

# ABRAHAMS: USSF CHANGES YOUTH SOCCER

Dan Abrahams

## US Soccer Player Development Initiatives

GoalNation's columnist **Dan Abrahams** shares his insights and advice for success on the soccer field for players of all ages. A global sport psychologist and author specializing in soccer, Abrahams is based in England and works with professional soccer players in the [English Premier League \(EPL\)](#). Abrahams has helped hundreds of soccer players – many of them who play in the English Premier League (EPL) and others who play across Europe. A recent example of his work includes helping Yannick Bolasie make an enormous impact on the EPL for Crystal Palace. Abrahams has held contracts with QPR, Fulham, and West Ham among other clubs and works quietly, behind the scenes with many coaches from top clubs across Europe.

**So a revolution is coming to soccer in the U.S and I for one am looking keenly from across the Atlantic to see how things work out.**

*Jurgen Klinsmann, the Head Coach for the U.S. Men's National Team believes we must do more to help our youth develop. Now, U.S. Soccer Federation changes youth soccer and next year, the landscape will look very different.*

*Who knew U.S. Soccer would mandate change? Now, stepping up to end the controversy on what is right, U.S. Soccer will make youth soccer better – especially for players ages 6 to 12 (the Zone 1 environment) where there has been too much emphasis on winning and not enough on developing player skills.*

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### Change is happening ...

So a revolution is coming to soccer in the U.S and I for one am looking keenly from across the Atlantic to see how things work out for you guys.

The changes being proposed by US Soccer are compelling and courageous. They argue that at the 6-12 age groups there is too much importance placed on winning at the expense of individual development. They are concerned that coaches overly emphasise teaming players as opposed to helping players have fun and develop individual skills. The organisation wants young players to have fun and to express themselves. They want players to learn in an environment that contains smaller sides and smaller pitches.

*I have to say that as an Englishman, I'm scared. I'm scared because I'm envisioning a different future as a result of these changes by US Soccer.*

This future no longer contains a US National team who comes to Wembley stadium as the underdogs.

I can see a US team brimming with developed talent – multi-million dollar players who play at some of the leading clubs in the world. I can see the English players chasing shadows as the opposition pass and move with speed, deal with confined spaces with ease, and demonstrate close ball control like they were born with a soccer ball attached to their feet.

Soccer coaches and soccer parents of the U.S. I am scared. The move that US Soccer is making is a step towards your global dominance of the beautiful game. Give their ideas your full support and maybe, just maybe within 3 or 4 World Cups you will be the world's greatest soccer nation in the men's game as well as the women's.

In this two part article I'm going to give you the reasons why I support the move for a shift in coaching philosophy, the use of smaller pitches and an emphasis on smaller sided games? Let me begin with the new approach to coaching – rationalising the need to win.

### **Developing Players in America**

US Soccer has stated that no 10 year old has ever been in a World Cup team, so why treat them the same way as a player who is in his or her mid-twenties. It's a fair point. But there are so many other reasons as to why coaches and parents need to get off the 'win at all costs' treadmill.

| *Firstly, it's easy to win in soccer. Yes folks, sorry but it is.*

You're not a great coach just because your under 10 team won the local league. And your young son or daughter isn't destined for a top European or MLS team just because he or she has greatly contributed to a winning under 8 side.

Teaching young players to win isn't dynamic coaching. Here's how to win in soccer. Hoof the ball forward, get it away from your own goal and towards your opposition's goal. There you go, simple.

One problem though – the players aren't developing skill and they're not improving their game intelligence. They aren't going to get much better because they're not being given the opportunity to get touches on the ball, to pass at all angles and areas of the pitch, and to move and find space in a manner that the leading players on the planet have to make. They don't have the opportunity to improve their decision making. They're certainly not having much fun given that most of the time they're not actively involved in touching the ball.

Here's another way to win at a very young age. Do what we do so well in England – get the big kids in, make it physical and win with muscle. There you go, simple. Recruit the right 10 year olds and bingo, you've got a winning side. You don't have to be a strong communicator, you don't have to develop listening skills or empathy. You don't have to help young players develop ownership of their game. You don't have to know how to help players manage distraction, increase self-efficacy, manage their athletic identity.

I mean, why bother with the complex stuff. Just get the big boys and girls and smash it forward. If you do that you'll go and beat Barcelona under 10's and **Bayern Munich** under 10's and then you the coach can be a local hero. You the soccer parent can be proud mom or dad to a player who constantly plays for the winning side. But that success is fleeting. Your young players will become bored and leave the game. And they won't develop into the kind of players that can beat Barcelona and Bayern Munich first teams – a time when winning counts so much more!

As a soccer coach and soccer parent it's imperative to see the world through the eyes of your young players. Think about what they want. Think about how they can best enjoy the game, learn improve and develop.

## **Coach, Mom, Dad – I Wanna Have Fun!**

Yes, you've guessed it. The kids first and foremost want to have fun. That's why they play soccer. A recent study completed by the English FA found that the most common reason why young players play soccer is because they want to have fun and be with friends. Simple! Let them do that.

## **Coach, Mom, Dad – I like to win anyway!**

Young people like to win anyway. They're competitive. So you don't need to insist on the notion of winning. You don't need to reinforce it. They'll play the new small sided games and strive to win – even in this different format. But they'll do it in an environment that helps them learn the craft of laying skilful soccer.

Kids naturally play to win and when they lose they are disappointed. But hey, this doesn't last long. Kids are real good at putting things in perspective – an important quality to have as you make your way through the minefield that is life (and something we can lose throughout adulthood!) They're soon distracted and off doing something else with their mates. And that's fine. That doesn't mean that they don't want to do well. It doesn't mean that they are going to grow up without a keen sense of competitiveness.

## **Coach, Mom, Dad – isn't this about me, not you?**

You can't force wins. You can't force ability. You can't force scholarships. You can't force professional careers. Just let them play. If they want to keep playing because they have fun so let them keep playing. If they start to become real good support them with love and care and affection and the right level of attention to detail. This doesn't mean that a 10 year old should have a whole team of experts around him or her. Just let them take part and they may improve. And that needs to be ok.

## **Coach, Mom, Dad – You're stressing me out!**

The more you insist that winning is important the more you will stress them out. Just think about it. The more we insist "you gotta win, this is so important, big game. You gotta win". Do you think they'll play with fun and freedom and focus with this kind of message? Or do you think they'll play tight and tense?

The stressed player never fulfils potential. The stressed player burns out. The stressed player doesn't take risk. The stressed player keeps things overly simple so he or she won't look foolish or stupid or risk a loss for the team.

## **The Result is Always There.**

It's ok to have a result in soccer. It can be there in a passing drill, and it can be there in a small sided game. It can be there every time a young player sets foot on the soccer pitch.

Just don't make a big deal about it. And certainly don't base your coaching or parental philosophy on it. Help young players strive to win whilst developing skill. Help them strive to win whilst developing game intelligence. But above all help them have fun and play with an unabashed freedom that helps them become lifelong learners in soccer and in other activities.

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**Dan Abrahams** is a global sport psychologist specializing in soccer. He is based in England and has some of the leading turn-around stories and case studies in English Premier League history.

Abrahams is sought after by players, coaches and managers across Europe and his 2 soccer psychology books are international bestsellers. He is formerly a professional golfer, is Lead Psychologist for England Golf and he holds a degree in psychology and masters degree in sport psychology.