

The Courage to Be Patient

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*SoccerNation News welcomes our newest columnist, **Christian Lavers** - a man who is making changes in the landscape of youth soccer in America. President of the ECNL, Lavers was the key coach in founding this elite player league for girls. Lavers, a charming, well-spoken man, is also a respected journalist and we are thrilled to welcome his insights on soccer.*

On March 30, in San Diego, CA, U.S. Soccer Director of Coaching **Dave Chesler** gave a presentation outlining concepts in long-term athlete development to approximately 50 coaches within the **Elite Clubs National League**.

During the presentation, he quoted **U.S. Soccer Women's National Team Coach Pia Sundhage** regarding the key quality a youth soccer coach must have in order to develop great soccer players. In her words, "great youth coaches must have the courage to be patient."

Those five words – "the courage to be patient" – give a picture of the great potential of American soccer and at the same time highlight the problems that exist in the reality of an ultra-competitive youth sports environment. More specifically, having the "courage to be patient" seems to involve doing four very difficult things, and the failure to do any one of these four things may explain the disconnect between potential and reality.

But before discussing these four components and looking at exactly what "the courage to be patient" implies for coaching, it's important to first identify the

three most common statements that are raised whenever the concepts of development and winning are mingled:

- **Development is More Important than Winning.** This statement has been made so often in the past several years it has almost become cliché, and it's hard to find a qualified coach anywhere who would argue with it. That said, this message should still be repeated if only to provide a constant counter-point to the pressure to win that seems to exist in almost every game, at every age, in every youth sport. Unfortunately, acknowledging this truth is very different than implementing it in trainings and games every day. Many more coaches and clubs repeat this statement in advertising and promotional material far more than they practice it on the field.
- **At Some Age, Learning to Win is Important.** This is another statement that few people would disagree with; the question becomes, “when does winning become more important?” The three common stages of athletic development (training to train, training to compete, and training to win) provide one measurement. There is much debate about where the boundaries are in each stage, and the precise demarcation point is relatively unimportant. In fact, these boundaries may actually differ slightly for individual players and teams depending on their own maturity and technical development.
- **Proper Player Development, in the Long-Term, Will Lead to Winning.** This is the final statement in the winning and development triumvirate. It neatly sums up the goals, (at least the most commonly stated ones), of nearly every youth coach: (i) develop players; and (ii) have competitive success.

The problem with the above three statements is that, while few would argue with any of them, even fewer actually implement them; in other words, these ideas are very rarely realized. For a small minority of people, this failure is because of an overwhelming need to chase trophies, at any cost, and the short-term ego boost associated with winning them. However, for most people, the failure to implement these statements is more because of a failure to have “the courage to be patient.”

As alluded to above, having “the courage to be patient” means doing four very difficult things:

1) Resisting External Pressure. This entails the ability to resist pressure from parents, players, competitors and peers for immediate results. Failure to resist this pressure can be seen when coaches neglect to spend sufficient time training technical skills because of over-emphasis on team shape, set pieces or other tactical areas. Emphasis on tactical points and set pieces may result in potential short-term success at low levels but is almost a guaranty of long-term failure at high levels. This failure can even be seen in a coach's tension or nerves on the sideline when his or her team has possession of the ball.

2) Controlling Internal Desire. This means controlling the internal pressure we all feel to have quick success to bolster confidence or validate methods. Failure to control this pressure can be seen when coaches train with one style of play, and then play a totally different way in games in order to win. Changing styles of play from training to games sends mixed messages to players about the "right way" to play and undermines confidence in playing attractive soccer. *This failure can also often be seen in the coach's demeanor.*

3) Being a Great Teacher. Being a great teacher means having both the ability to teach players the increasingly subtle and sophisticated cues, concepts and ideas to play at higher levels, as well as the ability to inspire players to believe they can achieve great things and to work hard in pursuit of ambitious goals. Poor coaches / teachers are often times those that refuse to study how to teach concepts and skills in different and better ways, to "steal" training ideas from other coaches, or to continually educate themselves about the learning and development process. A low ceiling for a coach will usually in turn set a low ceiling for the players. Similarly, failure to inspire players to be ambitious and goal-oriented sets a limit on the player's long-term performance.

4) Maintaining Faith. This means having confidence in your teaching ability and in the value of a long-term athlete development philosophy, over time and in all circumstances. Changing philosophies, styles and beliefs when the inevitable adversity of short-term setbacks hits will undercut even the best teachers. (One of the biggest signs of a coach with this confident patience is a consistent determination from his / her players to solve pressure with thought and skill in adverse situations – even when the voice in many observers' heads is "serve it!")

If there is a problem in any one of these four areas, the goal of long-term athlete development fails. When considering how difficult it is to do all four consistently, it is not surprising that few people are consistently great developers of athletic talent. It takes both great personal fortitude and great ability to have the courage to be patient. So now what?

The first step in solving a problem is identifying and analyzing its causes so that you can start to consider possible solutions. Acknowledging the existence of the pressure to win (external or internal), and starting a dialog with like-minded peers about how to resist it or manage it will help identify solutions or fortify convictions.

Educating parents and players as to what long-term athlete development really is, why it is important, and identifying the path (and the obstacles) in the process, is another way to help reduce external pressure and solidify personal belief.

Being a vocal and constant advocate and implementer of the concepts of long-term athletic development will inspire others to take steps in the same direction, even if they are small. Commitment to continuing education as a soccer coach, and to ongoing learning about teaching methods, will shorten the path to individual and competitive success.

As noted by U.S. Soccer Women's Development Director **Jill Ellis**, there are places and clubs across the country where these things are occurring, but not nearly enough of them. These are places where "the composure, skill and thought process of the players reflects an environment where they were consistently encouraged for many years to think, pass, and solve problems with skill without a primary concern about the result of the game."

The reality of this problem is that there will never be one perfect solution. Coaching styles will vary greatly from one coach to another, some players will always be more talented or driven than others, and the vision of the "right way to play" will be slightly different everywhere. Even executing the philosophy perfectly will not guarantee the success of every player, the understanding of every parent, or the support of every peer. Successful long-term athlete development will always require commitment and mental strength from the individual athlete, and support from their family.

Bearing these issues in mind, the important thing is to start getting more players, coaches, and organizations thinking about what it actually means to develop athletes for the long-term, and then thinking about what it actually takes to develop athletes for the long-term.

Once these questions are asked, coaches and organizations can determine whether they are really doing everything they can to facilitate the process. In that self-reflection, many may find that the failure to satisfy the development and winning triumvirate discussed above, and to have the "courage to be

patient” has much to do with maintaining faith. **Ian Barker**, Director of Coaching Education for the **NSCAA** has referred to this as “the courage to see the plan through.” In his words: “Once a direction is discussed, determined and implemented it needs time to be accomplished. Too often, a hasty response to criticism can lead to abandonment of a plan before its efficacy can be truly assessed. It is critical for the American soccer community to have an appropriate degree of self-confidence and belief in a well-thought out developmental plan.”

And perhaps, therein lies a big part of the answer to the problem.

It is very difficult to:

1. Create a solid developmental plan based on study, research, and experience,
2. Continually assess its impact and adjust it accordingly without abandoning fundamental principles, and
3. All the while resisting continual pressure from the critics that inevitably arise when immediate (or even short-term) glory isn’t immediately captured.

The individuals that can do all these things over the long-term – that truly have “the courage to be patient” – are rare.

Those that are around now need to be identified and empowered, and those that have this potential for the future need to be mentored and supported. Each additional coach with this courage will slowly close the gap between American potential and reality – and will help elevate the quality of soccer eventually at every level.