



How a Soccer Star is Made

An article in the New York Times summarizes the difference between North American soccer and Dutch soccer development – which is typical of most development in Europe. The Dutch are well known to play a style of football (soccer) referred to as “Total Football” which emphasizes very quick, skilled touches and passes on the ball to advance play rather than the kick and chase style typical of North American soccer. The Dutch emphasize the development of the individual, rather than the team – the success of skill development at younger ages rather than tournament and league wins. Practice is more important than games. Interestingly, the elite younger players train only 3 times a week, not unlike here in North America, but they play fewer games and tournaments. In addition, players “play” with the ball on their own much more, perhaps adding hours a week to “informal” training times that we here in North America simply do not do. John Hackworth, the former coach of the U.S. under-17 said, “As a player gets older, the game count just keeps increasing. It’s counterproductive to learning and the No. 1 worst thing we do.”

I reflect that over the past few years, our philosophy and curriculum at the Pickering Soccer Club resembles that of Dutch soccer. “Total Football” style is what we train in our Academy program and futsal. We strive for the highest development of the individual players, as we feel that it serves the player and game best. Through our own Long-Term Player Development model, we emphasize training over games and remind our members to de-emphasize the importance of games (and their outcomes – especially at it pertains to the pressures of league standings and promotion/relegation).

There is one aspect of soccer development in North America vs. Europe and South America that we must debate. Here at home, players typically continue their development at the University or College level. They derive the benefit of education and a post-secondary degree. In most other places in the world, soccer players do not attend post secondary schools; they either stay in academies or play for professional teams or their minor league squads. They forgo an education for a chance to play professional soccer. Our own hockey system in Canada is similar, as players play in the junior leagues then get drafted or continue on to minor professional leagues.

What is better for our kids? Sports only, or sport in University/College? As an educator, I feel that the University/College route is the better one for lifetime success – perhaps we do that better than the Europeans!

Yours in Soccer,

Franco Taverna
Girls Competitive Director
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Excerpts from How a Soccer Star is Made

By MICHAEL SOKOLOVE Published: May 31, 2010, New York Times Magazine.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/magazine/06Soccer-t.html?pagewanted=1>

"In March, I had a seat at the Amsterdam Arena, just across the highway from De Toekomst, to watch the U.S. national team play the Dutch in a "friendly," a pre-World Cup tuneup and test. Thanks to a late goal by the U.S., the final score was only 2-1, in favor of the Dutch, but the match was a version of that old playground game: it's our ball, and you can't play with it. The Dutch zipped it from player to player and from one side of the field to the other while the Americans ran and ran, chasing the ball but rarely gaining control. When the Americans did get the ball, their passes too often flew beyond reach or directly out of bounds.

Other nations and professional clubs around the world play in a manner similar to the Dutch — including, not coincidentally, Barcelona, one of the most consistently successful clubs in Europe, and where Cruyff played after leaving Ajax and then coached for eight seasons. What this type of play demands is the highest order of individual skill: players with a wizardlike ability to control the ball with either foot, any part of the foot, and work it toward the goal through cramped spaces and barely perceptible lanes.

That was only one game, of course, but it seemed to bring into focus what I had been observing at the Ajax youth academy, as well as learning about American soccer. How the U.S. develops its most promising young players is not just different from what the Netherlands and most elite soccer nations do — on fundamental levels, it is diametrically opposed.

Americans like to put together teams, even at the Pee Wee level, that are meant to win. The best soccer-playing nations build individual players, ones with superior technical skills who later come together on teams the U.S. struggles to beat. In a way, it is a reversal of type. Americans tend to think of Europeans as collectivists and themselves as individualists. But in sports, it is the opposite. The Europeans build up the assets of individual players. Americans underdevelop the individual, although most of the volunteers who coach at the youngest level would not be cognizant of that.

The American approach is the more democratic view of sport. The aspirations of each member of the team are equally valid. Elsewhere, there is more comfort with singling out players for attention and individualized instruction, even at the expense of the group. David Endt, a former Ajax player and a longtime executive of the club, told me, "Here, we would rather polish one or two jewels than win games at the youth levels."



Americans place a higher value on competition than on practice, so the balance between games and practice in the U.S. is skewed when compared with the rest of the world. It's not unusual for a teenager in the U.S. to play 100 or more games in a season, for two or three different teams, leaving little time for training and little energy for it in the infrequent moments it occurs. A result is that the development of our best players is stunted. They tend to be fast and passionate but underskilled and lacking in savvy compared with players elsewhere. "As soon as a kid here starts playing, he's got referees on the field and parents watching in lawn chairs," John Hackworth, the former coach of the U.S. under-17 national team and now the youth-development coordinator for the Philadelphia franchise in [Major League Soccer](#), told me. "As he gets older, the game count just keeps increasing. It's counterproductive to learning and the No. 1 worst thing we do."

"There are two ways to become a world-class soccer player. One is to spend hours and hours in pickup games — in parks, streets, alleyways — on imperfect surfaces that, if mastered, can give a competitor an advantage when he finally graduates to groomed fields. This is the Brazilian way and also the model in much of the rest of South America, Central America and the soccer hotbeds of Africa. It is like baseball in the Dominican Republic. Children play all the time and on their own. The other way is the Ajax method. Scientific training. Attention to detail. Time spent touching the ball rather than playing a mindless number of organized games."