

Do Not Force Youth Players into Solely One Position

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Over the course of a year teaching USSF, NSCAA and US Youth courses, I get asked thousands of questions all related to player development. I think around 90% of these are from well-meaning coaches simply wanting to know the best way to develop their players. Approximately 10% are misguided coaches still trying to figure out the best way to win before they even think about player development.

There are unfortunately another group of questions, often parent-driven and sometimes coach-driven that fit into the classification, "How can I most effectively delay or hinder my child's development in the game?". The question at the top of this category ultimately involves positions and a desire to pigeon-hole kids into one set position well before the suggested 17 or 18 years of age.

This article will attempt to explain why any parent or coach who wishes to assign a player to a set position before 18 is ultimately hurting their development and possibly stunting it beyond repair.

Let's start at the bottom and work up.

1. Kids under 7 have no real understanding of space and are enormously egocentric. Their nature is to want the toy (or the ball) and really only enjoy life when they have it. No matter how hard you try, they will not understand space or positions and to try to force them to do so is like asking them to do advanced scientific equations. Yes, they spread out but only when they are too tired to keep up with crowd.
2. Kids begin to understand space at around 7/8 years of age. It is a fundamental understanding of space that sometimes gets lost in the heat of the game (the moment where they get drawn to the ball). When the game is frozen or in a dead ball situation, they can be seen to be spreading out again. Kids do not get positional play and demanding they stay big or small no matter where the ball is only helps them disregard the principles of attack and defense. Put simply, when we have the ball, we all attack and when we don't, we all get small to defend. 24 years as a youth coach has taught me this is something most American parents struggle to understand. Seemingly if we call them defenders, that's all they do, so if we have the ball, they stay pinched in and back by their goal no matter who has the ball. Anyone who watched the World Cup or any professional or high-level youth game knows this is not how the game is played.
3. At 11 or 12, they understand space and that each position has slightly different skill sets and for the player to understand the whole subject they need to experience the different skill sets. To use a school math analogy, a good math teacher would not only teach addition because they know that would produce one dimensional simplistic students without the complete skill set to tackle advanced math problems of the future. Similarly,

the advanced coach will teach their players the skills and tactics to play in a variety of positions. They learn a little bit more about the support a fullback needs in midfield if they have played as both parts of the equation, as a fullback and a midfield player. They understand playing as a shadow forward and finding pockets of space if they have been the midfield player with no options to pass to as their forwards just run blindly to goal. Each position comes with a slightly different skill set needed to be successful but what should be obvious is that to fulfill their potential and truly understand the game they need have some mastery of all the skill sets and associated tactics.

4. The vast majority of college coaches need players who understand and can play in at least two or three different positions, not simply one. They understand that players may become injured or suspended and that players will need to fill in. They demand that the players be able to do so and simply do not recruit those players that can only understand the game from one position on the field.

There was a time when the "At what age should my kid play one position question?" was primarily asked by coaches and parents of 12 or 13 year old kids. Unfortunately and disturbingly, I am now asked this question of the parents and coaches of the 7 and 8 year old age group. Please do not think that by forcing a player to stay on one side of the field no matter who has the ball is helping them understand space or the game. Nothing could be further from the truth. At these younger ages, forget positions and see if through asking simple questions like "Where could you be to help your team get a bigger shape" (question for when we have the ball) or "show me a blade of grass you could be on to cover Tim" (Tim is the pressuring defender) will help them think and begin to solve some of the basic tactical problems of the game.

Coaches and parents alike would do well to remember a few basic truths about soccer and player development.

1. When we have the ball, we are all attacking (if your not thinking like this you're teaching them half the game).
2. When we do not have the ball we are all defending.
3. To gain a real understanding of space and the two shapes of the game, **YOU MUST NOT FORCE PLAYERS TO STAY IN POSITION.**
4. They will only develop a true understanding of the game and the skills needed if they experience play in different positions (perhaps three weeks as a defender, three as a midfield player and three as a forward in a 9-week season).