

## Quality vs. Quantity

Bobby Howe is back as our guest writer this month and as usual, makes us think about our role as soccer coaches. Most people in soccer in North America know Bobby, but if you don't take a peek at his Bio so you know that he knows what he is talking about.

### Quality vs. Quantity

#### Gazelles Never Could Play Soccer

by Bobby Howe

At first glance, John Smith could be the model of a promising young striker playing for any elite club in the area. He is tall, fast, aggressive and athletic. He is dedicated to the sport. He trains all the time, running ten kilometers daily, doing 50 push-ups and 100 sit-ups. He hits the weight room three times a week. He can run like a gazelle.

That is all fine and good, but John made a serious training mistake. Gazelles cannot play soccer. They never could.

During the tryouts, John realizes he is not prepared to play the game of soccer. He begins to lose confidence. His touch is off and he gives away the ball too often. The coach cut John. The story of John Smith is all too common across the country and here in Washington State, among elite clubs.

Sure, John was motivated, but he wasted his training time. He trained too much. He bet that the quantity of his effort would see him through. However, his lack of quality training, with either the ball, or creating balance between bursts of

intense physical activity combined with vital rest and recovery, eventually undermined his simple determination.

Soccer experts, here and abroad, stress the importance of balanced activity: rest and recovery are as vital to optimum performance. Equally crucial is the quality of the training itself.

"Even though rest and recovery is not a glamour topic like speed and agility, it lays the foundation for planning all your training," said Taylor Tollison, former trainer for the National Schools Fitness Foundation.

"One of the biggest mistakes you can make as a coach or parent is to think that the harder and more frequent an athlete exercises the better athlete he will be."

Here in the United States, however, endorsing a "more is better" training approach - one where players improve through more training, more games, more tournaments, etc. - continues to be the Holy Grail for many elite coaches. Some clubs fear that they need to do more to keep pace or stay ahead of rival clubs. This fear, or insecurity, has prompted some clubs to identify and train players at seven, eight and nine years of age. Certainly, kids of this age need to play. But over-coaching and overly structured practices kill the passion for the game. Young players need to experience soccer's joys and discover their own passion without adults hovering over them. Seven, eight and nine year olds must be allowed to be kids.

Who is right? Is it quantity or is it quality? The answer is not easy. But more recent research into the training of elite athletes, as well as my own observations over years of elite coaching, argues for "less is more." Quality should always trump quantity. Stressing quality training, or finding balance between physical activity and rest and recovery, is more effective in helping young elite players reach their full potential. The results of this approach may not win championships in the short term. However, it will develop better soccer players over the long haul, and players who will more likely keep a passion for the game for their entire lives.

Soccer is a game of skill, imagination, creativity and quick decisions. Coaching at youth level is all about enhancing those elements of the game. Practices must be stimulating, challenging and economical. They must also be well planned, realistic and age and ability appropriate. A dynamic one-hour practice is much better than a static ninety- minute snooze.

Games must motivate players to want to improve performance. Consideration must be given to the size of the fields, the size of the goals, the length of game, time and the length of the season. The same holds true for the age/ability levels of the players and substitutions must allow for quality playing time.

Elite youth soccer players should play for no more than forty weeks a year, even for the most serious players. It should be less for players' U-11 to U-13. The seasons must have rhythm and balance, where coaches consider rest equally to work. Players must prepare for a purpose - such as for league play or cup play, and young elite players should strive to reach their athletic peak during those competitions. Too much unnecessary training, or sessions focused on hardcore fitness over skills, burn players out.

"Coaches must take into consideration the positive effects of adequate rest periods during training, alternating hard and light practices through the season and allowing days off and time away from soccer to recuperate and rekindle a passion for the game," according to the U.S. Soccer National Coaching Manual.

Another area where quality should trump quantity has to do with the amount of tournaments during a season. Teams are always tempted to attend too many tournaments. Coaches should research the tournaments to find the appropriate preparation for players. Coaches should place their teams in tournaments that challenge players at their levels of ability and where the outcomes remain uncertain.

Tournaments must also be tests of skill and not tests of endurance. Tournaments that schedule two games per day should reduce the total time of the match so that players put less strain on their bodies. Tournament games should also start at a reasonable hour to enable players to eat at an appropriate time before the game to create the energy for optimum performance.

Most coaches plan technical, tactical and physical training sessions with great precision and many also recognize the importance of the psychological component in all their work.

The latter is the most challenging aspect to integrate into training, and yet it promotes a higher-level of quality and one that often separates the truly great from the great.

Developing quality players in every facet of the game is what we should be doing and what we are trying to accomplish at Emerald City. Remember young John's mistakes. We want thinking, quick-witted, high-speed players - not gazelles.

Bobby is now the Director of Coaching for Emerald City FC in Seattle, Washington State.