

## **From Chapter 4 of *Game On* by Tom Farrey**

Soccer is often the first sport that kids get signed up to play. Parents figure, What's it take? Running? Kicking? Any little kid can do that. They're urged on by the American Youth Soccer Organization, which knocked down its starting age from 5 years old to 4 in 2004, for no reason other than to build the customer base and keep kids from committing to other sports. Problem is, rarely do volunteer coaches at the lower levels have enough knowledge to create a practice session that hits on both fun and fundamentals, so kids get placed in lines and perform drills. And often, formal games are scheduled, which inevitably promotes the assigning of positions, tactical play—and parents on both sidelines screaming instructions that kids often cannot appreciate.

Scholars who have studied child development have found that most children only begin around age 8 to develop the cognitive and social abilities necessary to understand the complex relationships in competitive, action-oriented team sports. Sports sociologist Jay Coakley notes that parents and volunteer coaches often plead loudly with children to “Stay in position!” or “Get back where you belong!” without realizing kids' brains just aren't formed that way yet. Understanding the concept of positional play asks that a participant do three things simultaneously: Mentally visualize where his teammates and opponents are on the field at a given moment, assess their relationships to one another and the ball, and decide where he or she needs to be. Most children do not fully develop these skills until 12. Adults “mistakenly think that children are not concentrating or trying hard,” Coakley says. “This frustrates children who are doing the best they can at their level of psychosocial development.” Many of the frustrated kids quit the game.

Those who stay often lose out, too.

“A coach of a team of 8- or 10-year-olds might have great intentions, but what's the first thing they feel they need to do? Organize and manage,” says Bob Jenkins, director of coaching education and youth development at U.S. Soccer. “That's not what kids need at that age. These well-meaning adults feel like they have to manage things so the other team doesn't score on them. They plant a defender 18 yards from their goal and have him kick the ball downfield. Well, that may work when kids are young, and his team may get a trophy at the end of season. But the player doesn't learn how to move forward.

After a few years, he might be fast and physical, but there's a lack of comfort with the ball. Yes, you need mental toughness in soccer, and you need to be a smart thinker. But you also have to have good feet. If you look at Zinedine Zidane and Thierry Henry, the magic is in what they do with the ball."

U.S. Soccer is starting to recognize that its grass can only grow so high if the roots are overwatered with adult-style competition. In 2006, a few months before the World Cup, the organization published a paradigm-shifting, 70-page document compiled by Jenkins that essentially begs coaches to turn the game over to the fertile minds of children. Called "Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States," it attempts to find a place for loosely structured play within the society's need for adult oversight. "Coaches can often be more helpful to a young player's development by organizing less, saying less, and allowing the players to do more," the document advises. "Set up a game and let the kids play. Keep most of your comments for before and after practice and during water breaks. Comments should be kept short and simple. Be comfortable organizing a session that looks like pickup soccer."

Detailed recommendations are offered for each age group, beginning with kindergartners. No organized games through second grade, just three-on-three scenarios in practice. No lines, no laps, and no discussions about "commitment." Just one game a weekend through fourth grade, with no tournaments and rosters small enough to allow for close to 100 percent playing time for everyone. No assigning of players into specific positions until the teenage years.

"We have a tendency to overcoach kids in this country, and part of it is the culture," says Ivan Gazidis, deputy commissioner of Major League Soccer. "The idea that the game is improvised from moment to moment is alien to most people who grew up on football and baseball, sports that are less chaotic and less player-driven. Maybe the easiest way to win at an early age is to punt the ball downfield, have some big kid cross it, and another big kid head it in. But that doesn't develop a player. When I coach my kids' teams, people look at me like I'm crazy, because they know I'm involved in pro soccer and yet I'm not trying to impose structure on them. I don't insist on positional play. I want them to work it out."

“Making the quarterfinals of the 2002 World Cup was an anomaly,” says Gary Allen, who holds the same position as Jenkins with Virginia’s state soccer association. “Bruce Arena did a great job of getting the team ready to play that year but just about every major star in the world was injured or coming off injury except Ronaldo of Brazil. Then 2006 comes along, and we say, ‘What happened?’ Nothing happened. I was at a training session right before Bruce named the final team. He had 40 cookie-cutter players to choose from. Most of them were huge, but there was no creativity, no ability to adjust and solve problems. And that’s because since they were young they’ve been told that speed trumps all.”

There are a few American prospects who don’t fit that mold, among them Benny Feilhaber—who was born in Brazil. The young midfielder supplied what was hailed as the best goal in U.S. Soccer history when he picked a volley out of the air on a corner kick and sent the ball screaming through a pack of players and into the Mexican goal for the winner in the 2007 Gold Cup final. He moved to California when he was 6, but he regards those first few years in the land of samba soccer as critical in forming his concept of the game.

There’s also Freddy Adu. When Allen first scouted Adu, the 10-year-old was lighting up the fields of the Washington, D.C., area with his footwork. By 13, he was enrolled at the federation’s under-17 residency program in Florida (which was created after the U.S. finished last at the ’98 World Cup). On April 3, 2004, when Adu was drafted by the D.C. United of Major League Soccer, the 14-year-old midfielder became the youngest athlete to play in an American professional team sport since Fred Chapman played baseball for Philadelphia of the American Association in 1887. As Adu’s 17th birthday approached, he was not yet polished enough to make Arena’s World Cup roster—no one that young ever has locked down a spot. But his technical mastery of the ball remains superior. And for that, he gives credit to the system in which he was groomed during his first eight years.

Which was no system at all.

Before Adu immigrated in fourth grade with his family to the U.S., he lived in a town called Tema, in Ghana—the same nation whose team would send the U.S. packing at the ’06 World Cup. No one formally introduced Adu to soccer. No one taught him any

moves. Instead, he kicked balls made of socks around the neighborhood lot, an unruly patch of sand, rocks, and broken glass that the locals called Stone Park. “You had to keep the ball in control at all times,” Adu tells me. “The field was so bad and uneven you had to keep it close to you.” He never played organized ball, as there were no leagues for kids under the age of 14. Just impromptu games of five-on-five, sometimes overseen by teenagers on the block who had, you might say, a different sort of rooting interest than American soccer moms and dads do. “In all honesty, the older guys probably were gambling when they were picking the teams,” Adu laughs. “I was the first pick every time.” The teenagers complimented him constantly—which made him only want to play more.

There’s a saying in soccer: Let the game be your teacher. “We’d be right up with the rest of the world if we did that,” says Adu, who now plays with one of the top European clubs, Benfica in Portugal. “It’s too structured in the U.S. If you’re telling kids to do one, two touches, and pass—when they get older, they can’t learn the game. You don’t create superstars that way. Plus it’s just boring. That’s why I think kids get to a certain age and say, ‘I don’t want to play soccer anymore.’ They’re just not able to have fun. You shouldn’t get yelled at if you express yourself and lose the ball.”