

Teaching *True Soccer*[™] to Children

By Rich Badmington

Conceptual Foundation

Youth soccer games don't look like professional soccer games. The strategies and organization that work for the pros are often impossible to recognize among less skilled, less experienced, less physically mature players.

So, if one of our goals is to teach the game "right", and enable children to enjoy winning at the same time, what is a youth coach to do?

Many coaches appear to struggle between two, equally unsatisfactory answers:

1. Coach in the manner they understand to be the "right way" – laying a foundation of good technique – and *lose* ... a lot.
2. Or take the expedient route to victory: *accentuate* the gap between what works in the advanced game and what you can get away with at the youth level. *Teach* players techniques and tactics that seem to work now – like booting the ball up the field, or "locking" defenders to the line at the top of the penalty area. Of course unskilled and inexperienced opponents often succumb to these tactics that would prove disastrous at an advanced level. These coaches simply acknowledge, ignore, or are perhaps unaware of the fact that players soon will have to *unlearn* these approaches if they are to succeed at higher levels.

"... even the youngest players can be introduced to "true soccer" – the same kind of game the pros play. And even if they can't execute like the pros, they still can prevail or remain competitive while trying to play the right way."

Isn't there a third, better choice?

Yes! And this is the cornerstone – the thesis – of the coaching tips provided here. These recommendations are built on the premise that even the youngest players can be introduced to "true" soccer – the same kind of game the pros play. And even if they can't execute like the pros, they still can prevail or remain competitive while trying to play the right way. In fact, they can succeed in *many* ways, perhaps the most important of which is that they won't waste years learning and *unlearning* ... but instead they'll be *building* and growing as players. And by keeping frustration to a minimum and maximizing success, more players will stay with the game longer because of the joy it delivers.

Not only can young players learn the right game, but teaching it right isn't as difficult as we may think. In fact, there are a handful of core concepts – which we'll refer to as "Power Tools" – that are easy to teach and which together give young players essential keys to unlock the secrets to the mature game. This website explores how.

Essential Understanding

This approach – “*True Soccer*” – delivers understanding young players need in order to comprehend and immediately apply soccer behaviors wholly consistent with the advanced game; performance undistorted by understanding gaps or intermediate coaching devices, stratagems, or “fixes” invented to compensate for (or exploit) physical and mental immaturity.

True Soccer is more likely to test the actual limits of the learner’s athleticism, knowledge, and technique, rather than managing players using artificial “rules” which later must be replaced by new (or “real”) principles that govern the mature game. *True Soccer* concentrates at least as heavily on the mental game – soccer comprehension, if you will – as it does on technique and physical skill.

In a *True Soccer* model, coaches demonstrate often and create purposefully challenging game-like moments for players. Players feel, watch, understand, and experience carefully chosen core elements – Power Tools – that build upon previous knowledge. A loosely sequential series of foundational ideas form a framework onto which physical skills, speed, power, and mental toughness can be built.

True Soccer training exposes children to an extraordinarily broad and advanced array of tactics; good soccer as well as fun training and techniques to succeed in the younger, often distorted game. This training can be replete with pressure, creativity, choices, and most important, a cogent, purposeful appreciation for its application in the real game.

Instead of first learning technique and skills, and *then* learning tactics – the traditional American youth teaching sequence – *True Soccer* immediately begins to broaden young children’s capabilities and knowledge of the game, not waiting until later years. This early commitment to recasting abstract tactics as tangible, concrete tools children can comprehend and execute, enables children to handle the transition from training to games and exhibit surprisingly abstract tactical proficiency even at a stage of Concrete Operational Thought.

In so doing, *True Soccer* provides every child a better opportunity to sample the same game as the most fortunate children who play and watch the game constantly in communities with a rich culture of soccer.

The program springs from what has happened informally for over a century in these soccer-rich communities, and adapts these practices to America’s organized youth sports environment. *True Soccer* taps the one advantage that organized sports have over pickup, namely, that the instruction can be made far more efficient. *True Soccer* elevates the uneven teaching methods of the playground and creates a coherent, gradual and cumulative training program that can work for every child.

The goal of improving game competence turns out to be inherently gratifying for young players regardless of their ability. Children become better players by experiencing the advanced game. The Power Tools are given meaning and significance through children’s exposure to success in match play. *True Soccer* can reduce the distortion witnessed in the youth game and broaden all children’s soccer capabilities and enjoyment.

The purpose is to create genuine success – *early*. And because “excellence” is also “fun,” two of our highest objectives merge.

The Author:

Rich Badmington is director of coaching for the 2,600-member LTRC soccer program. In addition to being the father of three soccer-playing children, he is a USSF-licensed coach and former assistant men's varsity coach at Columbia University during four years when the team won the Ivy League and participated in the NCAA Division I Final Four. He also served as assistant men's varsity coach at Dartmouth College. Rich's understanding of youth coaching, refined over 10 years of coaching his own children, began during his decade-long tenure as a program director and vice president at two of the country's pioneering soccer camp programs: World Cup Sports, the first company to create a national overnight camp system, and North American Soccer Camps, then the largest provider of day camp programs serving over 25,000 children in 40 states. Rich was an all-conference player and co-captain of the men's varsity team at the University of New Hampshire.