

How to develop world-class soccer players

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By Brynna Leslie

A couple of years ago, I signed my two boys up for a winter soccer skills program with the Gloucester Hornets.

Overseen by Hornets' head coach Michael Lanos, the program was exceptionally well-run from the get go. For an hour each Sunday, the kids would do drills and non-competitive practice mini games in the dome at the Hornets' Nest. There were no full-field games, no goalkeepers, no refs and no big kicking. The entire program was focused around maintaining control of the ball.

It was also about allowing players to make their own decisions on the field.

As always, there was a group of enthusiastic parents cheering on Little Johnny from the sidelines. "Go, John," rang the high-pitched voice of one mother during a non-competitive quarter field non-game. It was mildly annoying, but not so bad, really. But then, "John, pass it! PASS the ball, John! PASS IT!!" And that's when we all got the lecture.

Lanos wasn't pleased. He told parents to be quiet. The reason, he told us, that Canada has no presence in World Cup soccer is because of parents like us, screaming from the sidelines. When we shout out commands, we're not allowing the kids to make their own decisions about how to play the game.

"If little Johnny wants to take the ball all the way to the net, then he should do that," said Lanos. "If little Johnny decides it's a good time to pass, then fine. But nobody on the sidelines - none of you - should be telling little Johnny what to do in the heat of the moment."

At the time, I thought it was a little over-the-top, although Lanos was stern enough that I vowed to keep my mouth shut for the rest of the season.

Fast forward two years to World Cup 2014, and I realize Lanos has the job he does because he knows exactly what he's talking about.

Canada currently ranks 110th in the world in men's soccer.

The Globe and Mail's Cathal Kelly cited a number of reasons Canada hasn't been able to develop world class soccer players - we (the parents) are too competitive, there's too much structure to the sport and we don't have many professional soccer teams to inspire kids.

But the thing that stuck with me most was the following quote: "The most important skills in soccer are developed in isolation."

Kelly refers to Brazil, a poor country economically, but one with a record five World Cups. Kids there, he says, play the game obsessively. They're given woven balls from birth; they play pick-up soccer in the streets and monkey-in-the-middle.

They play without worldclass community centres and volunteer coaches. They just play the game.

I read the article to my own boys before the World Cup began. (It's World Cup fever at our house right now). Sometimes, as parents, we strike when the iron's hot. Their recreational league this summer has teams named after those participating in the World Cup. When I told them

Kelly's observation about the importance of learning in isolation, they took it to heart. Yes, I spoiled them. I bought them a replica size four Brazil World Cup soccer ball.

I bought my younger son another Adidas soccer ball, so they can play and play. But the thing is, it's worked. They're out every day after school, dribbling and bouncing the balls off each other's heads. They're biking to the park to shoot at tree targets. They're playing in the morning before they get on the school bus.

I don't have any real aspirations that my kids will become World Cup soccer players. But I'd like to think that their learning in isolation is a step in the right direction for Canada to one day make it again into the finals.

In the meantime, Go, England, Go!