

COMMENTARY

Why free play is a crucial ingredient for player development

- by [John O'Sullivan](#) , Dec 26, 2019

*The following is an excerpt from **John O'Sullivan's** latest book, "[Every Moment Matters: How the World's Best Coaches Inspire Their Athletes and Build Championship Teams](#)."*

* * * * *

Ted Kroeten is on to something in St. Paul, Minnesota, and you can tell from the smiles on the faces of the hundreds of kids frolicking around the facility run by Kroeten's organization [Joy of the People](#).

Some of the children are playing a competitive soccer game on an indoor turf field while others have quite a match on an inflatable field with bouncy walls. Older children are intermingled with younger ones, "teaching" them how to play, dominating the games but not in a way that discourages the younger kids from participating. Joy of the People is all about free play, and Kroeten has found that many children, sadly, no longer know how to get a pickup game going.

Kroeten is a highly experienced soccer coach and player, and when he started Joy of the People, he thought he would squeeze in time for free play amongst all the skill training and deliberate practice. Luckily his board of directors forced him to prioritize play. Over the past decade, he has seen his first participants grow into incredibly skillful and creative players, with a group of U19s recently winning the National Championships in futsal.

He has seen players leave his program for more formal clubs and quickly return because they have lost the freedom to improvise and be creative. He has seen children raised in more structured environments come to Joy of the People and, at first, struggle with the lack of rules, discipline, and adult instruction. Over time, though, he has seen the smile return to their faces as they start playing with joy again.



We hear a lot in sports about the importance of deliberate practice: focused improvement through repetitive activity, continual feedback, and correction and the delay of immediate gratification in pursuit of long-term goals. What has gotten lost for so many children, especially with the demise of the neighborhood pickup game and the overscheduling of our children, is simple play. Researcher **Jean Cote** calls this deliberate play, which he defines as “activities such as backyard soccer or street basketball that are regulated by age-adapted rules and are set up and monitored by the children or adults engaged in the activity. These activities are intrinsically motivating, provide immediate gratification, and are specifically designed to maximize enjoyment.”

Play instills a passion and a love of sport. Play builds all-around athleticism. Perhaps most important, play stimulates brain development. It hastens the growth of the brain centers that regulate emotion and control both attention and behavior. Play inspires thinking and adaptation, promoting creative problem-solving and conflict resolution. It allows children to build their own games, define their own rules, and develop the cognitive skills that are needed, not only for athletics but also for every aspect of life.

In a recent conversation with Kroeten, we got off on a fascinating tangent around creativity and play. Kroeten introduced me to the work of **Stephen Krashen** and his research on language acquisition. Krashen has found that there are two phases of language learning, acquisition and structure. In the acquisition phase, where learners get a variety of comprehensible input through being immersed in the language or through music and media, the learners gain fluency. Learning is unconscious.

Once structure is added and the learners are taught about rules, laws, skills, and techniques, learning becomes conscious. The learners gain accuracy, but the acquisition basically stops. Kroeten equates this to how players learn a dynamic game such as soccer. During the acquisition phase, we want to provide the least amount of structure as possible so the learner will create, try new things, and play without fear of making a mistake.

Later, when we add structure, we can bring about accuracy. The problem is, we all too often focus on structure and accuracy first and then try to coach the creativity back into

them later on. It does not work. “When we teach youth sports in this country, we pretty much focus on the rules, laws, skills, and techniques,” says Kroeten, “and we don’t give any time to the joy and love of play. Only in acquisition can we really improve and become fluent. What we have seen is that when kids move out of acquisition to a local super club, they seem to plateau. They have not put enough time in acquisition.”



Kroeten is not opposed to coaching and structure but believes we need more time to let the kids play before adding too much structure and accuracy to their games. In his research, most of the best players have had a lengthy acquisition phase before they have added extensive structure. And that is why we need to create an environment where kids can simply play, both within our practices and by being encouraged to pick up a ball outside of practice. “Acquisition builds fluency, and structure builds accuracy,” says Kroeten. “When they are kids, they just want to play,” concludes Kroeten.

“They don’t want reviews. They don’t want rewards. If a competitive game is too much, they will naturally drop down a level to a less competitive place.” As the kids get older, they still want fun, but fun changes. It becomes doing the things that they are good at. Yet what Kroeten has also discovered is that when we introduce free play, it can only have one goal: enjoyment.

“If you try to do free play to improve and get better, it will not work,” says Kroeten. “It can only be for one reason, and that is enjoyment. You have to let go of performance in order to really grow from play, and once you do that, when you go into a performance,

you do very well. In that performance you are now playing the game instead of fighting or working the game.”

Our society has devalued play to such an extent that many children no longer value it anymore. This is incredibly sad. I meet many children who struggle to organize a pickup game or select teams, set up a game, and play.

I have tried to run “Free-Play Fridays” at different organizations, and attendance is generally poor. If I run “Skill Development Fridays,” they are packed. We have lost sight of the tremendous value of free play, and we need more situations where coaches provide a safe environment but then step back and let the kids enjoy themselves. We need more organizations to educate their parents on the value of these environments. We need fluency before accuracy, and that comes through free play.

(John O'Sullivan is the founder of the [Changing the Game Project](#) and the host of the [Way of Champions Podcast](#). His latest book, [Every Moment Matters: How the World's Best Coaches Inspire Their Athletes and Build Championship Teams](#), from which this article was excerpted, came out in December of 2019. It is available in paperback and Kindle. His previous books are, [Is It Wise to Specialize?: What Every Parent Needs to Know About Early Sports Specialization and its Effect Upon Your Child's Athletic](#) and [Changing the Game: The Parent's Guide to Raising Happy, High Performing Athletes, and Giving Youth Sports Back to our Kids](#).)

-
-
-

16 comments about "Why free play is a crucial ingredient for player development".

1. **frank schoon**, December 27, 2019 at 10:04 a.m.

Good interview John. What gets me is that learning soccer is so simple but we have thrown the simplicity away through structure, regurgitating it, processing it ,make it an obtuse ,pedantic subject, re-packaged around the concept that you need a coaching license to develop these kids. Van Hanegen ,a dutch great,wrote recently to the process of developing players (youth) and stated we're beginning to lose the essentials of soccer because of these so-called new ideas, structures and other existentials that hinder the development of the youth. Ted Koester, basically is expounding concepts that are over 70 years old. He talking about how my generation ,and older learned the game. In other words, WE ARE REINVENTING THE WHEEL", again. You constantly hear NOW voices saying we need to kids to be free and creative....HELLO , PICKUP SOCCER.

These concepts are NOT NEW and I'm sure you won't hear these at your Coaching Academy while obtaining a license because they deal with structure, organization and ofcourse the aspect of money charging these coaches.

<"kids ,no longer know how to get a pickup game going">. EXACTLY!! Through this kids have lost leadership qualities, creative thinking, by setting up their own rules and structures. Worse, without pickup soccer, skipping that step, the kids are immediately introduced to STRUCTURE ,in the form of a coach with a license who tells what to do, where to go , what you do wrong. From day one they are depended upon the coach making the decisions. That's why today's players,including much older ones

cant' think for themselves, it is a herd mentality, that follow the dictates of the coach.

Kids do have structure even if there is no coach in pickup soccer. That structure is created by playing rules and through playing mixed ages, for the older player presents structure to the younger ones. There is an artificial hierarchy created and all players respect and follow it. Ted mentions ,that kids come back to him for they don't like a club or structured environment. YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO BOTH. This is how I developed. I played and learned most of my soccer in the streets (unstructured) and played and trained at Ajax(structured) a couple times a week. In other words, I have an outlet for creativity in the streets playing Pickup. NEXT POST

Reply

-
2. **Mike Lynch**, December 27, 2019 at 10:31 a.m.

Good article John. In prior days, it helped you couldn't play organized sorts until 8 or so. The result was you did years of free play before joining a team. When structure was introduced, the creative foundation and skills were already embedded. Plus the free play was by imitation, watching parents, siblings , from the sidelines, and parallel playing and making up your own big plays. This is why most high level players in US come from 2nd generation soccer families. Without the good picture and free play, they wouldn't have got where they are.

Reply

-
3. **frank schoon**, December 27, 2019 at 10:48 a.m.

Realize that at Ajax, playing in a more structured environment, so to speak, the youth coaches, who were not licensed but were former players themselves, didn't follow all this pendantic 'garbage' learned at a Coaching School. For example Johan Cruyff, in his youth just beat everybody and dribbled and scored. The coaches never yelled at Johan for dribbling too much or tell him to pass the ball. What they did in order for him to learn is to change his environment without telling he dribbled or the hogged the ball too much.. They simply moved him up a year, making it more difficult to beat so many players. The secret is to let him experience a different ,more difficult environment. WHAT YOU DON'T DO!!! is to tell some kid who is a great dribbler with the ball to not allow what he is good at!!! The reason is that he's currently not mentally developed to understand the other options off the ball. I remember in my first game with Ajax youth, I dribbled and beat 7 players and lost the ball. I had no clue about off the ball options. The coach told my father, not me, that I dribbled too much, but he allowed me to do what I was good at. As the youth gets better or older he will get to learn these options WITHOUT LOSING HIS DRIBBLING SKILLS, which is the most important aspect. But what do you see today, players who are NOT GOOD DRIBBLERS...I wonder why??? Because the youth in the beginning stages are told that dribbling too much is not team play, and it is not good soccer, not efficient or whatever. This comes from coaches who are licensed and should know better but don't. We have structured our youth so much today, putting them in an environment that snuffs out creativity. As a result, we have programmed Wiel Coerver skill drills, or like Ted states "Friday Skill Sessions", all of which you DON'T NEED. But since we have 'SQUEEZED' the living "creativity" out of these kids through all this structured garbage , we really think were doing something by introducing licensed coaches along with these skill drill sessions.

I totally disagree on Ted's statement <"if you try to do free play to improve and get better, it will not work". Players who play lots of pickup soccer, get better by playing a lot, improving their touch, their thinking, their one on one playing savvy. I ,every monday, made it a point to play in a different neighborhood in Amsterdam, to meet up with new, different competition, learn a new move from

different players, a new challenge or way of handling a ball. This is how you build your DNA of soccer. Playing with different size balls, never knowing whether it is a tennis ball or rubber ball, or plastic ball also gave you new experiences upon learning touch on the ball. Everyday of playing was a learning day.

Reply
