



## The Great Debate: Development vs. Winning

An often debated topic in youth soccer is whether it is more important to develop talent or win games.

A common situation that I have experienced in my many years of being involved in youth soccer happens at the youngest ages of the game. We will call this "**The Winning Scenario.**" Let's take the U9 age group as an example. As a coach if I want to win most games, I put the player that can kick the ball the farthest at central defender and my fastest player at striker. Obviously, the defender will kick the ball the length of the field and the speedy forward will sprint past everyone and score on a breakaway. This may happen three or four times per game, and the team will win most of the time.

Now let's look at "**The Development Scenario.**" I have the same players lined up in the same positions, but instead of coaching the defenders to kick the ball up the field as far as they can, I tell them to control the ball with one touch and find a short simple pass with their second touch. With this scenario my team loses most of their games. But which scenario is best for kids?

**The Winning Scenario:** This strategy will work for players at U8, U9, U10, and U11. When they reach U12, they will struggle because these players will not have learned how to play the game of soccer. They will have simply learned to kick the ball hard and run fast, getting by on their athleticism alone. After U11, when they come up against teams that have learned to pass and create space, they will end up chasing the game the entire time and most often lose.

**The Development Scenario:** This strategy only works if the club has created the right culture. What this means is that the Director of Coaching and individual

coaches have clearly communicated the plan for development to parents and kids. The challenge is to get players to stay with the development scenario even when the team loses most games. What does it take to convince parents that a coach is doing the right things and that in a few years the team will win the large majority of games--communication.

Communication is critical to implementing the Development Scenario. First, the Director of Coaching must have the credentials that show that he or she knows what he or she is talking about. Second, there should be some record of the development model working. Now I understand that this is not possible in all cases which means that the Director of Coaching and individual coaches must communicate their ideas repeatedly. Once a club decides to coach for development, coaches must not waiver and get sucked into trying to be more competitive. It is important to stay the course and let the development model work.

So which approach is best for kids? Personally, I always opt for The Development Scenario, but as I mentioned in the beginning of this post, very few coaches, directors, and clubs actually stay true to this plan. We are all naturally extremely competitive so it really is no surprise that people have trouble sticking to it.

Can you?