

What it Takes to be Successful in the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program

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Player Development is a frequently discussed topic within the US Youth Soccer Technical Department. Over a the span of a few months, John Ellinger created a series of blogs dedicated to defining the qualities of what makes a US Youth Soccer ODP player. The following are his thoughts in the their entirety:

As a part of the US Youth Soccer Technical Department, we receive a lot of questions. However, the most frequently asked question is, "What does it take to be a successful US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program (US Youth Soccer ODP) player?" Now, the generic reply from most US Youth Soccer ODP staff coaches when they identify a player they like is to say, "That player can flat out play."

There is nothing wrong with this assessment; in fact, the coach is paying the player a tremendous complement. What does the staff coach see in a player to merit such an accolade? Well, this answer can be broken down into the four pillars players need to possess: Technical Qualities, Tactical Qualities, Physical Abilities and Psychological Qualities.

Technical Qualities

Let's start with the first pillar—the technical areas that are necessary for a player to become a successful US Youth Soccer ODP player:

- 1) Quality of the first touch** - Does the statement "The first touch is everything" mean anything to you? A player needs to have the technical ability to receive any type of service (pass) from their teammates and even the opposition for that matter, and be able to handle it cleanly. The first touch can either take you out of a pressure situation or it puts you back into pressure from an opponent or space. One type of two-touch soccer that is not conducive to what people call "the beautiful game" is when the receiving player's second touch is the tackle to win the ball back after a poor first touch. Two Men's National Team players who have a flawless first touch are Landon Donovan and Michael Bradley, former US Youth Soccer ODP players. They always look and feel comfortable with the ball at their feet.
- 2) The ability to strike a ball cleanly** - It does not matter what surface of the foot we are talking about—instep or inside of the foot; the player needs to be able to put the proper pace on the pass.

- Can they drive a ball over various distances to the intended target (both diagonal and down the

line passes)?

- Can they bend the ball into the open space in front of a teammate or around defenders to the feet of their teammate?

- Can they execute a proper chip pass or lofted pass and can they play the ball with both feet?

A good example of this technical ability is when you see a defender play a long ball forward in order to get his team out of a pressure situation - if that defender just played a 40 or 50 yd rope to his teammates' feet and he accomplishes this on a consistent basis, then this player has some talent and it is not an attempt to play "kick ball", "long ball" or "direct soccer". I have not worked with any defenders yet, who honestly do not feel that they can make that pass. The player who can hit this type of ball from the back or from one flank to another flank does have the ability to strike a ball cleanly.

3) The ability to dribble to penetrate and to maintain possession - The player should be comfortable dribbling with all four surfaces of the foot, the sole, inside of the foot, instep and the outside of the foot. The player has to be comfortable in their ability to move at speed with the ball and to avoid challenges from opponents while still maintaining control/possession of the ball. Players at this level have some tactical understanding of when to hold the ball up/shield and wait for supporting players to combine with. They also have some tactical understanding of when to take a player(s) on in an attempt to beat the opposition. A player can understand tactically when and where during a match to execute this skill, but without the technical abilities of knowing how to make these tactical decisions actually work creates many frustrating moments on the soccer field for the player. As the competitive level of matches increases for players, they need to understand that turnovers because of a poor or a needless dribbling run puts their team at a defensive disadvantage from which many goals are scored.

4) The ability to head the ball in attack and defense - Can the player effectively clear an incoming high ball with their head when defending, can the player effectively pass and shoot with their head when on attack.

There are many things that can go wrong to affect the quality of a good header:

- mistimed jump
- poor assessment of the flight of the incoming ball
- closing of the eyes
- mistimed thrusting of the head towards the ball

All of these situations will affect how the player strikes the ball with their head and how successful the header will become.

Heading is a skill that often receives less than its normal share of appropriate training time during practice sessions. But think about the number of goals that are scored off of restart situations from headers or the number of assists that come from passes from headers, especially from flick headers. By possessing the skill to handle any type of heading situation, while playing

on both sides of the ball (attack or defense), allows players to increase their chances of moving up the elite player development ladder.

5) The ability to finish with their first touch - Of the five technical qualities mentioned, this may be the most difficult skill to master. I am not talking about composure on the ball, which also plays a big part of quality finishing; I am talking about the player's technical ability to strike on goal with their first touch. The player has to possess the ability to solve problems technically under intense pressure when receiving the ball close to their opponent's goal. There are many variables a player encounters in this situation, such as the position of the goalkeeper, the flight and pace of the pass they are about to receive, the position of defending players, etc., which forces the player to choose a technique to use to strike the ball at almost "warp speed".

The biggest problem for young players is that many believe scoring goals is all about striking the ball with power. I am going to show my age here by quoting a line from the old FA Instructional films that were made after England won the World Cup in 1966, whenever a player missed a goal scoring opportunity by going for power instead of accuracy, the announcer would say "He went for power when clinical accuracy would have done him better." Landon Donovan is by far the best pure clinical finisher I have ever had the pleasure to work with at any playing level. When you watch him closely, his decision making as to what surface to strike the ball with, what pace to put on his finishing attempt and the placement of his this attempt are exceptional. Maybe this is why he holds the records for scoring goals with the US Men's National Teams at both the youth and senior levels. Another interesting fact is that something like 70% of all goals scored are scored from the player's first touch—more reason for the player to become comfortable with dealing with goal scoring opportunities with their first touch.

Tactical Qualities

After addressing those technical qualities of "what a player needs to be successful in the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program," it is time to start defining what tactical qualities the player needs to possess. One of the most essential tactical concepts necessary for the player is:

1) Understanding of transition play on both sides of the ball

a. Transitioning from Defense to Offense - Let's first talk about transition from a team defending situation to now moving forward into the attack. The player needs to understand their role in this tactical situation, where their team has just won the ball back. Their team is now looking to possess the ball and wait for more numbers, or they could be looking for penetration of their opponent's defense through passing or someone making a run forward with the ball. If the player is a wide defender, they need to know when to make a run forward to provide width and to give additional support in attack. They also need to know when not to make that run forward, but rather, when to stay back and pinch in providing additional defensive coverage for their team. If a counter attack opportunity exists, where the team can gain an advantage by quickly playing a ball in behind their opponent's defense, the player needs to understand their involvement in this attacking movement.

One National Team program that has a phenomenal understanding of this transitional phase is the Men's and Women's National Teams from Brazil. Players from both programs understand the importance of quickly having supporting players around the ball the moment the ball is turned over to them by their attacking opponents. This tactical understanding of this transitional element allows them to play "the beautiful game" (having unbelievable technical abilities helps as well).

There are many in the soccer coaching ranks who feel that soccer has three phases of play and the outcome of most matches will be determined by the following:

- What happens the moment the team has lost the ball?
- What happens the moment the team has won the ball back?
- What happens during those moments when neither team is in possession of the ball?

Interesting, don't you think? Two out of the three phases deal with transitional play.

b. Transitioning from Offense to Defense - Once the ball is lost, where does the team begin organizing its efforts to win it back, does it start with the player that has caused the turnover, does it start with the attacking players? These are questions that the player will often ask their coach. The answer to both of these questions is yes.

The first principle of defending is immediate chase. The player who has lost the ball, if possible, should make every effort to track down the player they have lost the ball to, and attempt to win the ball back or delay that player from attacking any further. Attacking players often times become the team's first line of defense when the ball has been lost in the teams attacking half of the field. Attacking players have the responsibility of organizing the team's defensive pressure in what we call the higher areas of the field, they have to make decisions immediately during these turnover situations of whether to help win the ball back right away or to delay and drop back towards their own goal.

When a team has sent several players forward into the attack, and then that team loses the ball, it creates counter attack opportunities for the other team. A player has to have an understanding of what their role will be during such situations, especially if they are one of the players who has been caught forward in attack. Players should understand the concept of getting numbers back behind the ball, and they should also understand what is meant by getting numbers inside the ball (getting back goal side). As much as we talk about Brazil and how great they are in attacking transition, they are also extremely good at this part of the game as well. They often do not get enough credit for how organized they are defensively as a team because they get back into defensive positions quickly, with numbers around the ball in a compact defensive organization; they now make it look easy when they go from defending to attacking.

How many times have we heard the phrase, "Offense does not win championships, defense wins championships"? This especially is critical to the sport of soccer. Transition play from attack to defense is not the fun part of the sport, it at times is called "doing the dirty work," players have to make a choice—will they track back and win the ball back, will they sprint back to get back behind the ball and help their team get properly organized against the opponents attack?

The best players in the world understand the tactical concept of defensive transition; the days of the attacking player, or any player for that matter, just standing around and watching their team attempt to win the ball back at this critical moment of the game are long gone.

2) Speed of Play/Speed of Possession - These could be considered two different themes, but I feel they should be taught together. It doesn't do the player any good if they possess the technical level to deal with pressure from space, opponents, time, etc., if they don't understand speed of possession (rhythm of play to some). They have to understand how to move the ball around the field while their team is in possession. Sometimes the ball movement needs to be quicker than at other times. Sometimes the ball has to be moved to the left side of the field first in order to attack from the right flank. Sometimes it has to be moved backwards in the team's defending third before the ball can be successfully possessed in the team's attacking third of the field. There will be some teams who will have that special player who can serve as the playmaker and all of the attacking movements for their team are dictated by this player, but what if that player is injured, suspended or being closely marked during the game, what then? All of the players on the field should feel comfortable in their abilities to hold possession of the ball in order to achieve their attacking objective or even their defensive objective if they are trying to kill off the game for the win.

Some of the elements of this tactical quality, speed of play or speed of possession, that the player needs to be successful include:

- Effective short passing
- Understanding of transitional play
- Knowing when to pass instead of dribble
- Understanding of when to apply pressure on the opponent when defending
- Making a long pass to keep possession of the ball that then allows his team to open up the game
- Individual composure on the ball
- Understanding of depth and width in attack
- Understanding of compactness as a team when defending
- Effectively assisting their team in controlling the pace of the game

I know this seems like a lot to ask of one player, but if there is a weak link in this chain, you can bet that player will be exposed under pressure from your opponents as the level of competitive play increases.

One of our team goals, during training with the U17 Men's National Team, leading up to the World Championships in 1999 in New Zealand, was to improve this tactical quality as individuals and as a team. We wanted to feel comfortable with any type of pressure that our opponents could throw at us - mission accomplished. I have always considered this tactical theme important enough that I always include a training activity in every training session to help improve this quality in the player.

3) Ability to read the game - Personally, I have made the statement on numerous occasions to, "Take what the game gives you," while coaching at various levels of play. What exactly does the coach mean when making this statement to their players? Players both on the

ball and those who are off the ball are faced with making split-second, tactical decisions in an environment that is constantly changing over the course of the game. The players who consistently make the right decisions whether they are on attack or defense are usually given the honor of being labeled as a "player who can read the game."

On attack, these players:

- Understanding of when to hold the ball
- Know when to combine with teammates
- Know when to change position on the field either with the ball or in support of the attack
- Know when it makes sense to go for the quick counter attack versus the slow build-up
- Understand the importance of knowing what type of pass and at what pace the pass is needed
- Know when to change the point of attack
- Have an awareness of their role and responsibility to the team

When defending these players, understand the importance of how this is accomplished as an individual, in groups or as a team; they know the importance of communication with teammates during critical moments of the game, such as transitioning from attacking to defending, knowing when and how to close down an opposing players space, understanding the importance of delaying penetration or disrupting play of the opponent and being aware of the consequences of making poor decisions during the game.

A player who can read the game does not have to be the fastest or the fittest player on the field. This player usually has a solid technical base, is one who is comfortable on the ball and handles the pressures of time, space and opponents consistently well. You will hear comments about this player such as "the player has vision" or as Manny Schellscheidt (former US Youth Soccer ODP Boys Region I Head Coach and current US Soccer U14 Men's National Team Coach) always likes to say "the player has a soccer brain". This player does not have to be in the center of midfield, these qualities are essential to the development of all players.

4) Heightened awareness of the importance that restart situations have in determining the outcome of the match - Almost a third of all goals scored are a direct result of restart situations (set pieces). In the 2002 Men's World Cup, restarts accounted for 45 of the 161 goals scored (28 percent) and during the 2003 Women's World Cup, restarts accounted for 39 of the 107 goals (36.4 percent). So what does all of this mean to the player who is competing at the US Youth Soccer ODP level?

It means that as the competitive level of the event increases, it usually means that the result, often times, is generally determined by a single goal because of the increased technical and tactical abilities of the players involved. Now, players need to be concerned more than ever with the choices they make on the field during these higher quality games.

The two areas that need to be addressed during game preparations are:

- Player responsibilities when defending restart situations
- The consequences of committing fouls, giving away corner kicks or throw-ins in critical areas

of the field

The players need to completely understand what their responsibilities are during the various types of restart situations (free kicks, corner kicks, throw-ins). Does the player need to be standing in front of the opposing player who is throwing the ball in, or does it make more sense for that player to step back and front an opposing player so the ball does not get played directly into that player's feet? Do the player's understand that they should not give any type of tactical advantage to their opponents the moment their team has to begin defending a restart situation?

In game-time situations, players need to know:

- How to stop the short corner kicks attempted by their opponents
- Whether their goalkeeper likes to have the near and far posts covered during a corner kick
- Know how to hold a defensive line on a free kick situation and who on their team is responsible when this situation occurs
- How to be disciplined enough to carry out their responsibilities in defending restarts, such as setting the wall and communicating with the goalkeeper, being the first player in the wall, tracking players, attacking the ball, etc.
- How to be aware of where and how they should clear balls when defending restart situations—there are times when the prudent action from a defending player is to give away a corner kick or throw-in to their opponent.

We have already mentioned that the outcome of the more competitive matches is usually determined by a single goal. With that being said, players need to realize the technical abilities of players are generally better in these matches. This means a single free kick, corner kick or even a throw-in (if the team possesses a player with a long throw-in) can win the game for a team.

Players must realize that committing a silly foul in or around your defensive penalty area can cost your team the match (this would also cover things such as players not being baited by their opponent into an action that can cause a mental lapse). To avoid these critical restart situations, some coaches have found that by challenging their team not to give up any restart situations within 30 yards of their own goal, it helps their players remain more focused and to show more discipline.

Fitness

It is now time to address the third of the four components (pillars) of soccer known as fitness. We generally call the component that deals with the physical abilities of a player, fitness. The obvious and most noticeable physical quality that a player may or may not possess is speed or pace, as some like to call it. However, it is not the most necessary quality a player must have to be a successful US Youth Soccer ODP player. The one quality that is vital to a player's success is endurance or work rate.

1) Player Endurance or Work Rate - One phrase that coaches say quite often is, "A player doesn't play soccer to get fit; he must be fit to play soccer." It has always amazed me when I would see players in a tryout (ODP, HS, College, Professional levels) situation and they have

poor levels of fitness. The one thing the player can control without anyone's help is their own fitness level. You can be sure that at the end of the tryout, the coach evaluating players will have noted one of two things in regard to player fitness:

- The player was fit.
- The player was not fit.

It is that simple.

Coaching candidates of the US Soccer National Coaching Schools are currently taught that one way to improve a player's conditioning is through Speed Endurance Training. Without getting too technical here, there are generally two types of Speed Endurance Training -production training and maintenance training.

Production training usually involves training exercises that are for short periods of time (20 to 40 seconds). The rest periods are in the range of 2 to 4 minutes, and the players are always working at a high level of intensity.

Maintenance training involves training exercises that are for longer periods of time (30 to 120 seconds). The rest intervals should be as long the exercise periods that are used, and the player will become progressively more fatigued as the work to rest ratio cycles continue.

A player who trains following the above guidelines will certainly help them to improve their power (distance covered or ability to maintain work rate) output. This system allows the player to train at a higher intensity level during the training session and for a longer period of time.

The importance of a player having a quality such as work rate allows the player to become a more effective player on both sides of the ball. For example, when coaches' decide that the team needs to change tactics and go into a high pressure defending situation, coaches need to feel comfortable with the knowledge that all of their players can still be effective once the ball has been won. A player's ability to recover and work further is essential. A player's work rate and level of fitness will affect a player's choices made during a competitive match - the choice to track back and pick up opposing players or the choice for the player to push forward on attack from their outside back position is certainly easier for the player who is fit.

2) Agility - It is usually sport specific, by that I mean that soccer agility will be, at times, different than what is required of the tennis player; although, there are many similar carry over values in the various components which comprise the players overall agility.

Agility consists of a player's balance, coordination, reflexes, speed and even strength. A soccer player needs to possess all of these traits. Think about all of the moments during a soccer game when a player has to:

- Jump to head the ball
- Change direction with or without the ball
- Quickly move forward to close down an opponent
- Move sideways across the field, or backwards during transitional moments during the run of

play

- React after either losing their footing or getting knocked to the ground to be able to react quickly and get back into the game

Soccer players must possess the ability to react both physically and mentally to the movements of their opponents and to the movement of the ball during training and matches.

Most experts agree that agility training exercises such as fast footwork training with ladders, obstacle courses with and without the ball (limited leaping and bounding exercises for younger players) and exercises where players have to react to commands or a signal from the coach (these would include stop and go exercises, up, turn and run exercises, etc.) will all have a positive influence on improving a player's agility. The above exercises are great for agility training in young players, but as a player becomes older (US Youth Soccer ODP age groups), then it is an acceptable training philosophy to increase both the intensity and duration of these exercises.

Unfortunately, there will always be a debate in soccer of whether a player should be a soccer player first and an athlete second or vice versa. The merits of the physical component in soccer certainly do not outweigh the merits of a sound technical base for the player. However, if a player wants to achieve success in the US Youth Soccer ODP, then that player must possess some physical abilities to go along with their technical ability and tactical knowledge. Improving one's soccer agility will certainly improve the chance for success at all levels of soccer competition.

3) Starting Speed - A player who possesses quality starting speed creates significant advantages for themselves during both training and match play. This player will have the ability to reach the ball first, possess the ability to beat an opponent 1 v 1 and have the necessary explosiveness to overtake an opponent. Most soccer coaches will agree that the first three steps that a player takes in the various competitive soccer situations are more crucial than the later steps.

It does not necessarily mean that the first person to get to the ball is the faster player, but that the player most likely has a combination of decent starting speed and speed of thought (tactical speed, which in this instance would be their ability to anticipate). Think about all the situations in soccer when the player has to step in front of an opponent to win the ball, turn and move in another direction, move backwards or sideways, or use a quick burst of speed after getting by an opponent on a dribbling run. These are all situations where possessing good starting speed will help the player be successful in these soccer moments. There have been many players who have lacked blazing speed, but yet because they possess good starting speed, they have had successful playing careers at both the National Team and Professional levels.

In order for the player to improve this quality of the fitness component of soccer, the player first has to look at those explosive moments in a game and be able to analyze that performance. How quickly does he move from one point to another?

There are many athletic performance facilities popping up all over the country that specialize in speed training, acceleration training, strength and power development, etc. If after this self-

diagnosis, the player feels the need to improve in this area, then that is one possible solution to solve this deficiency. Plyometrics and weight training are also common training methods to improve a player's starting speed. It is important that the player be aware that training activities with and without the soccer ball should be utilized to improve this aspect of player fitness.

4) Essential Training Habits - This quality would cover the player's understanding of hydration and nutrition, proper warm-up and cool-down and knowledge of prevention and care of common soccer injuries. Soccer is one team sport where the player needs to understand that proper hydration and nutrition is necessary because of the constant physical demands (stop and go activities, speed and agility movements, etc) of the sport. The player needs to begin training sessions and matches properly hydrated. During exercise the player needs to understand the importance of rehydrating. At the completion of a match or training session there is a need to replenish any accumulated fluid loss that occurred because of the match or training session.

The Gatorade Sports Science Institute offers the following facts on hydration, <https://www.usyouthsoccer.org/coaches/Hydration.asp>.

The player needs to understand how important proper nutritional habits are to enhancing their performance. The player needs to have an understanding that there should be a pre-workout high-carbohydrate snack or meal 2 to 3 hours before training sessions and matches. The player should also understand that within 30 minutes of finishing the training session or match, there is a need to replenish lost energy with a carbohydrate-rich snack.

Understanding the need for properly warming up the body for training sessions or matches, is something that the US Youth Soccer ODP player must believe to be crucial to ensure quality performances. The player should have knowledge of dynamic stretching exercises (taking the body through the types of movements that it will do during the activity), static stretching exercises (holding the stretch for about 15-20 seconds - no bouncing), and how to move the body from some light jogging to some short sprints just prior to beginning the activity. The player should also understand that following training sessions and matches that it is essential to properly cool-down. A proper cool-down would include some light jogging and stretching exercises which can go a long way to assist that player's body to recover quicker before beginning the next training session or match.

The player needs to fully understand that proper warm-ups and cool-downs, proper hydration and proper nutrition go a long way to aid in the prevention of athletic injuries. Other precautionary measures include:

- Blister prevention when the player is preparing to wear a new pair of soccer shoes in training or a match (ideally the player should have two pairs of shoes - one that is broken in and another pair that the player is gradually breaking in during training sessions)
- An appropriate level of overall fitness to play competitive soccer.

Finally, once injured, the player needs to have the knowledge of how to care for athletic injuries. Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation (RICE) is still an effective plan in dealing with most injuries. The bottom line is that the player has to know when to compete and when to rest---

playing at 80 percent of one's normal performance level at times may be effective, but at other times may be creating more harm than good for the player.

Psychological Qualities

Up to this point we have talked about qualities from the Technical, Tactical, and Physical components of soccer, now it is time to address the Psychological component. For me there is only one quality essential for the player to becoming a successful US Youth Soccer ODP player, and that quality is attitude.

Attitude - There is so much written material out there covering the phrase "Attitude is everything." Trevor Moawad, the Director of the International Performance Institute at IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida used to emphasize this on a consistent basis when speaking to all of the athletes enrolled in the IMG Academies and the US Soccer U17 Residency Program. If you think about it for a moment, as a soccer player, almost every decision that you encounter during a match, other than pure technical execution, will involve the player's attitude.

Evaluating the Player's Attitude:

- Does the player understand the importance of following the game plan for the match?
- Can the player make choices that are good for the well being of the team-tracking players, runs without the ball, etc.?
- Can the player exhibit the proper sportsmanship regardless of the final outcome of the match?
- Does the player have the proper attitude regarding training sessions; does the player have the proper attitude regarding training habits - regeneration after matches, nutrition, care and prevention of injuries, etc.?
- Can the player take criticism and praise from coaches, teammates, and spectators?
- Does the player understand the importance of self analysis and possess the desire to improve one's performance?
- Can they turn a weakness in their game into a strength?
- Can the player enjoy the sport of soccer, both as a participant and spectator?
- Does the player possess the attitude to accept leadership responsibilities when needed and to follow another teammates leadership when necessary?

You can talk to me about mental toughness, drive, passion, motivation, desire, dedication, etc., but each one of these traits is determined ultimately by one's attitude.

US Youth Soccer ODP covers a wide variety of age groups, so you can imagine the wide range of player attitudes that are exhibited at the State Association and Regional levels of play. Most US Youth Soccer ODP staff coaches will agree that players exhibiting proper attitudes are already half way there in becoming successful US Youth Soccer ODP players.