



COVER PHOTO: CHRIS RUSSELL

THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

By Rik Tod Johnson // Exclusive to Cal South Soccer

Ask Bob Schwarz to define what makes coaching younger kids unique, and he will tell you about the ladybugs.

"Last spring, while many of our girls were only four years old, I had them play in our off-season spring league," recalled Schwarz, a coach with Laguna Niguel Youth Soccer Association's burgeoning recreational program. "We were the youngest team, none of the girls had ever played before, and we were getting beat badly each game. In the middle of our fourth or fifth game, my girls saw ladybugs in the grass and started to look for them, not interested in the game going on right around them. At one point, the ball rolled right by them. The girls looked up, saw the opposing team running by and finally realized they were playing a soccer game. They jumped up and started chasing.

"After the game, I sat the girls down and I told them how proud I was of how they played. All the parents gathered around to hear my speech. I told the girls we won the game, 8-4 (even though the other team scored 15 goals and we only scored a single, charitable goal). The girls were excited, but the parents were puzzled. How could it be that the coach was telling the girls they had won? What I continued to say was, we won 8-4... we collected 8 ladybugs during the game to only 4 ladybugs collected by the other team. The parents laughed and the girls were happy. In their minds, we had won."

Every coach who is involved in teaching soccer to kids eight years old and younger can probably recount many scenes strikingly similar to Bob Schwarz' tale of the ladybug hunt. The child might be pulling up grass sitting apart from the action, staring at a dog or a cloud in the distance, or simply getting lost in his or her own imagination, while the game goes on around them. Whatever the distraction, the point is, no matter how much many parents wish to believe their child is going to immediately excel at a sport from the first kick, soccer is not usually a priority for the child at this age. Unlike the older, more competitive ages where most of the kids are those who truly wish to engage in the sport, kids eight and younger are not necessarily directly focused yet on soccer as a sport, but rather see the field as just another playground, regardless of activity.

"When I work with young kids, my goal is that they enjoy the sport and will want to continue playing as they get older," stated Chris Ramos, a head coach with Legends FC, who also has a background in Human Development and Child Psychology. "A younger child who has lost interest and is chasing butterflies will be allowed to do so; that is what is important to him at that moment."

"The chief goal of having kids play at such young ages is to encourage them to play the game of soccer and have as much fun as possible," said Steve Hoffman, Cal South's Director of Coaching and Player Development. "With ages under six, it's just about putting the kids on a field as a group and having them understand which goal is theirs to score in and which goal is the other team's. At this age, the kids tend to run about like a swarm of bees, all tucked into one mass, and they tend to have a hard time with changes

of direction, such as when the goals switch at halftime. The main thing is that these kids learn about having fun in a safe, social environment and will hopefully have enough fun to want to return next season."

Cal South's Coaching Education department fully stresses to its coaches that there are vital, and often subtle, differences between what children even a couple of years apart in age are capable of learning on the soccer field. Cal South's coaching program for younger recreational players is broken into two different categories: Youth Module 1 (YM1) is specifically designed for kids aged eight and younger, while Youth Module 3 (YM3) is for coaches of U10 and U12 players. Cal South's Youth Module courses are taught by instructors who hold a US Soccer National Youth ("Y") license. "The YM courses are mini versions of the National "Y" license just as the "E" license is a mini version of the National "D," said Melinda Darling, a YM instructor with Cal South. "Both are great classes that help coaches in different ways, so the YMs and the "E" are perfect complements to one another with little overlap."

Ken Scott, another Cal South YM instructor, added, "I receive a lot of feedback from parents who have attended the "E" and "D" courses when they coached their older child, but now have a younger child starting soccer. They love the YM course, because much of what they had learned in the other courses doesn't help them much with their new team of 6-year-olds. They love that the YM is filled with activities that they actually need."

Within the YM coaching manual is a section devoted to the differences between U8 and U6 players in matters of cognitive, physical and social development. These differences, once recognized, are easily identifiable when one watches any game by either age group. "By the U8 level, things start to gradually change," said Hoffman. "The "swarm of bees" goes away, and the kids have a better understanding of direction. Kids start to actually pass and dribble the ball, and there is more sharing of the ball with teammates. The concept of an actual team effort starts to sink in."

Ken Scott is adamant about making clear one very important thing to coaches under his tutelage. "I tell the coaches 'know your audience.' They must know that 6-year-olds will not be learning the same things a 15-year-old can. All of the activities at the younger ages should be within the range of what they can learn."

It must be stressed that recreational soccer at these ages is a far different game than the one most people end up getting to know: the more competitive variety where championship trophies are the ultimate goal. For the younger recreational crowd, everything about the sport is much smaller: the fields, the ball, the length of game, but the rewards are possibly far more universal. It is important that each child sees his or her participation as a positive, and due to this, seasonal awards to each child for this are recommended in the YM manual. "Praise the child, not their action," said Ramos. "We must like the child more than their great goal. It is not a great shot we are looking



for; it is a smile and their feeling of accomplishment we strive for. The outcome when it comes to the sport is secondary; their mental well-being is first."

Ask any coach what the most frustrating thing about dealing with kids U8 and younger is, and the answer, for numerous reasons, will often come out as "the parents." Ramos pointed out, "Even at this age, [parents] expect me to teach more than the child can take in. They don't understand that before soccer can be taught, a foundation needs to be set; kids have to be engaged and their minds have to be activated. At 4 years of age, they are too young to even consider soccer as their sport." Most coaches agree that parents have a very important primary mission when guiding their child into the world of soccer. "Positive reinforcement," said Chris Russell, a parent who coaches U7 girls for the Brea Soccer Association. "Remember to always be positive towards your children's efforts. Do not be that parent that points out all the things they could have done instead of all the things they did do."

Tied directly into all of this is a wish that the more aggressive parents step back a bit from their obsession over their child becoming the next Ronaldinho, and do something beneficial for their team instead. Vince Neale, a director of coaching with Laguna Niguel Youth Soccer Association, encourages such parents to "get involved as a volunteer and help, or to take a course. If they are not prepared to do that, then they need to remember that the coach does the 'coaching,' and they should just cheer positively without added instruction, and just get the player to the game on time with the proper gear."

This is a common appeal from many coaches: that parents take advantage of Cal South's YM classes to further their soccer knowledge and get involved directly with the game. "Almost all of my volunteer coaches are parents of the kids," said Mark Leeds, director of Laguna Niguel's U5 Mini-Kickers program. "Because we lay out the activities for them each week, it's easy for them to execute the plan. All they need is a half-hour of preparation the night before, and a big smile in the morning. Once these parents see how easy and rewarding coaching can be, they will want to continue to contribute as their child moves up."

Cal South also offers parents who are new to soccer, and who might have questions as to their involvement in it, free parenting courses online via a partnership with Sports Path. Robin Russell, Sports Path's president, maintains that the time is ripe to get parents more involved. "Too often, parents are depicted as a problem. Soccer parents are far from being a problem, but rather, they are an opportunity. The most progressive and successful programs value and nurture their parents."

Michael Rogers, another parent with a child psychology background, noted that "the ideal role of the parent is to nurture all the life lessons and character development opportunities available, build your child's self-esteem, and enjoy watching your child become a better person... a person that knows how to play soccer."



“DO NOT BE THAT PARENT THAT POINTS OUT ALL THE THINGS THEY COULD HAVE DONE INSTEAD OF ALL THE THINGS THEY DID DO”

What better call for soccer-loving parents to get more involved with the sport than that? Whether it's finding out how you can guide your child better through the sports world through a parenting course or diving into a Youth Module class and taking the reins of your child's team, recreational soccer has a place for all parents. Sure, you might start out coaching kids more interested in everything else but the game, but the ultimate rewards will prove to be far bigger than any ladybug.

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT BECOMING A GREAT SOCCER PARENT?

Take advantage of Cal South's FREE Online Parenting Courses! Go to page 12 in the Member Central section of this issue to get more information, or go to CalSouth.com and click on the Free Soccer Parenting Course button on the right hand side of the homepage.

TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT YM COURSES, PLEASE CONTACT CAL SOUTH'S COACHING EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT 714.451.1553 OR GO TO WWW.CALSOUTH.COM/COACHYOUTHSOCCER_OVERVIEW.HTM

CALSOUTH

SOCCER MAGAZINE

VOLUME 05 / NUMBER 2 / NOVEMBER

\$3.95 U.S. / \$4.95 CANADA

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YOUNG REC SOCCER...THE START OF SOMETHING BIG



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CUP CHAMPIONS
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