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Clarifying Some Misconceptions Around LTPD

While the LTPD initiative is a directive from Canadian Sport for Life and mandated by the Canadian Soccer Association, it is not something we are doing in Ontario because “we have to”. It’s time that we change a system that needs to progress and evolve for the benefit of our youngsters in the game.

That said, as we move forward with the phased-in implementation of the Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) initiative across the province, it is important to talk openly about some of the “push-back” that we are receiving around what LTPD means.

I spoke with many of our members at the recent Soccer Conference 2012 and heard first-hand about various perceptions that some people have about LTPD. I’ve also seen some interesting (and not always accurate) media coverage on this subject.

Let me briefly try to address some of these concerns that I’ve noted.

1) LTPD kills competition

In fact, a major newspaper article in the Globe & Mail recently used that as a headline. While the article itself was well crafted, the “headline” was misleading from my perspective. LTPD is not “killing competition”. Yes, the intent is to move away at the early ages (U4 through U12) from scores and standings. But there will still be plenty of games and lots of competition. But before we focus on wins and losses, we first have to teach our boys and girls the *basic skills* so they will be in a position to compete successfully—when competition and results actually matter. So we need to focus on proper instruction, skill development and positive coaching approaches at those early “golden learning” years of learning. Importantly, young players who want a future in the game will find there is all kinds of competition awaiting them as they mature in the game—when it makes sense to compete seriously and focus on “winning”.

For those who may not be aware, the new Ontario Player Development League (OPDL) kicks in at U13 starting in 2014. There will be plenty of opportunity for not only great training



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also intense, high-level competition. So no, we are not “killing competition”—far from it. But we are only introducing a focus on “winning and losing” in the later years of their development—when it makes sense for the athletes, who are our priority.

2) Young people need to learn to “win” and lose”

While this is true, we’re kidding ourselves if we think this has to be “taught” when children are 7, 8 or 9 years old. Youngsters who are in our sport purely for fun and fitness don’t need to learn to “win” or “lose” at those young ages. Those who aspire to play at a more serious and competitive level will need to learn about winning and losing—at some point. The question is one of timing. Just as we do in the academic system, for example, our young people learn the basics before we test them on complex formulas. Kids are not taught algebra before they master arithmetic.

Academically, we have an entire youth development phase where young people are “assessed”, yes, but the “system” works to ensure that they are not discouraged from continuing to move ahead with their schooling. In fact, we consider it a major societal failure when kids drop out of school. When that happens too much, we study and assess how we can do a better job of motivating youngsters, teaching them better and keeping them focused and in school—so it has real meaning for them.

It’s the same thing with youth sports, including in soccer. When kids drop out because of pushy parents or because coaches sit kids “on the bench” in house-league because they need to “win”, we lose thousands of kids every year—and we don’t have to.

Again, there will be PLENTY of competition when they are ready for it and when it actually matters. Learning to deal with winning and losing—and rejection—will come soon enough.

3) Parents aren’t happy with no games/scores, no standings

In fact, there will be games at the early ages. But scores won’t be kept. (Kids will know the score, of course. It’s human nature to be competitive. But the focus *from the adults* won’t be on if youngsters won or lost a game.)



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Yes it will be an adjustment for some parents and coaches who live for trophies at the young ages. But that approach has got us where we are now: players dropping out of the sport because of senseless pressure from coaches with misplaced priorities and from parents who too often ruin the sporting experience for their own children.

The majority of youngsters who start out in sport leave because of the pressure they feel and the fact that the experience is no longer fun for them. We have to recognize this and change course.

The focus going forward will not be simply on chronological age but biological age as well. We have to recognize that children grow and mature at different times. It's crucial that we place kids in the best environment for them individually and match up youngsters with others of similar abilities.

4) LTPD is only about finding players for the National team

The reality is the vast majority of youngsters who play soccer in Ontario simply want to have fun. Those who stop playing, as I mentioned earlier, usually do so (and the research is very clear on this) because it's no longer fun when parents and coaches criticize and take the fun out of the game. LTPD is primarily about keeping youngsters active, fit and healthy playing the world's best sport for as long as they can.

At the same time, it will also be a tremendous boost to our overall player development system in Canada. We have improved our coaching curriculum. We are over-hauling our training approaches and the way we coach and identify our more elite players under LTPD. This means we will be developing better players, and more of our aspiring youngsters will have an opportunity to be "identified" and developed if they have the passion to have a future in the game. This can mean playing at a high level, including scholarship possibilities, international opportunities or representing Canada on our Canadian national team.

So in reality LTPD helps the youngster who primarily wants to have fun and stay active but also is a huge benefit to those who aspire for more. Neither "stream" is more important than the other. This is why the Long-Term Player Development document from the Canadian



Soccer Association is titled "Wellness to World Cup".



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5) What are the details of the OSA's Club Development Plan?

We provided an overview of the Club Development Plan at the recent Soccer Conference 2012. For those who were not on hand, we are developing the non-financial support program and resources needed to help Clubs who are looking to meet the different standard levels under LTPD criteria.

We want to be in a position to enable those Clubs striving to provide the very best training programs at the recreational and competitive levels to be able to reach their goals within the new player development pathway. Importantly, individual Clubs will have the choice to determine where they fit, and whether or not they want to focus on a grassroots orientation or might also want to offer even more.

Whatever decisions Clubs make, The OSA will work to support you and your goals, and try to ensure that you not only keep youngsters in the sport but also build even more interest in your local community.

6) Why are Clubs being pushed to have more coaches certified?

While volunteer parent coaches can provide a valuable service to soccer, it has become apparent that if we are to really progress as a sport at the Club level, in terms of how we train and develop players, we need to enhance how we coach the game at all stages of the sport.

While there are many fine coaches in the system that do not have their coaching certification, we still need to set a higher bar in terms of what we expect from coaches. The new Canadian Soccer Association (CSA) coaching curriculum is outstanding. Any coach, no matter how experienced, will benefit by being exposed to the learning tools available.

Our knowledge of the game is always evolving and we must stay current. These coaching programs will increase our coaches' ability to work effectively with boys and girls at all stages in their development, from Active Starts and FUNdamentals to the Soccer for Life and Train to Win stages.



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Starting in 2014, coaches who wish to participate in the OPDL must have their Canadian National “B” license. Coaching courses are being added to help enable our coaches, if necessary, to meet certain standards in order to reach the level of certification they want to.

LTPD is very much about improving how we develop our young players in Ontario. But is also designed to help our coaches and referees improve and reach the levels they want to reach as well.

7) What if Clubs can't reach the new standards established under LTPD to gain acceptance into the new Ontario Player Development League?

First, one of the critical elements of LTPD is that we simply had to move away from the notion of promotion and relegation in Ontario. It is killing the game. Too many coaches were constantly poaching the biggest, oldest (those born early in the calendar year) and fastest players to play “kick and run” so they could win games and get “promoted” to the next level. It has not been an effective way to coach and administer soccer and that system lasted far too long in Ontario.

Now, LTPD will have a standards-based focus. That is, Clubs will decide where they “fit” in the new player pathway. Some Clubs may want to focus on doing a great job at the recreational level, at the young ages. Others may want to build on that good work and provide programs further along the development pathway. If so, they can take the required steps to ensure they have, for example, enough qualified coaches, provide the appropriate training environment and practice to games ratio to meet the new standards established under LTPD.

No longer constrained by the promotion and relegation system, the OPDL is open to every Club that meets the standards. That said, not every Club may choose to go in that direction, and may instead focus on other player development or program priorities



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How can Clubs afford to join the new Ontario Player Development League?

Just as before, Clubs will need to prioritize how they invest their revenues and resources. Many Clubs now don't participate, because of cost and other issues, in the Ontario Youth Soccer League (OYSL). They prefer to play local competition and focus, for example, on taking their teams to U.S. tournaments. That is always going to be the Club's choice.

This, in part, is why we are giving Clubs a two-year window to plan and make decisions accordingly. A Club may not be "ready" to join the OPDL in 2014, but may be in a position to join in later years. That can be accommodated.

Final application packages and information regarding the standards will be available for prospective OPDL clubs in early January 2013. OSA will release further information to assist and support clubs in making this transition later this year.

9) Where do Referees fit in LTPD?

Referees have a huge role to play in the new player pathway. A huge component of our "Respect in Soccer" initiative has to do with ensuring that our referees—at all levels—are treated with the respect they deserve on and off the pitch.

Implementing LTPD is a significant task, and over time, we will be able to respond with more specifics when it comes to referee development. But we want to assure our referees that we value their efforts tremendously and that referee development is a key component of the LTPD philosophy.

10) Why are we doing this now?

In reality, this is a step that should have been taken long ago. As I've written many times before, this approach to developing players is so common in most of the world there is no "name" for it; it's just the way things are done.



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For those that don't have the time to review the vast amount of research that is widely available, or the countless articles from high-level international soccer people pleading for us to take this approach, then I invite you to watch the video we just released at the Soccer '12 Conference <http://www.ontariosoccer.net/LTPD.aspx>. Listen to what some of the best Canadian players, including Diana Matheson of our Women's National team and current Major League Soccer MVP and Canadian National player Dwayne De Rosario have to say. They are imploring Ontario to follow this approach. They both stress that they wish they had this opportunity when they were young players.

Our current player pathway is so fundamentally flawed that it's sad—because the players are missing out. We now know we can do better and we can't wait any longer to do the right thing. Yes, it will be an adjustment, but only for a while. Some Districts and Clubs are already in the early stages of implementing LTPD and the response from the vast majority of parents is overwhelmingly supportive. Parents are seeing first-hand why this is being done and can better appreciate the values that this approach inspires. Importantly, the feedback our coaches and Clubs are getting from the children is absolutely positive.

And from a practical perspective, we will be developing much better soccer players—and athletes—down the road. This is not a short-term fix. It's a long-term process. We have a window between now and 2020 to turn the ship around. But we can't delay.

Going forward

In Ontario soccer, our focus will be on skills development at the crucial young ages. Once our boys and girls have developed the skills they need, then it makes sense to learn how to train properly and then to start competing at a serious level. At that point scores will be kept. Players will indeed win and lose while learning all those valuable life skills that come through dealing with success and disappointment.

It is important for everyone to understand that LTPD is based not only on extensive research from the soccer community (research conducted by “real” soccer people, not only “academics”) but on the science around how and why youngsters develop as they do. We need to understand not just the obvious chronological age of our youngsters, but their biological realities as well. With science, research—and common sense—as our guide, we



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ed to acknowledge that children mature physically at vastly different rates. LTPD recognizes this important reality.

Way more important than whether they win or lose a game at the age of 9 or 10, is making sure we give our young players the skills they need to play the game properly, to be creative, to try things on the field of play and to make what adults might consider “mistakes” without fear of criticism. Because if we put so much unnecessary pressure on our kids, we can kill the love that youngsters have for the game at an early age. We will make them afraid to try things because they might make a “mistake” and “lose the game”. It’s simply a bad way to teach our young people. If we keep failing in this regard, we will be “losing” way more than a game.

People forget that, more than 20 years ago, parents and youth coaches were aghast at the idea of “small-sided” games in our sport. “This isn’t soccer” was the cry. Now, small-sided games are universally embraced as natural and a huge element in developing players with vision, foot skills and a sense of the game. Now, it’s commonplace.

That’s how we will look at LTPD in ten years.

As we receive more questions from you, we will endeavor to respond on the LTPD section of the OSA web site. Please use the following e-mail to contact us with regard to LTPD:

LTPDquestions@soccer.on.ca

Thank you for your continued support.

Alex Chiet
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