

# OSA emphasices SKILLS over Results

BY MICHAEL GARDNER - FAN FUEL BLOGGER

The Ontario Soccer Association has launched a plan to focus on development in this country. In it, they have borrowed from successful models around the world, including private academies here in Ontario, which have demonstrated that development at a young age is extremely important.

Development is not measured by wins and losses and in fact is measured by the child actually developing their skills. Imagine that, focusing on skills over results. It's not that results aren't important but there is a time and place for them.

Most successful models don't include published standings or "playoff" type matches until the U15-16 age group. Besides, if a kid can't trap a ball, what good is playing a system that is designed purely to deliver results in the win column? Their lack of technical skill will hold them back as they progress.

Rest assured that the countries using these models are well established football powerhouses.

When I coached, I told parents that if you have a choice between missing a game and a practice, miss the game. For the most part, a child has very few touches on the ball during a game. Yet, put a ball at their feet for a 90 minute training session and you can be assured that there will be marked progress.

The models favoured by these countries suggests that the ratio of training to games should be at least 3:1. Unfortunately, in our current club model of tournaments, Cup games, regular table games, "friendlies" and the like, those numbers would be reversed in a traditional local soccer club.

So, why is the idea of development so foreign to North Americans?

I don't necessarily blame parents who have grown up in a North American culture of competition and winning. I'm not one who likes the idea of participation ribbons being given out like candy. But that isn't what we are talking about here.

I also don't blame parents for being confused as to what their options might be. Soccer clubs have done an historically poor job of educating them as to the various options available to them.

What isn't confusing is the fact that the current culture and lack of emphasis on development is getting this country nowhere. **Canada sits 71st in the world, tied with war-torn Haiti. No offence to the Haitians but for a country with riches, facilities and other advantages, that is an absolute embarrassment.**

So, if you are a parent of a good, young (under 14), rep level player. What are your options in Ontario?

Well, if they are extremely good, you can have an open tryout with the Toronto FC Academy. Be warned though, there will be an extreme emphasis on skill development and progress won't be measured in terms of whether the team is winning.

**A second option is the private Academy route. The Soccer Academy Alliance of Canada is an association of private clubs that all subscribe to common ideals. The emphasis is on high quality, paid and certified coaches, superior training facilities, trainers and other staff available to help and most of all on development. For players under 14, games are played but standings are not published which removes pressure from parents. The emphasis on training is significant.**

**Parents also must follow a very strict code of conduct which forbids "coaching from the sidelines" and other forms of distraction. The parent gets two warnings before they are asked to drop their child off at the pitch and pick them up afterwards or simply take their money elsewhere.**

These programs are expensive but most generally run from January through November so the overall cost with a Rep program is comparable if you factor in your tournament costs, etc. Players here have made the jump into TFC Academy and as a result of a stronger partnership with the OSA, are now finding eligibility for Provincial, District and Regional teams.

A third option is the one that most are probably familiar with, playing Rep at a local Club. The standards here will vary so parents would be wise to do their homework. Coaches may be extremely well qualified or have the minimum standard. It is not uncommon for a coaches to be parents of a player. Nor is it uncommon for parents to leave one association for another, sometimes as a result of "poaching." Poaching would be recruiting players from one club to another often based on the promise of shiny trophies. At the Club level, the development emphasis is a bit of a work in progress.

A major philosophical shift needs to change within the Club system. Again, the model follows that of private Academies and they follow the model of successful programs worldwide. Parents of younger players will need to let go of their impulse to scream instructions or relish victories in Cup play. It is a major shift but the will is there.

As for what works best for you and your child, I'd highly suggest doing your homework. I can offer that I've been involved with both the Academy programs and the Club programs. Having experienced both I would never go back to the Club environment in its current state.

For us it came down to a simple question. While a club rep team might beat an Academy team at a friendly, is that really a sign of progress? If you lined each up of those kids in terms of basic technical skills and then ask which one is in a system that will allow them the most opportunity to develop between now and the end of the year?

Without technical skill, a player's potential, and that of our nation, is severely limited. Once we understood that and the differences between programs, the answer was obvious.

I applaud the OSA in its direction. At the same time, until they can successfully oversee massive cultural shift, you can have that U8 parent on your sidelines. I don't want him interfering with my own child's development.

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