

Developmental Characteristics of U.S. Male and Female National Team Players

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*Looking back, I realized that the
simple games I played were
crucial to honing the skills that
would provide a livelihood for me
and lead to glorious moments,
such as captaining a World Cup
team. (Claudia Renya, 2004 p.2)*

Landon Donovan
Soccer America Magazine, July 2002

“As a kid you need to touch the ball as much as you can. You should always be with the ball. You should have a feeling that wherever the ball is, you can do anything with it. No matter where it is, where it is on your body, how it’s spinning, how it’s coming at you, the speed it’s coming at you, anything. You can learn the tactical side of the game later. It’s amazing to me that people put so much emphasis on trying to be tactical and worry about winning when it doesn’t matter when you’re 12 years old. We’re going to have big, strong, fast players. We’re Americans, we’re athletes. But if we never learn at an early age to be good on the ball, then it’s just useless.”

Purpose of Study

- To identify developmental traits and characteristics of those individuals whom have played or are currently playing on the male and female senior U.S. Soccer National Teams.
- If there are common developmental traits and characteristics of elite soccer players, then it may help us to better understand and enhance the development of all soccer players.

Research Questions

- What are the demographic characteristics of U.S. Men & Women National Team Players?
- What are the parental influences on the development of the elite soccer player?
- How do developmental traits, i.e., early maturer-late bloomer, of the individual contribute to the development of the elite soccer player?

Research Questions

- What is the competitive history (experiences) of the elite soccer player?
- What factors contributed to selecting soccer as the sport of choice?
- How would you describe your childhood practice/training environment

Methods

- Instrument Development
 - The initial instrument was developed by the researchers based on the research questions. This is a retrospective study that will require the respondents to recall aspects of their personal soccer development. A pilot survey was presented to seven women professional soccer players in June of 2003. The pilot survey consisted of 14 questions to identify player demographics and characteristics of elite soccer player development. From the results and focus group discussions the instrument was revised to include follow-up statements regarding the confidence of their recall. Items addressing maturational patterns, parental involvement and overall sport participation were added. The instrument was revised by the researchers and presented to Dr. Michael Weissbuch, a sport sociologist who contributed to the additional of five qualitative questions. The researchers again revised the instrument and added a section regarding a players training environment. Finally the instrument was reviewed by researchers at Ohio University and deemed to have content validity.

Methods

- Data Collection
 - A web-based survey was distributed through the U.S. Soccer Hall of Fame and the U.S. National Team Members Players' Association.
 - The membership pool from the USNTPA was 70 and a return rate of 67% was achieved. (N = 47; 22 women, 25 men)
 - The distribution through the NSHOF was not effective due to the small number of national players who have also been inducted into the Hall.
- Data Analysis
 - This is a descriptive retrospective study that utilizes quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data will include descriptive statistics of the categorical data while qualitative data will describe any emerging themes from the open-ended questions.

Results

- At what age did you begin to play organized soccer? N = 47
 - Female = 22 M = 5.4
 - Male = 25 M = 5.7
- At what age did you first identify with a position? N = 45
 - N_f = 21 M = 10.76
 - (one respondent wrote: "still don't have one.")
 - N_m = 24 M = 10.73

- What position was it?

	Fwd	M/F	MF	Def	GK
Female	12	1	3	2	4
Male	13	0	7	3	1
Total	25	1	10	5	5

Did you play more than one position during your career?

N = 46

F = 20 (95.2%) Yes 1 (4.8%) No

M = 24 (96%) Yes 1 (4%) No

- At what age do you recall when you first had a tryout for a team?

- $M_{\text{total}} = 11.34$

- $M_f = 10.72$ (41% were 10 or younger, 59% were 11 or older)

- $M_m = 11.88$ (32% were 10 or younger, 68% were 11 or older)

- Did you make the team?

- Two males did not.

- Would you describe yourself as a(n):

	Early Maturer	Average Development	Late Bloomer
F	7 (31.8)	13 (59.1)	2 (9.1)
M	7 (29.1)	12 (50)	5 (20.8)
T	14 (30.4)	25 (54.3)	7 (15.2)

- As a youth player did you play pick-up games?

– N = 47

- Female 11 (50) Yes 11 (50) No
- Male 21 (84) Yes 4 (16) No

- At what age did you switch from recreational to competitive soccer?

– $M_{\text{total}} = 10.83$ (n=46)

– $M_{\text{female}} = 10.86$ (n=22)

– $M_{\text{male}} = 10.81$ (n=24)

- Did you incur any significant injuries as a youth player? N = 47

– 6 (12.8%) Yes 41 (87.2%) No

- Female 4 (18.2%) Yes 18 (81.8%) No
- Male 2 (8%) Yes 23 (92%) No

- As a youth player, were you provided with any training outside of the team, such as a personal trainer? (N = 47)

– Yes 11 (23.4%) No 36 (76.6%)

- Female Yes 5 (22.7%) 17 (77.3%) No
- Male Yes 6 (24%) 19 (76%) No

- Other than soccer, did you participate in other organized sports?
- Elementary School
 - Total M-F N = 38 (80.9%)
- Middle School
 - Total M-F N = 42 (89.4)
- High School
 - Total M-F N = 38 (80.9)
- College
 - Total M-F N = 14 (12.8)
- Other
 - Total M-F N = 6 (12.8)

- How would you describe your level of motivation for sport participation up to age 12?
 - Male – Female N = 45
 - Not interested, but parents signed me up.
 N = 0
 - Mutual level of interest between myself and parents. N = 14 (30.4)
 - Highly motivated, self-directed.
 N = 32 (69.6)

- How would you describe your level of motivation for sport participation between the ages of 13-18?
 - Male – Female
 - a) Not interested, but parent(s) pressured me. N = 0
 - b) Mutual level of interest between myself and parents. N = 5 (10.6)
 - c) Highly motivated, self-directed. N = 43 (91.5)

Parental Involvement

- 51.1% of Fathers played some identified role during their son or daughters youth soccer career.
 - 48.9% had no role.
- 24.5% of Mothers played some identified role during their son or daughters youth soccer career.
 - 75.5% had no role

Playing Environment

In general, how would you describe your youth soccer practices?

Please select the appropriate rating scale.

1-Drill oriented to 5-Game/activities

- Female N = 22
 - Male N = 24
- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1. 4 (18.2) | 1. 7 (29.2) |
| 2. 6 (27.3) | 2. 6 (25) |
| 3. 8 (36.4) | 3. 5 (20.8) |
| 4. 3 (13.6) | 4. 5 (20.8) |
| 5. 1 (4.5) | 5. 1 (4.2) |

Playing Environment

In general, how would you describe the coaching style of your youth soccer coaches? Please select the appropriate rating scale. 1-Coach-Centered to 5-Athlete-Centered

- Female N = 22
 - Male N = 24
- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1. 4 (18.2) | 1. 7 (29.2) |
| 2. 6 (27.3) | 2. 6 (25) |
| 3. 8 (36.4) | 3. 5 (20.8) |
| 4. 3 (13.6) | 4. 5 (20.8) |
| 5. 1 (4.5) | 5. 1 (4.2) |

- Why did you choose soccer over other sports that you may have played? (Women)
 - I just loved it and I loved being part of the team.
 - Soccer was the sport that I excelled at the most and had the most fun playing. I don't know whether I was good at it because I enjoyed it, or if I enjoyed it because I was good at it.
 - I liked to run around and I think I knew I was better at soccer than the other sports. Plus I loved oranges at half-time. (seriously I did like the oranges)

- Why did you choose soccer over other sports that you may have played? (Men)
 - Because there were few rules, stoppages, and I could be creative.
 - I liked it and my dad did to. It was something that we could do together.
 - It was more stimulating than any of the other sports I had contact with. I liked the impact/control I could have over the game, know that my actions meant something.
 - Neighborhood setting and, mom and dad were involved in the game

- If you could change one thing about your youth soccer experience, what would it be? (Female)
 - Seven responded with nothing or there isn't anything I would change.
 - I wish I had better coaching. They mainly had a football background.
 - I would have trained more on my own.
 - Would have had more fun.
 - I wish that I played on more competitive teams, in more competitive leagues and better tournaments. I did not learn much, or travel.
 - More support from family.

- If you could change one thing about your youth soccer experience, what would it be? (Male)
 - Seven responded with nothing or not much.
 - I would have liked to have played 4v4 or 5v5 up until about age 10. The less numbers the more individual development a player receives.
 - I wish there were better more experienced coaches to teach kids fundamentals at an early age. I was lucky I had my father, if I didn't I'd be screwed.

- What would you describe as your best youth soccer experience? FEMALE
 - The team party sleepovers and the friends I made from the teams I played with.
 - Getting oranges at half-time, snacks after the games, and going to 7/11 for a super slurpee if I scored goals.
 - Tournaments
 - The last year that I was in recreational soccer my team went all the way to the championships and won. I still remember things from that game, the girls on the team and our coach where the best thing to happen my future career in soccer. I learned so much about, not just soccer that year, it was more of life things. I still have the medal we won!

- What would you describe as your best youth soccer experience? MALE
 - There wasn't an incredible amount of pressure from my parents. It was enjoyable.
 - My experiences with the ODP programs. Being able to compare myself with some of the best youth players in the country at the time was a real motivator.
 - Playing pick-up games with teammates and friends.

Please make any other comments you deem important regarding your youth soccer experiences and development as a soccer player. FEMALE

- I think what's made me a great goalkeeper is playing on the field for all those years as well as playing other sports to help me be quicker, and more coordinated.
- Important to have fun and parents should focus on that as well for a child's enjoyment of the sport.
- I think my parents' involvement was important. They were very supportive. They came to every game and my father drove me to all of my practices. They didn't need to push me though, since I was self-motivated.

- I think the emphasis in the clubs today has changed from player development to winning. I believe the players should be able to play up age groups if they are talented enough. I also believe that girls should be able to play on boys teams if they are good enough. It is also very good for girls to train with and against boys. Lastly, I have witnessed many coaches encouraging young players to play soccer and only soccer which I disagree with. I think they kids should be allowed to play as many sports as they can at least until 15 or 16 so they can better develop their overall athleticism. Several studies have shown that this is the case.

- Please make any other comments you deem important regarding your youth soccer experiences and development as a soccer player. MALE
 - Played pick-up soccer almost every day which was the most important factor.
 - My parents were a great support net for me . . . they rarely criticized my play and sacrificed a lot for me to play competitively growing up. I enjoyed my youth soccer experience that it's really hard to think of really any negative experiences.

- The training I did on my own made the most difference in my development. Technique, fitness, etc.
- My youth soccer experience was fundamental to who I am today. Most of my long-term friendships have come from people that I played youth soccer with.
- It is all about the kids and them having fun!!!!

Discussion

- Soccer in the United States is well established in all 50 states and more children than ever before are playing some form of the game. The goal of this study was to identify the childhood developmental characteristics and traits of former and current male and female U.S. Soccer National Team Players. The intent was to gain insight as to the type of childhood experiences, the role and influences of coaches and parents, the contextual soccer environment, and the context in which they played as children.

Discussion – Characteristics & Demographics

- Did not differ along gender lines which is clearly a testament to gender equity.
- Family socioeconomic status is not so encouraging in that lower-class or as some would describe as the urban or rural child is either not making it through the system or not being provided the appropriate soccer opportunities.
- Currently there are initiatives from the U.S. Soccer Foundation and the Urban Soccer Programs Collaborative (UPSC) to address this issue as well as further study in identifying the barriers to both structured and unstructured play opportunities is needed.

Discussion – Highly Motivated

- A common thread among the participants in this study is that they had lots of opportunity to play primarily in unstructured environments.
- It is our belief that players who rely solely on structured programs will not progress and develop the technical and tactical nuances that will take them to higher levels of competitive play. Clubs and recreation programs created to provide playing opportunities for children as young as 4 years-old would be well served to create an environment that encourages play with minimal structure and assign adults who are best suited to work with young children to help facilitate play in games that foster decision-making and problem solving.

Discussion – Specialization

- Parents are made to believe that in order to achieve any level of success you need to select either a primary sport or a single sport as early as age 10. The respondents starting at the age of under-6 soccer reflects the current U.S. system of children joining teams, however they still appear to hold onto the notion that variety is the spice of life. Eighty-one percent indicated that they participated in more than one sport in high school and sometimes beyond. The respondents indicated they felt that being involved in other sports actually enhanced their overall athletic ability and made them a better soccer player.

Discussion – Maturation

- With the emphasis on early identification will the individual who doesn't have the prerequisite skills by age 12 still have a chance for continued involvement? This is of particular interest to the late bloomer. Only 15% described themselves as late bloomers. It is fairly clear in the literature that children who are born in the first half of a birth year have distinct advantages over children born later in the same year. Too often, decisions are made about future ability and potential to play soccer at later periods strictly because a child is dominating play at very young ages. We know that children grow and develop at different rates, and there is great concern that children who take longer to mature are impacted negatively about their future in soccer and possibly other sports as well.

Discussion – Positional Roles

- It is the position of the authors that strict positional play at early developmental stages is not a key beneficial aspect to player development. This was echoed in the responses of the participants. While many eventually identified a specific position, very few sought out or were placed in specific positions at the early stages of their involvement in organized soccer. The position of goalkeeper, which is quite a different role from that of a field player was also not stressed at younger ages. Many played various positions and did so for quite a long period of time.

Discussion – Team Selection (Try-outs)

- Most participants were not exposed to this process until nearly age 11 and nearly everyone was selected. Two did not make their initial team during this tryout process. Most felt that the selection process today in the United States is occurring too early an age. The authors recommend U-12 as the initial period where the selection process may begin but emphasize that alternative playing opportunities must be available for every player in this age group. Too many players are not being selected for their initial team and are dropping out of the sport altogether. This issue again appears to be tied directly to growth and development (maturity), rather than ability. The implications would confirm the belief that the system is not protecting the late maturing child and we are possibly losing some of our best talent.

Discussion – Gender Equity

- The women in this sample could be considered the “first wave” of elite U.S. women soccer players, either by desire or circumstance sought out alternative experiences. In many communities, coed teams became the norm because there were not enough players to have gender specific programs. Many of the female respondents felt this was an advantage to their development and allowed them to develop skills because they played in more competitive environments. Many women players sought out opportunities to play against males as they grew older. They felt this was very beneficial to their development. Now that more and more females are playing soccer, coed programs are less common than a generation ago.

Discussion – Parental Involvement

- The respondents (male and female alike) stated that they felt their parents had provided an appropriate level of involvement during their early years of playing soccer. Emphasis was placed on the quality of the experience and their effort and enjoyment, rather than the outcome.
- Most felt that their parents encouraged their involvement but had no future expectation of a college athletic scholarship or professional contract. Even though their parent-coach was perceived as a positive, there was no significant advantage or disadvantage for player success as a result of their parent assuming a formal soccer role (ex. Coach or club official).

Discussion – Parental Involvement

- We believe the positive parental involvement could be a key element in the successes of these elite soccer players who were able to develop their own level of motivation. Fun, a positive social interaction and feeling part of the team, was also a common theme for continued motivation and participation for the participants. Their responses to open-ended questions revealed early enjoyable experiences through being able to run around, continuous action, few rules to understand, and playing with friends. These responses underscore the importance of providing a child with a quality first experience.

Summary

- It will be crucial for the development of the elite soccer player in the United States to balance our competitive free market society with that of better aligning the developmental growth in all aspects of maturation (physical, social, emotional, mental). The old saying: *You can't fool Mother Nature*, has relevance for player development. We can certainly enhance the soccer experience, but we would be unwise to try to force the issue through such actions as U8/9 State competitions, talent identification before the age of 14, strict positional roles for players under the age of 10, over-coaching through too much "instructional" information during games by coaches and parents, and too much organizational structure at the youth level.

Recommendations

- This study was an attempt to explore the developmental characteristics of male and female national team players and it is our hope to extend this line of inquiry to specific national teams currently in place within the various other age groups. It is also recommended that urban and rural player development be given a higher priority and that the influence of our coaching education programs be determined.

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