



## Cheshire Innovations Affect All Ages

edited by Dan Woog

Al McWhirter is a busy man. An attorney, he has also spent 25 years as a youth soccer volunteer. He coached boys and girls-including his youngest son, now an under-19 player-all the way up the ranks, at all age groups. He served four years as Connecticut Junior Soccer Association president, and has been active at the national level as well. So three years ago when Tony Carvalho, the president of McWhirter's hometown Cheshire Soccer Club, asked him to become U-8 and U-10 division coordinator, he could have been forgiven for saying, "No thanks. I've done my time." Instead, McWhirter said yes - on one condition. The Cheshire board of directors had to let McWhirter try all the ideas he'd been pondering since he first got involved in soccer.

The board said yes, and McWhirter went to work.

"After all those years, I realized the long-term success of our club depends more on what we do with U-8s and U-10s than any other age," he said. "At most clubs, the directors of those age groups are the least experienced people. They have the most to learn, but as soon as they learn it they move with their kids into older ages.

"There is usually no mechanism for them to pass on their knowledge, so they get replaced with other inexperienced people. Even the ones who know a lot about soccer don't necessarily know how to teach it to 6-, 7-, 8-, and 9- year-olds. It's completely hit-or-miss and inconsistent. The whole idea is to fill that spot with any warm body, because that's the age you'll do the least damage. After 25 years, I've learned that's not true."

Holding on to the ball

McWhirter wanted Cheshire to produce 11-year-old soccer players, not kickball players. To do that, he believed youngsters had to learn to play a possession game from the moment they set foot on the field-even if that day came at age 6.

"If we encourage or allow young players to get rid of the ball with their first touch, they will never possess the skills to enjoy the game and play it well later on," McWhirter said. "But if they learn to take ownership with their first touch, if they are given the dilemma of 'What to do with the ball now?' then they not only learn possession, but all the important skills that follow."

It was not an easy sell. Most U-8 and U-9 coaches thought players were too young to learn such concepts. Coaches habitually put their largest players on defense, told them to bang the ball forward, then use their swiftest athletes up front to chase those balls down and score. The tactic won games-and McWhirter set out to do whatever he could to forbid it.

First he devised a set of "Dos and Don'ts," which he handed every season to every coach and parent. The list forbade shouting instruction to players that urged them to boot the ball.

McWhirter also eliminated all U-10 travel teams. In their place he instituted a development program that brings players into a special development pool whenever they appear ready and capable to do more than play recreational soccer.

The pool program begins in the fall of a child's U-10 year. During that season, coaches identify at least 24 boys and 24 girls who seem capable of and interested in advancing. Pool players participate in one extra practice per week, with an experienced coach.

Friendly games with competitive area teams are scheduled. Each game includes a different mix of pool players; there is no "A" or "B" squad. Players are limited to no more than three such games per season. There are no tryouts; the entire system is based on match and practice observation, discussions, recommendations and invitations.

The next spring, more players-those who have progressed since fall-are added. "We never drop a kid," McWhirter insisted. "We tell kids, we think you're ready to develop more, and now it's our job to help."

There is one tournament at the end for both boys and girls. All pool players are invited. Teams are divided evenly, and for the first time the young players meet outside competition in a tournament setting.

Contrary to many parent's fears, they do fine. Last year, neither of the Cheshire's two girls team lost a match; in fact, both beat Connecticut powerhouses Simsbury and Ridgefield. Both boys teams finished above .500.

McWhirter also instituted a juggling patch program to help young players develop balance, coordination, timing and touch. Each patch gets sewn on uniform sleeves. "The kids work hard to earn the patches," McWhirter noted. "It's great peer incentive. And we've had some surprising results, like a 10-year-old girl who juggled 119 times."

A U-8 child can earn a patch with five juggles.

Solving their own problems

Several years ago, at a United States Youth Soccer Association workshop in San Diego, McWhirter observed a 4-v.-4 tournament in presentation by Dutch national staff coach Ruud Doktor. Players play five 10-minute games. The composition of each team changes with every match. Players earn points based on how many games they win, and how many goals are scored and allowed.

There are no goalkeepers, no referees, not even any parental help from the sidelines. (McWhirter actually handed

duct tape to a parent who tried to help a child tie his laces. "Today is the day Billy trips, and finally learns to tie his shoes," he said.)

The format enables young players to solve their own problems- and because they are playing with new teammates each game, they constantly devise new solutions to new problems. They must even decide who kicks off to start a match. "A kid who wants to play all these 4-v.-4 tournaments can do it 20 times by the end of U-10," McWhirter said. "That means 100 10-minute games."

"That's a lot of self-coaching and problem-solving. It may not help them win the next Saturday's game, but it will help produce better-players when they're older."

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