1<sup>st</sup> activity)
- ◆ 2<sup>nd</sup> activity - alone & in small groups
- ◆ 3<sup>rd</sup> activity - group activity on cooperation
- ◆ 4<sup>th</sup> activity - group activity on competition
- ◆ 5<sup>th</sup> activity - 4 v 4 games with conditions
- ◆ Cool-down (6<sup>th</sup> activity)

Simple principles, professional organization, appropriate incentives, and unlimited encouragement...any coach worth the name can hardly fail.

*“What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing.”*

*Aristotle                      Nicomachean Ethics II. i.*

*For more information how to train youth players  
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