

## Do Kids Actually Play Soccer?"

By Perry Alexander

For almost twenty years now, I have been involved with youth soccer first as a parent and coach and later as an administrator. Today both my sons are grown, out on their own, and coaching their own youth soccer teams. I, too, am still actively involved as a coach of youth players. Looking back over the years, I still do not know the answer for sure to the question "Do kids actually play soccer?"

Recently at a practice for my under 16 boys competition team, I asked "Who has a ball?" SIX of them did not (out of 18). Two confessed to not even owning a soccer ball. This made me wonder again, do they actually play soccer? If they don't have a ball, how can they play soccer? For years at my house, I had to avoid tripping over soccer balls both inside and outside the house. They seemed like rabbits, constantly multiplying and hiding in strange places. One frequent admonishment to our boys was 'stop playing with the ball in the house.' That problem is solved if the player does not own a ball but at what price.

Yes, they definitely play on teams; they definitely play games - soccer teams and soccer games. But do they play soccer? I do not think that they do as much anymore. So often on my way home from work I see soccer fields but do I see players playing? NO, unless there is a game or an organized practice, the fields are empty. Is this just a Kentucky phenomenon? I do not think so. My professional job requires a good deal of travel and I get the opportunity to observe lots of soccer fields and again they are generally empty unless used by 'adult supervised' soccer activities.

Why don't we see pickup games with neighborhood kids just kicking around a ball? Largely because we have so successfully ORGANIZED and PROFESSIONALIZED the sport that the kids cannot do it by themselves unless they have an adult to tell them what to do. From the youngest ages, we place players in a tightly controlled environment where an adult (AKA the coach) must tell them everything to do. Free play is not allowed and everything is organized. How can we expect players to learn how to play on their own in such an environment?

Gone are the days of pickup games in a front yard with a bare handful of kids kicking around any round object with two targets, be they trees, shrubs, water bottles or whatever for goals. Gone are the days of worn bare spots in the back yard caused by the constant friction of young feet trying to play goal in front of two duct tape strips on a back yard fence. We have to put up full size goals and nets in our backyards so they can 'play soccer.' We have to have 'coaches' or our kids cannot 'play soccer.'

Basketball can be played in a driveway with a hoop up on a backboard of any type and it's basketball. Somehow soccer requires that we have painted lines, corner flags and great big fields to be 'real soccer.'

How can we get out of this corner that we have painted ourselves into?

- First, give the game back to the kids. Make it as simple as tag or hide and seek. All any kid need to play soccer is ONE simple thing - a ball. EVERYTHING else

is just add-ons. We need to put miniature goals in parks that encourage small-sided play by neighborhood kids. We need to start putting as many miniature soccer goals in backyards as there are basketball goals in front yards, so kids can get out and kick a ball on their own and with their friends. A few extra hours each week of unregulated play after school or after homework can do wonders for players' love of the game, mastery of the basic skills and physical well being.

- Second, get the kids off the play stations and the Nintendo and out in the yard playing with a ball. Maybe that requires parents to get outside as well but what better activity can there be than bonding with your son or daughter by kicking a ball around? Today it seems that parents are more worried about 'playing time' than play time' How much time should a kid spend playing soccer each week? Certainly more than a couple of hours at practice and an hour or less in a game - double that at least. The more time a player spends with the ball, the better the player. Those who put in the time on their own, reap the rewards, they are the better players.
- Third, revolutionize youth coaching by making it more disorganized. Make players think, experiment and learn on their own. Allow them to fail. Players learn from their mistakes how to make good decisions. They learn from appropriate instructions how to create their own playing environment. Most of all, make it fun, make it a game, make it THE game for kids.