

(Ian Plenderleith is a soccer writer who also referees and coaches the game at youth level. He is also the author of a book of adult-oriented soccer short stories, "For Whom The Ball Rolls.")

The parents of the girls U16 indoor team screamed at every shot and wildly cheered at every goal. Their players and all three (yes, three) coaches did the same. The more they scored, the more excited they seemed to be at beating a clearly inferior side. I was coaching that inferior side, and had loudly remonstrated with my counterparts when one of their players had scythed through my best forward, leaving her in a crying heap on the turf, too hurt and upset to take any further part in the game. It was the most brutal of countless overly physical challenges from a team clearly coached to play in what can kindly be called a 'robust' fashion.

One coach shouted back at me that his player - who was yellow-carded, though she should have been dismissed - had played the ball (where have we heard that one before?). It was this regrettable verbal exchange between the coaches that prompted our opponents to ramp up the cheering, but by that point I was only concerned that we end the game with no further injuries. At the final whistle (result: 7-1), I refused for the first time in five years of coaching to shake hands with the opposition coaches and, rightly or wrongly, suggested to my players that they likewise abstain. The opposition parents booed me out of the arena.

As a coach at youth level, you often come across the problem of lopsided games, and winter indoor soccer especially can throw together teams of vastly differing caliber. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and there are lessons to be learned from both severe beatings and easy wins.

When my teams are losing heavily, I don't expect or even wish for mercy from superior travel teams. Instead, after pointing out the positive aspects of our performance, I will ask my players what they noticed about the team they just played and lost to. For example, did they see how the opposition players always moved for the return ball after passing it? Did they hear how well they communicated? Did they see how closely the defenders stayed on their mark? How fit the other team was, and how they didn't tire? Were their opponents born with good technique, or did they play well because they train at least a little bit every day? Playing quality opposition can show young players the rewards of dedication and practice, rather than destroying their confidence.

My teams have also been in the position of playing far less gifted opposition, and it's important for coaches to distract their players from the scoreboard after the fourth or fifth goal. Now is the time to try your defender as a striker, or see if the tall midfielder might shape up as a back-up goalkeeper. Instruct your players to see if they can keep possession for long periods, and perhaps only shoot once they have made five passes (if you're coaching boys, you'll hear some protests at this one). Tell them to continue to respect the opposition, and not to celebrate overtly if they score. Emphasize that this is a good chance to practice using their left foot. Play short by one, two or even more players in order to make the rest of the game something of a challenge.

These all sound like obvious points, but its astonishing how rarely you see them put into practice. The team mentioned at the start of this column was full of talented players, and had no need at all to intimidate my team or kick lumps out of them to win. The failure of their coaches to recognize the skills gap and adjust their tactics accordingly lead to an acrimonious game that taught the players nothing positive about soccer and how to play it.

The values of the grown adults madly cheering their daughters on to a cakewalk victory, or the coaches who spent the entire game screaming instructions at their players, are arguably topics for another column. But my concern is that a bilious sporting environment can be used to influence tomorrow's adults into thinking that foul play, constant shouting, and beating on weaker opponents are virtues that lead to success.

As coaches, we should use one-sided games to suggest to young players that in defeat there can be both dignity and room to learn, and in victory there should be respect and restraint. Most importantly of all, that sportsmanship and fair play are of far greater importance than a 10-0 scoreline.