

Dr. Ron Quinn

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American Youth Soccer: What's Right and What's Wrong – Feb.5, 2019

**“Sadly, we have moved from an educational model to a business model in youth sport, and especially in youth soccer.”**

*A leading authority in youth soccer and coaching education, Dr. Ron Quinn shares his insight on American Youth Soccer today, what we're doing right and what needs to change.*

Dr. Ron Quinn is one of the first who began studying youth soccer in America over 40. Now Associate Professor in the Department of Sport Studies, and coordinator of the online graduate program in coaching education and athlete development at **Xavier University** – Quinn actually one of the primary co-authors of the US Youth Soccer National Youth License and the State Youth Modules. Working alongside Sam Snow, and the other NYL authors, Quinn helped open the minds of many and pioneered the concept of going beyond the X's and Os.'

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A member of the United States Youth Soccer (USYS) National Staff, Quinn was awarded the **2006 National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA), Youth Long-Term Achievement Award** and in 2007 received the US Youth Soccer **Dr. Thomas Fleck Excellence in Youth Coaching Education Award**.

Soccer Today's Diane Scavuzzo asked **Dr. Ron Quinn** for his thoughts on youth soccer in America, specifically on what needs to change to create a brighter, more successful future.

*Diane Scavuzzo: What is right and what is wrong in American youth soccer today?*

**Dr. Ron Quinn:** There are many things right with youth soccer in America.

**SOCCER IS VIEWED AS THE SPORT OF CHOICE FOR YOUNG KIDS.**

In many places across the USA, we have the outstanding soccer facilities. Technology and the internet provide for greater access to information, and countless individuals are contributing to the growth of the game.

**HOWEVER, THE SAME FACTORS THAT ARE RIGHT, ARE THE SAME ONES THAT CAN BE WRONG.**

As a preferred sport, coaches and parents become too involved and have unrealistic expectations.

I coined the term, **“The Game in the Child”** in 1988, meaning that we have to allow a child to experience and learn the game from within, not the “Child in the Game” perspective, where we place the child in an adult structured environment, expecting, for example, to stay on one side of the field or position, when they are seven.

**The move to small-sided modified games has helped, but it took years to change.**

Children learn through both unstructured and structured play, but it seems today, that it is completely out of balance. If there is not a scheduled practice, are kids playing soccer or choose to do something else? More than likely, it is something else, largely due to the fact that they have not been able to take ownership of the game.

Children are told when, where, and how long to practice, and at games, told where to run, when to dribble, pass and shoot, only to look at the sidelines for approval (most often disapproval) every time they touch the ball.

**AS A RESULT, IT NEVER BECOMES “THEIR” GAME, ONLY AN ACTIVITY THAT ADULTS CREATED.**

Related Article: What Needs to Change in American Youth Soccer

The National Youth License (NYL), created in 1996, was on the right path, as the first child-centered coaching education in the United States, and most likely, on the planet. It took the approach, that *if we take care in the beginning, the end will take care of itself*. Meaning that, if the first experience is not positive and growth enhancing, a child’s development and self-view could be delayed. The course was based on sound child development principles and integrated a holistic philosophy, that *nothing happens in isolation*. It was the first course that introduced psychomotor, psychosocial, social-emotional and cognitive theories and practices, which have now become commonplace.

Unfortunately, the USSF have removed it from their coaching scheme.

*Diane Scavuzzo: What needs to change in youth soccer today?*

**Dr. Ron Quinn:** This is a very complex issue because we are a complex and diverse society, and I would encourage parents, coaches, and administrators to read the Aspen Institute, Project Play report, that **Sam Snow** mentioned in his interview on **What’s Right and What’s Wrong**.

We need to have mandatory child-centered youth coaching education for coaches and parents.

**AND, WE NEED REALIZE THAT WE DO NOT HAVE ELITE SOCCER PLAYERS AT AGE NINE.**

We need to believe that the “cream rises to the top” given the proper environment, rather than, what seems to be our present, “last man/women standing” approach, that selects people out to get to the best.

We need to keep as many children in the game for as long as possible, and not create elite, all-star teams at age 10 and younger.

Placing what is perceived to be the best players together at the youth level, most likely, only creates average players in the end, because, a child’s focus is to stay on the team, by not making mistakes; what happens then to risk-taking and creativity?

**IT IS IRONIC THAT WE HAVE A SOCIETY THAT VALUES DIVERSITY, BUT YET, WANTS TO CREATE HOMOGENEOUS TEAMS WITH 9-YEAR-OLDS.**

Reciprocal or peer teaching is beneficial for both the skilled and yet-to-be skilled person. How else, can our kids learn compassion, patience, and cooperation?

We need to teach cooperation, before competition, so that a child learns to accept and seek out challenges and learns to compete from within.

In short, we need to give children back their childhood. We can always increase the intensity when they are ready but never dial it back.

When the players are more mature in all areas of development, not just the physical — usually in the middle teen years — they will be able to make the commitment needed to meet the physical, psychological, social, and emotional demands to move to the next level.

Dr. Ron Quinn: **Sadly, we have moved from an educational model to a business model in youth sport, and especially in youth soccer.**

Our educational system has outsourced the physical development of children. In 1937, a group of educators, physical educators, physicians, and child psychologists met in Atlanta to discuss sport and competition in the elementary schools.

The result was a position statement, that discouraged sports competition based on the developmental stage of children to handle the competitive stress. Unfortunately, well-intended adults outside of the educational system didn't listen. Hence, the birth of community-based sports programs. Interesting enough, Carl Stolz founded Little League baseball in 1938, and the rest they say is history.

### **WE NEED TO VIEW YOUTH SPORT AS PART OF THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS.**

When teaching the National Youth License course or talking to a group of parents, I always ask this question:

What is required of an adult to work with a child from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm? Universally, the response is "patience" — but once we get beyond that, the person is identified as a teacher — with a minimum of a four-year degree in teaching.

The follow-up question: What is required of another adult to work with that same child, from 3:00 – 9:00 pm?

**The answer, I'm available!**

The real question then becomes, how do the needs of the child change at 3:00? It doesn't. This is not to say, that every adult needs a four-year degree in education, physical education or sport pedagogy, but for the sake of the child, we can't be at both ends of the spectrum.

**This can only be accomplished through developmentally appropriate coach education.**

*Diane Scavuzzo: What do you recommend?*

Dr. Ron Quinn: **We are not Spain, Germany, Brazil or the UK**, but we can learn from them, without trying to duplicate their systems.

**We need an American system that incorporates our educational system.**

Our players play too many games, without sufficient practice or recovery.

If players in the USSF DA's are only allowed to play one match on a weekend because it is best for their development, then why do we allow non-DA players to play in tournaments, where they play, possibly, two to four matches between Friday and Sunday?

**I BELIEVE EVERYONE READING THIS KNOWS THAT ANSWER: MONEY.**

There need to be diverse pathways for a child to reach the highest levels; this typically is the recreational or participation model, or the performance model. However, the issue is, at what stage – age or ability – should these paths begin or diverge? I would contend, certainly, not before the age of 10.

We need to take a long-term athlete development approach that addresses participation across the life-span, and not just one for the elite player.

**WE NEED TO MOVE FROM PRESCRIPTIVE, JOY-STICK COACHING, TO A PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING APPROACH.**

How can we expect to develop players who can solve problems on the field, if we never give them any problems to solve in practice? Problem-solving and decision making is a skill, and just like any other soccer skill, needs to be practiced. It is only then, that players can begin to create and internalized the game for themselves, so that, the “Game in the Child” emerges.

I would like to conclude with a passage from **Zorba the Greek** by Nikos Kazantzakis, used in the NYL, to summarize my thoughts.

*“I remember one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life.*

*The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help with my breath. In vain.*

*It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear all crumpled before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.*

*That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.”*

How many little bodies do you want in your palms?