

Are Youngsters Learning Sports Skills?

If you've been reading about some of the top players in professional sports you were probably surprised by what they did as youngsters. For example, Kobe Bryant said that he learned how to shoot, pass and to move without the ball, (the fundamentals, sports skills) when he grew up in Italy where he played soccer. When he came back to America he found that the players his age didn't know how to execute these fundamentals because they were only interested in jumping and dunking.

We should not skim over this comments. In fact, I believe that his comments should be required reading for all coaches and especially youth coaches. Why? Because the major function of the youth coach should be to teach sports skills. The youth level is where skill teaching should be taking place. In the ideal world athletic skills should also be taught in the elementary and middle schools.

His comments, which apply to what takes place in many different sports beside basketball, show that most youngsters today are more interested in the flashy or major components of the sport rather than the elements that make up for the best performances. In other words, youngsters, in order to excel in any particular sport, youngsters must develop the skills and physical abilities that allow them to develop their sports performance to their full potential. This is the key to true player development.

Having the athlete play more, run more, throw more, or jump more (as is commonly done on sports teams) is a poor way –really the slowest and most inefficient way – to improve performance. Everyone may be born with the rudiments of such basic skills, but not the ability to perform them on the highest levels. For this a strong background in the science of skill development and analysis is needed by the coach.

Parents, sportswriters, sports commentators and many sports coaches, continue to perpetuate the belief that all it takes to be an expert in the basic sports and skills is to have played the sport. Thus former athletes are considered experts but it can easily be proven that they know little if anything about the execution of sports skills. If you look closely at their teachings, you'll see that they most often demonstrate what to do but they are unable to explain how to make needed corrections for what should be done. This may be fine for five and six year old children but not teenagers and pre-teens.

It appears that it is only in sports that people take it for granted that you are an expert once you have played the sport. Simply talk to a sportswriter or parent who has played a

particular sport. He will be very definite in what you do in execution of a sports skill. It is analogous to someone getting sick and then getting over the sickness and then becoming an expert on what it takes to treat the sickness. You may laugh at this proposition but it is exactly what takes place in sports. Is it any wonder that collegiate and professional teams travel the world over looking for best talent?

For a youngster to truly enjoy the game he must feed his inner self and get satisfaction from his performance. Not being able to execute the basic sports skills prevents him from receiving this satisfaction and enjoyment. If he does not experience good play he will not want to continue. As a result, it is not uncommon to see many youngsters drop out after one or more years of playing.

Coaches say that they teach the players how to execute the basic sport skills of the game. Why then, is there so much failure?him. Even physical education teachers fail in this category as their sports skill teaching time is usually the same or even less. For example, it is not uncommon to find the following tennis course outline. Monday is devoted to the forehand, Tuesday to the backhand, Wednesday to the serve, Thursday to the volley, Friday to the rules, and Monday they begin a tournament to determine the best player and often the best grade.

When you consider the number of youngsters on a team and the amount of time that the coach has before beginning competitive play, it's obvious that it is impossible to devote sufficient time to each youngster to make sure that he or she learns the basic skills of the game. Thus, it is impossible for them to effectively teach because of the time restraints, as well as not knowing how and what to teach youngsters so that they truly learn the skills. Telling the youngster what to do does not mean that the youngster is capable of doing it.

Thus, as should be obvious, many changes are needed before we begin to effectively teach youngsters the fundamentals of the game. We must put the needs of the youngster first, not what adults want or enjoy.