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Dear Coaches,

It was a pleasure to see all of you on the fields this past Saturday with your players and teams. The players appeared to be enjoying themselves, which is most important during these formative years of their development, and the weather and conditions were much better than opening day!

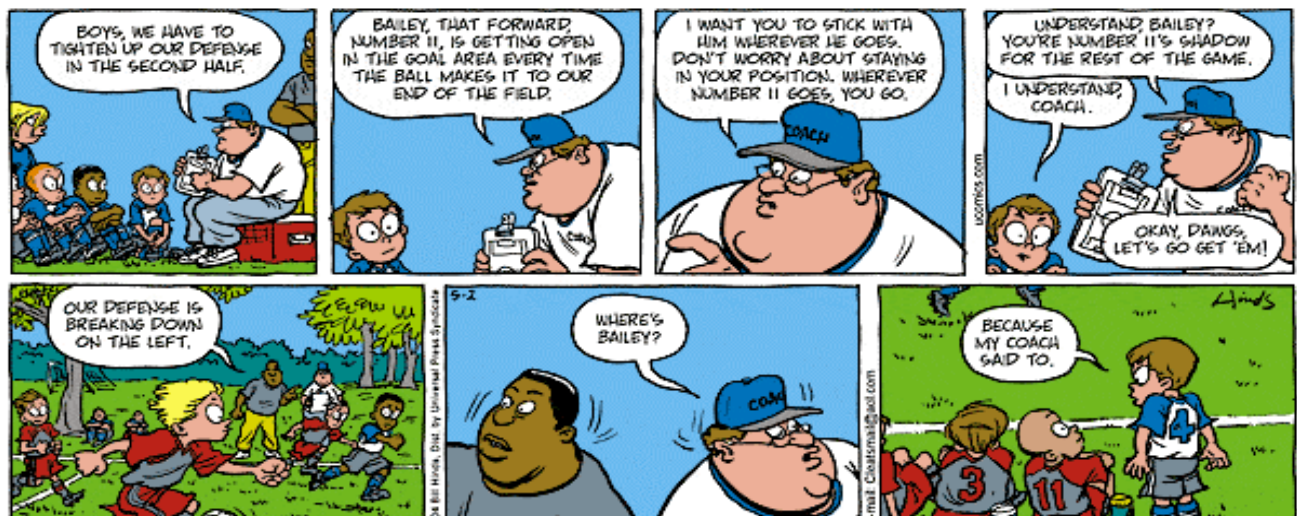
While on the fields Saturday, I made a few observations and I'd like to make a few suggestions at this time based on those observations that I hope might aid in development.

**LOCATION OF PARENTS...**If possible, please kindly remind your team's parents to remain in the areas designated for them – when parents are mixed in with the players and coaches, the environment becomes cluttered and confusing to all.

**MAN-MARKING...**I noticed on a few occasions where some coaches were encouraging their players to "man-mark", or to follow one of the other team's players wherever they roam on the field. Because our younger players are so very literal, they often follow their "mark" all over the field and defend them all of the time – because the coach has given them this assignment, they struggle to differentiate between when they can stop "marking" this player and when defending stops and attacking begins. It makes sense to us as adults, but this is a complicated concept for them and lends toward developing them as "soccer-robots" instead of "free-thinking" players. My suggestion when talking to your team about defensive responsibilities is to simply assign them "areas of responsibility" on the field. For example, player "x" is responsible for certain areas of the field when players come into it. That might be player "y" from the opponent at first and then a few minutes later, could be player "z" from the opponent's team. By employing this method of defending, we are teaching the kids to think about dangerous spaces on the field and to differentiate between when to attack and when to defend. Additionally, encouraging this also helps the players spread out on the field and break up the "bee-hive" or "herd-ball" bi-product of players bunching up – can you imagine if all of the players on the field were "man-marking" – it would create a giant blob! Or consider the following graphic where one player takes the assignment so literally that he follows his "mark" off of the field!

## CLEATS

BY BILL HINDS



**DEVELOPING TWO-WAY PLAYERS...** Adding to the notion mentioned above regarding players making the proper decisions for when to attack and when to defend, I have found that the easiest way to help them understand their roles is simple – when your team has the ball, everyone is an attacker and when the other team has the ball, everyone on your team is a defender! I noticed there were some players placed in roles where they weren't permitted to cross the midfield line when their team has the ball – they were coached to "stay back". What we know about young players, particularly those playing under the age of 10 years of age, is that they struggle to circulate the ball by passing the ball over distance. In most occasions, when the ball moves from one place to another on the field, it is because it is dribbled or randomly caroms off of a few players. Coaches – this is ok – this is part of where these players are in their developmental stages. However, since we know that it is highly unlikely for a 7-year player to kick a ball further than 10 yards, I ask you to consider the following questions: do we really need to keep one or two players back on your defensive half of the field? If the opponent wins the ball and is now looking to attack, since we know that attack is most likely to take place via a dribble, aren't your players close enough in proximity that they can chase them? If a player is forced to "stay-back" they can't play in the game until play comes to them. It is important that we develop "two-way players" – players who can attack and defend. When we cast or label players as an attacker or a defender, they tend to internalize this label at a young age and tend to develop as "one-way players". I encourage you to play all of your players in all different areas of the field – up, back, left, right, central, outside – but no matter where you've placed them, please give them the freedom to roam and go get the game!

**DESIGNATED THROWERS...** For the age groups U8 and above where throw-ins are utilized, on a few occasions I noticed coaches directing certain players to throw the ball in. On some of those occasions, player "A" had the ball in his or her hands and was preparing to throw the ball in and the coach instructed the player not to throw it in and summoned someone else to do this. When we designate only certain players to throw the ball in, we are in essence communicating to all other players on the field that they are not capable of throwing the ball in and that only the player(s) you designate to do so are good at it. Even if this is the case, how will the players who don't throw the ball in well ever improve this skill if they don't have the opportunity to experience repetitions in game scenarios? When a player is enthusiastic about chasing the ball down and throwing it in, I encourage you allow them to experience this and resist the urge to direct a stronger thrower to execute the throw-in. Consider the comic below – although the sport illustrated is baseball, the coach is encouraging the player not to swing or experience what it means to hit, so that the team can benefit from a base runner.



**COACHING COMMENTS...**I noticed many confused players when in the middle of a game, they were receiving instruction from their coach as to what to do, who to pass to, where to run, etc. In his book "Just Let the Kids Play," Bob Bigelow best explains how we as coaches sometimes complicate the environment when he writes: **"Kids playing a sport of near-continuous motion (basketball, soccer, hockey, lacrosse) make two decisions each second, according to Dan Whitham, a Boston-area coach and children's physical education teacher. Do you think you will help by adding yet a third piece of information to each second? The kids may hear you, but can they understand you? If they can understand you, by the time they can act on it, your command is probably obsolete. Everyone else has moved to a different spot."** (Just Let the Kids Play, pg. 161) So, since giving direction and coaching is certainly something we as coaches must do, we must find an effective way of getting our message to our players. I recommend trying something that I try to hold myself to when on the sidelines – limit the time I give instruction or direction during a game to the brief moments in the game when the ball is stopped because of a foul or is out of play.

Additionally, it is important to limit the comments you make to the players on your team. I heard some coaches remarking about other players during the game making statements like "you are faster than her!" and "he isn't as strong as you". Try to be creative in finding ways to encourage your players without putting down the other children – it will create a much more positive environment for all as a result. If you can incorporate these adjustments to your coaching style, I think what you'll find is that the game will flow better, players will make more decisions on their own, and you will have a voice at the end of the game! ☺

**IN A NUTSHELL...**Most of the items above are bi-products of us as coaches wanting to obtain a favorable result, or win. I invite you to resist the urge to coach for results and focus on coaching with a focus geared toward enjoyment, participation, and development.

I hope you have found some of my observations and suggestions helpful to you as you move forward with your coaching experience. I'll be at a tournament this weekend, but am scheduled to be back out on the fields on Saturday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>. If you have any feedback or questions about my comments here, please feel free to contact me before the 2<sup>nd</sup>, or make sure we have a chance to talk in person on the fields.

Thank you again for dedicating your time to the players and teams of Concord Soccer and I look forward to seeing you on the fields again soon!

Sincerely,

*Fran Kulas*

Director of Coach and Player Development

