

# Putting the Team Back in Teamwork

by Coach Steve Bender

It has been 24 years since my sister was married, but I still remember an incident between her, my mother, and a neighbor as though it were this morning. They were involved in one of many heated discussions regarding wedding details when the neighbor said to my sister "You must recall, Catherine, that this is not your wedding, but your mother's. You are only the bride." While her humor calmed the moment, there was too much truth in that statement. All too many mothers view their daughters' wedding exactly that way.

Unfortunately, all too many parents and coaches hold the same view toward youth soccer. The boys and girls on the field are only the players; it is the parents and coaches who are the competitors. And it is the children that pay the price. I am proud to say that my U-11 house league girls' team in Northern Virginia's Springfield Youth Club finished our fall season with a 1-3-4 record. Those of you who are competitive in nature are no doubt surprised by that statement, but there are several reasons for it.

**First**, in eight games, they gave up only 12 goals. We only "lost" one game. That team, appropriately named the Orange Crush, completely outplayed us with the maturity and discipline of a high school varsity team, beating us 5-0. However, our two goalies in that game made some incredible saves among the 14 shots that they did stop. In every other game they thoroughly outplayed their opponents--we just didn't outscore them. My team came off the field knowing they had done their best. They kept the ball on the attack; at least three-fourths of those seven games was played in front of our opponent's goal. Virtually every goal our opponents scored came within two minutes of a mid-half substitution on defense.

Because I start each game with pre-planned substitutions for each half, my girls know when they will be coming out of the game. They know that I do not pull players because of bad play--only because of bad attitudes. I am proud of that record because at no point during the season did I put or keep a player on the bench for the sake of scoring a goal. When one observer commented that benching my own daughter prior to a kickoff seemed an odd way to reward her for scoring a goal, she turned to him and said "I had to come out, it was Courtney's turn to play."

**Second**, I had several girls that told me they only liked one particular position. They didn't want to play anywhere else. I always told them that they were very good in that position, but to understand the game, they needed to play every field position. That meant that sometimes we had a player whose fitness, knowledge, skills and abilities did not match the position she was playing. But by the end of the season they all better understood why players in another position did things the way they did. I could have won more games by going with a set lineup every week, but I am proud of the fact that these girls came away with greater knowledge and a much clearer understanding of the game than with a winning record.

**Third**, I am proud of the fact that as they came off the field every week, they would always compliment two or three others for something they had done well in the match. The only time I saw them upset after a match was when the other team had spat on their hands before shaking. They weren't bothered by the losing, only by the poor sportsmanship. And even then, rather than retaliate, one of the girls said "Next time we play them, remember to bring paper towels. They're poor sports." I am proud of a team that brings that kind of attitude to the field, all the more so because of that record.

**Fourth**, I am proud of that record because we focused on building everyone's individual skills as the foundation for team skills. When I got the registration forms, I was told my team had a total of 36 seasons of experience. The organizers, while able to add, weren't very good at statistics. Yes, I had 36 seasons of experience on the team, but seven of my players had only one or two seasons of experience, and one--Ashley--had never played soccer before at all. Because of the Northwest Airlines strike, she wasn't even able to join the team until the week of our first game. But by the end of the season, four of the five girls that I nominated to the All-Stars team were girls in only their first or second season--excited sponges-that-are-dying-to-soak-up-everything-ready-to-learn rookies--and one of them was Ashley.

During their All-Star match, Ashley and my daughter led four players in a jail break on the goal. As the other players tried to catch up, they screened our view from the sideline and it was hard to see what was happening. I saw at least three, and perhaps all four, take a shot on goal. I thought it was Ashley who scored, but wasn't sure.

Why am I proud of that 1-3-4 record? Because as they were walking back for the ensuing kickoff, I asked her who scored. Both of my players turned toward me and shouted across the field in response: "We all did!" Win or lose, they had learned to be a team. I am one coach who would choose a losing team over winning individuals any day. Those lessons will stay with the players for a lifetime.