No Substitute For Experience
Dr. Tom Turner, September 2017

Aspiring to anything of value requires a dogged mindset and a tough skin. No-one reaches a worthy goal in life without experiencing failure and without accumulating emotional scars from their experiences.

It’s really tough to be really good at something.

For all but the very, very elite youth soccer players, there is always someone with more skill... always someone with more tactical awareness... always someone who is faster, taller, stronger, quicker... always someone who is willing to work just that little bit harder... always someone who is more willing to absorb set-backs and use them as motivation for taking the next steps in the process.

Ironically, for the rest of us, the lessons we take from our experiences are pivotal to our chances of being successful.

ODP is a filter system to promote talent; by its very nature, most people fail to be selected for the next level. When asked to consider whether the risk of failure is worth investing more time and energy, some players (or parents) blame the system or coach-bias and go back to being comfortable. These players are typically not willing to look inward to explain their shortcomings; and typically not willing to use adversity to fuel improvement.

By way of perspective, US Soccer formed a boy’s U17 residency program in Bradenton, FL in 1999. The academy will close its doors this October (2017) after the U17 World Cup. Of the 450-plus players invited into full-time residency, only 33 (7%) have, to date, earned at least one “cap” for the full national team.

This tells us two things. One, that talented “young” players are just that... talented young players; and two, that professional coaches who try to predict future top performers from a pool of high-performing young adolescents also register a high degree of failure. The reality of young player identification is that persevering late bloomers are more likely to fill college and professional rosters.

Will the 400-odd U17 players who didn’t quite make it to MLS or the men’s national team regard themselves as benefitting from their experience? In most cases, clearly, yes! Experience is, by nature, what we participate in, not what we read about or view on television or hear about second-hand. There is no substitute for experience. No substitute for being in the spotlight. No substitute for risking failure in the expectation of achieving something of value.

From our experiences, we learn where we stand against our aspiring peers. We learn if we are willing to work smarter, more deliberately. We learn if we are willing to make more sacrifices. We learn if we really want to maximize our potential. We learn if we have the passion to get out of bed every day and persevere when things aren’t going well, or feel monotonously repetitive. We learn about consistency and standards. We learn about discipline. We learn about inner strength and our ability to be honest with ourselves. We learn to prioritize. We learn to set and reset our goals.

Most importantly we learn that the journey to achieve excellence provides us with experiences that build character, resilience, perseverance, values, satisfaction, respect, pride, humility and so many other key qualities that build our character and personality and carry us through life.