

PICTURE DAY

Yesterday was picture day and the park was jammed. Waiting for the U-14 girls team that I am coaching this season to show up for their noon appointment, I couldn't help noticing how many faces I recognized, how many people I've gotten to know in eight years of coaching. Good people, including many who have gone on to become friends. It's nice to find that kind of feeling in this strange and often cold city of my birth.

We carpooled over to the nearby home of one of our players for lunch. The girls sat outside, gulped down pizza and sodas, and then sugared up with cookies, ice cream and brownies. They're teenagers from different backgrounds who genuinely like each other and it was great for them, and the parents, to hang out a bit away from the field. After playing in our league for an average of six years, most of them had at least a nodding acquaintance with each other before the season even started. Corny as it sounds, over time AYSO really does become something of an extended family - an amazingly functional one at that.

We drove back to the park, I had them warm up a little more vigorously than usual to aid the digestive process, then they took the field. It was an exciting game. We controlled the ball for most of the first half, with teamwork that was missing the week before. But the other coach, against whom I've coached my entire career, was smart. His defense ran an offside trap, which took advantage of our eagerness and nullified our speed, costing us two goals. Some calls didn't go our way and we had some mental lapses which resulted in a 1-1 tie at the half.

I couldn't stay, so my Assistant and friend, took over. Later, he told me that the girls made a great adjustment to the trap, going to a more lateral passing game in the second half.

My U-8 team was playing at another field. U-8's are different. As much as I love watching the advanced skills of the older players, teaching strategy and developing an ongoing appreciation for a game I never played as a child, it's every bit as much fun - and a lot less pressurized - coaching the little ones, who are in the process of transitioning from "swarmball" to soccer. There are a few girls who can already play the game at a high level. Most don't get it yet - which doesn't mean they never will. In a couple years, that little kid laying down in goal, or backpedaling in terror from an oncoming break suddenly - and from nowhere - will become a soccer player.

Of course, some kids will never get it. For whatever reason, it just doesn't click. But most of those kids have one thing in common. They lose interest. Why? There are a

million reasons, but I speculate that more often than not, parental pressure or over-coaching have something to do with it.

My U-8 team runs the gamut. I've got a little girl who can already dribble the length of the field, execute a crossover, make a sharp cut and score from the edge of the penalty box with a kick that's rising as it kisses the net - with either foot.

I've also got a little girl who skips backward (when she's paying any attention at all) whenever the action heads her way. I can see how it distresses her parents, who, thankfully, don't get on her for it. I told them my older daughter's story; how she too was passive and clueless at first, until one day - and I remember the exact moment - the light switched on and she developed into a strong, aggressive player. And I know that if she keeps playing, "the light" will go on for this girl too. For now, when coaching her, I use gentle praise and subtle reminders that left wings don't belong in the right fullback position.

I've got a good U-8 team this year, which is nothing but luck. But where I really got lucky was in having such great kids and parents. No yellers. No second guessers. We had won most of our games going in and I guess I expected to win yesterday as well. I'd tell you it doesn't matter - which, of course, it doesn't - but I'd be lying. You see, I understand the ultra-competitor as much as anyone, because I am one. I was the youngest son of a Type-A+ Little League father who was capable of complete meltdown at the slightest perceived injustice, and who never resisted an opportunity to point out my failures. That's probably why I became a distance runner in high school. It's hard to mess up putting one foot in front of the other.

Anyway, my U-8's lost a well-played game by one goal, in which my younger daughter made a huge clearing kick. During the second half, I got a call on my cell that the older girls lost, too - also by one. I was upset for a moment, until one of my subs sitting on the sideline playing a hand-clapping game asked what was wrong. Nothing. Nothing at all.

My teams lost two games yesterday and, as usual, I lost my voice. It was another great AYSO day.

Editorial Comment:

One correction is needed here - in the second paragraph, the author writes "Corny as it sounds, over time AYSO really does become something of an extended family..." It is the great people who choose to contribute their valuable time and energy to the AYSO program that create these successes, not AYSO itself. People like the author!