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The National Youth Soccer License: The Historical Reflections, Evaluation of Coaching Efficacy and Lessons Learned

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ABSTRACT

Coaching education has been part of the United States soccer landscape for over 40 years. However, the education of youth soccer coaches is a recent phenomenon. The purpose of this study was threefold: a) to provide contextual reflections of the USSF National Youth Coaching License (NYL); b) to share the impact of the course on coaching efficacy; and 3) to critically discuss the implications of the lessons learned through these reflections and research on the design of quality coach education for youth sport coaches. The statistical evidence in conjunction with reflective comments demonstrate that *The Game in the Child* model and the NYL curriculum provide the contextual framework for an effective L-S coaching education program.

Key Words: Coach development, coaching confidence, coach certification.



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“The most important things that must be seen in youth soccer are those things that are unseen” Ron Quinn, (Fleck, Quinn, Carr, Stringfield, & Buren, 2002, p. 6).

Introduction

The above statement reflects the importance of the coach-athlete relationship and experience, especially at the youth level where a facial expression, tone of voice, or body posture can be a sign of encouragement or disappointment. The coach must not only be aware of what they see, but be able to look beyond the missed pass or shot, to the intent or decision-making process. Coaches must understand that nothing happens in isolation and the developmental process is more important at the youth level than the product or end result (Côté, Bruner, Erickson, Strachan, & Fraser-Thomas, 2010). Using a child-centered approach with the aim of unlocking what Quinn (1988) coined, *The Game in the Child* a player development model became the foundation of the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) National Youth License (NYL).

The NYL license was designed as a developmental soccer program that embraced problem solving and guided discovery through the application of a games/activities approach. For the NYL authors, this games/activity approach was originally conceptualized from Torbert’s (1980) work on play as a tool for human growth. This later evolved into what Côté, Baker, and Abernethy (2003) have identified as deliberate play. Furthermore, the belief was that the youth game in soccer should be different than the adult game. Thus the design of the NYL curriculum proceeded with the intent to give the game back to the child.

The NYL has become a preferred model in many soccer environments (e.g., communities and organizations). However, the perceived success of this program on coach and player development has not been empirically determined. Previous studies (Feltz, Hepler, Roman, & Palement, 2009; Kowalski, Edginton, Lankford, Waldron, Roberts-Dobie, & Nielsen, 2007; Maleté & Feltz, 2000) on coaching education identified coaching efficacy as one means to measure program effectiveness. This present study followed this pattern through the use of the coaching efficacy scale (CES) (Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999).

Therefore the purpose of this study was threefold: a) to provide historical and contextual reflections of the NYL; b) to share the impact of the course on coaching efficacy; and 3) to critically discuss the implications of the lessons learned through these reflections and research on the design of quality coaching education for youth sport coaches.



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Historical and Contextual Reflections of the NYL

Through an analysis of coaching education research, Trudel and Gilbert (2006) proposed a learning-how-to-coach model that views “coaching as a science and as an art” (p. 516). The learn how to coach model provides insight into two separate practices, that of Large-Scale (L-S) programs (i.e., acquisition metaphor) and experience (i.e., participation metaphor). Large-Scale programs tend to focus on what coaches should know and do. Learning how to coach through experience tends to focus on coaching as a social and reflective process. By telling the story of the creation and success of the NYL, the authors’ goal is to link coaching as a science and an art. This section discusses the historical perspectives, program creation, and candidate reflections of the NYL.

Historical Perspectives of U.S. Soccer Coaching Education

The licensing of soccer coaches to coach at the adolescent and adult levels has been in existence since the early 1970’s through the United States Soccer Federation (USSF). Thus as a sport, soccer has been involved with coaching education for over 40 years. Therefore it is prudent to provide a brief historical overview of the evolution of U.S. soccer coaching education.

The USSF as a member of the Federation Internationale Football Association (FIFA) is one of the governing bodies in the United States that provides education for soccer coaches (i.e., L-S programs). In the early 1970’s the USSF hired German and FIFA Coach Detmar Cramer to develop the USSF Coaching Schools based on the four pillars of the game (technical, tactical, physical, and psychological). Based on personal experiences of the 1st and 3rd authors of this paper, the initial program was a one-week residential course, generally on a college campus, and was physically demanding. The belief at this time was that the American coach needed to be able to demonstrate proper technique and have a moderate amount of playing competence. The initial courses were divided into three national levels: A (highest), B, and C. At the conclusion of the course Coach Cramer would meet all coaching candidates in one room and read their name aloud as to whether you passed or failed; if passed at what level (A-B-C) he believed you had achieved. Coach Cramer began to develop his instructional staff by selecting and mentoring those coaches who earned the A license. The core educators through the 1970’s and 1980’s include Walt Chyzowych, Bob Gansler, Joe Machnik, Bill Muse, Nick Zlatar, Bill Killen, Timo Liekoski, and Jim Lennox.

The national courses were eventually divided into three separate courses in which a coach had to start at the C-level; professional players could be waived into the ‘B’ course. The C to A courses still emphasized the technical, tactical, physical, and psychological aspects of the game, but added a progression of individual technical and tactical emphasis at the C-level, group tactics at the B-level, and team tactics at the A-level. Candidate physical training and conditioning, and ‘coach as a demonstrator’ were also a requirement for successful course completion at all three levels. Sport psychology, as an emerging discipline addressed mostly team motivation issues. Throughout the week



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candidates were evaluated on their playing ability, practical field coaching (technical and tactical), laws of the game exam, and an oral presentation on a pre-selected topic.

Once a sufficient number of coaches became certified throughout the country, state level courses were developed to address the volunteer or parent-coach. The state level coaching education program was also based on the four pillars of the game, but much of the emphasis was placed at the technical level. The Youth Soccer State Associations through the USSF also offered a three level license program: F license (9 hrs), E license (18 hrs) and D license (36 hrs). These courses became the mainstay through the late 1970's to the early 1990's and provided the burgeoning parent-coach population knowledge of the rules, how to teach technique and tactics, and how to organize a practice. Thousands of coaches during that time helped grow the game and develop players, yet no critical examination has ever been conducted on the effectiveness and impact of the USSF Coaching Education programs.

As the game began to grow (from adult to youth), the general belief was to teach technique within a static drill-type environment that is not conducive to teaching young children learning the game. Jim Lennox, former USSF National Staff Instructor stated: "the coaching school curriculum was never intended to be applied to coaching children under the age of 13" (Quinn & Carr, 2006, p. 13). Taking note from early youth sport researchers (Smoll, Smith, & Curtis 1977; Tutko & Bruns, 1976; Olgivie, 1979), Quinn (1984, 1985, & 1988) began applying holistic and humanistic aspects of sport to youth soccer. Slowly a shift began to occur moving from the drill type training to developmentally appropriate game/activity-based training (Quinn & Carr, 2006).

Creation of the National Youth License

At National Soccer Coaches Conventions in the 1990's Quinn, Fleck, Carr, Stringfield, and Buren discussed the state of youth soccer in America. They collectively believed that there was a need for a more child-centered, developmentally appropriate approach to teaching the game. The following narrative by V. Stringfield (personal communication, February 15, 2011) details the formation of the NYL authors as a collective group. For a detailed account of the design process see Quinn and Carr (1998).

In 1995 Timo Liekoski had just been appointed as the Director of Coaching for U. S. Soccer. During the National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA) Convention in Washington D.C., Timo spoke to Dr. Tom Fleck and expressed that there was pressure to "do something for the recreational coaches." Tom told Timo that he could develop a course. At the convention Tom assembled Dr. Ron Quinn, Dr. David Carr, Bill Buren, Dave Simeone and Virgil Stringfield. During the convention, the group shared ideas about creating a new coaching course that addressed the issues of the youth soccer player, 12 years of age and younger. At the end of the convention, the group continued to exchange ideas via the "state of the art" device known as the FAX machine.



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... the idea of holding a pilot course was recommended and U. S. Youth Soccer committed funds for a pilot course.

Ron Quinn made arrangements to host the pilot course at Xavier University in Cincinnati, OH. The pilot course was a seven-day course in July 1995, where coaches and administrators were invited from a cross section of the country at no cost to them other than transportation to get there. Attending were a total of 29 individuals representing the parent-coach, directors of coaching, and individuals holding various administrative positions at either the local, state and national levels. An age group per day focus was instituted along with videotaping of candidate practice coaching utilizing age-specific youth players. After assessing the pilot course the first National Youth License (NYL) course, as we now know it was held in January of 1996 at Cocoa Expo, FL...

National Youth License Program Description

The National Youth License originally created by the NYL authors was a seven-day residential course (Quinn & Carr, 1998) and adopted the motto of *The Game in the Child* (Quinn, 1988). This motto espoused the belief that the game was within the child. The goal was to bring the game out in a natural and holistic way, as compared to placing children in an adult-centered environment (e.g., at one time children as young as seven played 11 vs. 11). *The Game in the Child* was a departure from the coach-centered U.S. sport environment where the coach makes all of the decisions.

The NYL is believed to be one of the first coaching education programs to take a child-development approach rather than a sport technical model. The belief of the authors was that we were not coaching soccer; we were coaching children playing soccer. As a result the coaching model developed by Quinn (1991) became the building blocks for the course (see Figure 1).

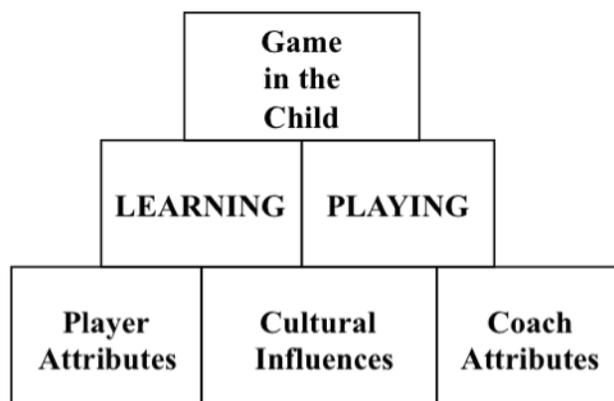


Figure 1. The player, organizational and coach attributes lay the building blocks to understand how players learn through playing thereby discovering the game within.



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(From “The Peak Performance: Soccer Games for Player Development” by R. Quinn, 1990.)

This model sought to connect the coach, player, and organizational attributes as the foundation that supports connecting playing with learning, and learning with playing, leading to unlocking *The Game in the Child*.



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NYL Philosophical and Pedagogical Approach

The course begins with foundational lectures to lay a philosophical and pedagogical approach to developmentally appropriate, child-centered coaching (Fleck, Quinn, Carr, Stringfield & Buren, 2002). In addition to providing a basic understanding of Piaget's cognitive development (Singer & Revenson, 1997) as it relates to children and soccer, three essential pedagogical concepts include flow (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975; Jackson & Csiksentmihalyi, 1999), slanty line (Mosston, 1970; Mosston & Mueller, 1970), and Torbert's (1984) equalization, expansion, and interactive challenges. The candidates are provided activities by the instructional staff that demonstrate how to match ability and task (flow), allow for all children to participate at their developmental level (slanty line) while also providing each child an equal chance for success (equalization), for maximum opportunity for repetition (expansion), and how to integrate a wide range of ability and interest levels (interactive challenges) within a team. The pedagogical implementation of these concepts also follows a Socratic method / guided-discovery with the belief that problem solving is also a skill that needs to be practiced. As a result the candidates are expected to design and select developmentally appropriate activities for their practice coaching sessions with age-specific children (i.e., U6, U8, & U10).

To support the course philosophy and methodology, the course authors developed a set of youth soccer coaching principles. These include: 1) developmentally appropriate; 2) clear, concise, and correct information, less talking, more action; 3) simple to complex, using a progressive approach; 4) safe and appropriate training, not only physically safe, but also psychologically safe; 5) decision making, opportunities for the players to make decisions within the activity; and 6) implications for the game, what components in the activity relate to some aspect of the game (Fleck et al. 2002). These principles are also displayed through what is called the three L's: No Laps, No Lectures, and No Lines (Fleck & Quinn, 2002). If the coaching principles in conjunction with the three L's are implemented, then perhaps some progress in youth soccer development can occur.

Another component of the course is the teaching games for understanding approach, similar to what Côte, Baker, and Abernethy (2003) call deliberate play. Deliberate play in the NYL is expressed through a three-tier game/activity classification. These include body awareness, maze, and target games. Body awareness activities involve movements where the players experience how their body and ball can move together. Maze games are ones in which the players move within a 360° environment where they have to be more spatially aware, and finally target games introduce the concept of direction going to specific targets such as various sized goals. For an extensive use of these three game categories see Fleck and Quinn (2002).

The percentage of using these three game/activity categories in practice will vary with the age group. For example at the U6 level 50% could be body awareness, 40% maze games, and 10% target games. At the U8 level body awareness games would decrease and target games would increase. This same pattern would continue through the



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U10 and U12 age groups where when you reach the U12 age group, approximately 10% could be body awareness, 30% maze and 60% target games.

Each day is dedicated to a particular age group that discusses their psychosocial, cognitive, and physical characteristics. Throughout the week additional discussions address sport ethics, team and risk management, laws, and club development issues. Following the morning classroom sessions, candidates move to the field where the staff introduces developmentally appropriate activities for this age group. During this time candidates are also given the opportunity to test out activities on their peers, but the real experience occurs when candidates work with age group players later in the day.

Each candidate must prepare a lesson plan with developmentally appropriate activities prior to the afternoon session. These sessions are videotaped. Following the practices coaching candidates meet in small groups to review with a staff instructor. In these session's discussions on the appropriateness of the activities, the behavior of the children (e.g., did they display the age group characteristics discussed?), and the behaviors of the candidate are reviewed. Over the years we have found this to be a critical factor in the learning process because it puts theory directly into practice and provides the candidates with immediate feedback on their coaching techniques.

It should be noted however, that the U12 age group is viewed as the dawning of tactical awareness where players are beginning to become more aligned with the adult game. Thus a model session is presented by one of the instructors, and candidates do not work with U12 players during the course. Additionally, the element of deliberate play, also known as street soccer, is presented to show how to replicate a free-flowing 4v4 game environment. This also creates an opportunity for the candidates to play themselves and experience the value of pick-up play.

The course concludes with a three-prong evaluation: a written exam, an oral exam and a field exam. The written exam addresses understanding of the course philosophy and pedagogy. The oral exam presents scenarios that resemble a real life situation such as difficulty with a parent, dealing with a team management or risk issue, or addressing developmentally appropriate coaching. In the field exam the candidates present their prepared lesson plan with children of the appropriate age group (U6, U8, or U10) to the instructors. No evaluative feedback is given to the candidates at this time.

The instructional staff assesses all testing materials and decides on candidate pass or failure. All paperwork is then sent to the USSF National Office in Chicago, IL for processing and notification of course status (pass or fail). The candidates who pass receive a license certificate in the mail, and those who failed receive a letter noting areas of deficiency. The next section details reflections from past candidates through unsolicited anecdotal comments.



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Impact of the National Youth License

To date over 3,000 coaches have attended the NYL (Snow, 2011 personal communication). Coaches who attend this course represent a wide range of soccer experiences and roles; some are full-time coaches or club director of coaching, while others are the typical volunteer parent coach. It has been discovered through instructor observations and candidate comments regardless of their soccer playing or coaching background, few have any experience in developmentally appropriate coaching of young children.

To date, other than Quinn and Carr (1998) who documented the instructional design process for the NYL, no other examination of the program has been conducted since its inception. Unsolicited anecdotal comments suggest a paradigm shift in coaches' philosophy and practice regardless of their background. A few comments below, provided by the US Youth Soccer National Office, have been selected that represent the overall tone and impact of the course:

“Without the course, I doubt that I would have moved on with coaching. I am having a fun time and the kids are clearly enjoying the experience. The course and over-all experience gave me the confidence in beliefs that are already part of my philosophy. More importantly, I gained a wealth of knowledge and the sense of support on how to better instruct my players in developing their soccer skills.”
(Personal communication, September 9, 2007)

“I want to thank you for having the vision for putting together the National Youth License. I have recently taken my UEFA B license and did my NSCAA National Youth a few years ago. I have undergone the USSF D, C and FA preliminary award as well as being a certified Physical Education teacher. I have to say without a shadow of a doubt the National Youth is definitely one of the best licenses I have undergone; its philosophy and its user -friendly atmosphere set it apart from all other American licenses. I am not aware if you know this or not but many people from the UK and their academies are coming to the US to undergo the license. I thank you for allowing the US to lead the world in grass roots football. Thanks for sharing your vision of releasing the game within each and every child worldwide.” (Personal communication, September 17, 2007)

“I changed my practice last night to incorporate some of the games and activities we learned about this weekend. It was so hot that I intended to cut the practice short...but the girls would not let me. They had so much fun and told me so several times. They were so disappointed when I said it was over. What a difference in their attitudes. We still accomplished the same skill sessions...but everything was a game. Even my daughter, also 8, who has been getting a little 'burned out' said, “Dad, that was fun. Can we play that dribbling game again Thursday.” I told her, “Hannah, all you want to do is play games!” She replied,



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“Yep! All a girl wants is to have a little fun!” Thanks for course. The proof is in the pudding.” (Personal correspondence, July 22, 2008)

“If this class would have been available 35 years ago when I began coaching soccer I would have been so much more effective teaching the game to kids. Oh well. The next 35 years I will be better! The only word I can come up with is ‘enlightenment.’ This course enlightened me on so many things I have been doing wrong in my approach.” (Personal communication, November 7, 2010)

These comments clearly indicate a significant impact on the coaches’ philosophy and practices, and confirm Malette and Feltz’s (2000) statement that, “Coaching education/preparation is a source of efficacy information that is based on personal mastery experiences. An effective, well-designed coaching education program should enhance the level of coaching efficacy, especially at the novice level where previous experience has been minimal,” (p. 411). It would appear that the NYL accommodates not only the novice youth coach, but the experienced one as well.

The historical and contextual reflections of the NYL provided indicate that the child-centered curriculum with foundations in educational psychology is positively impacting the candidates that attend these courses. This unsolicited anecdotal evidence since the beginning of the NYL stimulated an empirical investigation on the impact of participation in the NYL. One aim of the study was to investigate the impact, albeit short term, of the course on coaching efficacy. Utilization of the Coaching Efficacy Scale (Feltz et al. 1999) provided a reasonable starting point although Trudel, Gilbert and Werthner (2010) indicate; “this strategy does not provide information about the long-term impact of participation in large-scale coach education training programs” (p. 143). Demographics and open-ended questions were also asked of the participants.

Participants

The study included a convenience sample of youth soccer coaches. There were a total of 24 courses offered in 21 different states, and all participants were informed of the purpose of the study and gave consent as required by the institutional review board at Xavier University. Six hundred and forty candidates attended the NYL in 2010; 236 candidates created pre-test logins, and 149 created post-test logins. However, 74 completed both the pre and post-test surveys.

The gender make-up continued to demonstrate a male dominance in coaching, with 89% men and 11 % women participating in the study. The candidates were on average 36 years old, with nine years of coaching experience prior to the course; one person reported coaching for 37 years. The ethnic affiliations of the respondents were 78% Caucasian, 18% Hispanic, 3% African-America, and 1% Asian. The candidates were also highly educated with 43% earning a bachelor’s degree. When graduate degrees



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and educational specialties are added 73% of the candidates have significant higher education qualifications.

Instrumentation

Coaching Efficacy

Coaching efficacy was identified through the literature as a construct that would serve as a viable beginning for investigating the effectiveness of the National Youth License empirically. Feltz et al. (1999) define coaching efficacy “as the extent to which coaches believe they have the capacity to affect the learning and performance of their athletes” (p.765). The initial coaching efficacy dimensions included game strategy efficacy (GSE), motivation efficacy (ME), technique efficacy (TE), and character building efficacy (CBE), which aligned very closely with the initial curricular components in the USSF Coaching Schools. The CES is a 24-item survey using a 10-point Likert scale and validity and reliability coefficients. However, as recommended by Meyers, Wolfe, and Feltz (2005) and Feltz et al. (2009) a five-point Likert scale was used for youth sport coaches. Coaches are more likely to rate lower end categories on the scale than with the 10-point Likert scale.

The Coaching Efficacy Scale was sent to six senior US Youth Soccer staff instructors for further review of the instrument as to its appropriateness to measure a coach’s level of confidence as it relates to coaching children 12 and younger. All questions were retained, but some language was substituted to make the questions more soccer specific. For example question 7 asks “how confident are you in your ability to demonstrate the skills of your sport” and was changed to “how confident are you in your ability to demonstrate appropriate skills of soccer?” Also question 21 asks “how confident ... to adjust your game/meet strategy to fit your team’s talent,” and was changed to “how confident ... to adjust your game strategy to fit team’s developmental level?” One of the core aspects of the NYL is to encourage coaches to allow players to make decisions. Two additional questions were added creating a 26-item survey. These questions were 25, “how confident ... to allow players to make decisions,” and question 26, “how confident ... to ask appropriate questions to guide players’ decision-making?” Traditional demographic information sought included: age, gender, ethnicity, and educational background. Information about the participants’ soccer and coaching experience included: previous coaching education certifications, years of previous coaching experience, coaching level and coaching status as a paid or volunteer coach, playing experience, and course time and location. In the pre-test survey, the participants were given the opportunity to express their expectations of the course where in the post-test survey additional comments regarding their experiences at the course were provided.



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Procedures

The present study was conducted with the cooperation of the US Youth Soccer National Office and Sam Snow, Director of Coaching. Data were collected through an online survey procedure (www.surveymonkey.com). Mr. Snow then included the survey link with the pre-course readings to all candidates along with his personal support for the study. Coaches were expected to complete the survey prior to the first day of the course, along with a login ID to access the instrument for the post-test survey. Mr. Snow also sent a follow-up request to the candidates to complete the post-survey at the completion of the course. Data were only collected for courses delivered in 2010.

Results

Paired-sample statistics were used in this study to evaluate the hypothesis that there would be significant mean differences between pre and post-test coaching efficacy scores, both globally and for each of the coaching efficacy dimensions (see Tables 1 and 2). According to the paired Sample *t*-tests there are significant differences between the pre and post scores on Coaching Efficacy (CE), Motivation Efficacy (ME), Game Strategy Efficacy (GSE), and Character Building Efficacy (CBE), but not Technique Efficacy (TE) for the participants who attended the NYL in 2010.

Candidates attending these courses are mature, experienced, and well educated and already possess a high level of coaching confidence. Although only 74 pre and post-test surveys could be matched for data analysis an increase in CE is supported by the participants' post-test survey comments, as they tend to align with the unsolicited anecdotal reflections.

The statements below are from candidates who elected to comment on their expectations during the pre-test survey:

Candidate 14: "I have wanted to take this course for the past five years. I love the game and want my young players to love it as well. I have been turned off by much of the coaching/licensing courses I have taken so far. Learning the various developmental stages for the U6-12 groups, what is appropriate to teach and expect just makes sense for all youth coaches, regardless of each coach's experience. I am excited to take this course."

Candidate 18: "Hoping to gain a greater understanding of the development of 4-12 year olds and to have a better understanding of age appropriate training."

Candidate 25: "I have volunteered as a coach at the U10 level and below levels; I am a Grade 8 referee and have also played at a competitive level. I look forward to attending this course to continue to improve and continue my overall professional development in soccer."



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At the completion of the post-test survey the candidates were asked to state any other comments regarding their experience during the NYL. The following reflective comments support the need and impact of this course on coaching efficacy and development:

Candidate 26: “I felt the course provided an excellent insight for the U6-U12 age groups. It allowed me to understand the reasons certain activities are appropriate, and why some are not. It also shed some light on the typical characteristics of each group to allow me to understand the typical capabilities of players and how to best provide an environment to enhance development and fun.” (personal communication, August 25, 2010).

Candidate 29: “This course was a fantastic experience, a must for any youth coach and should be mandatory in my opinion for any Academy or select coach as this concept fits the USA culture and provides in my opinion the right approach for our children. I am very pleased with this course, way above expectations. It confirms my coaching approach, sharpened my skills and showed me how to teach soccer in this country.” (personal communication, August 26, 2010).

Candidate 49: “This course was fantastic. I already knew the “what” to teach part, but gained a great deal of information on HOW to coach.” (personal communication, November 9, 2010)



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Table 1

Summary of Basic Statistics of Pre and Post Test Scores

Constructs	Mean		Standard deviation		Standard error mean	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Average	4.03	4.40	.609	.503	.071	.058
ME	28.26	52.04	4.608	8.066	.536	.938
GSE	27.27	29.54	5.127	4.600	.596	.535
TE	23.95	24.30	4.572	3.872	.531	.450
CBE	17.47	39.36	2.371	6.706	.276	.780

Note. N=74. Pre/Post Test = Coaching Efficacy (CE), ME = total motivational efficacy, GSE = game strategy efficacy, TE = technical efficacy, and CBE = character building efficacy. From “A conceptual model of coaching efficacy: Preliminary investigation and instrument development,” by D. L. Feltz, M. A. Chase, S. E. Moritz, and P. J. Sullivan, 1999, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91(4), p.765-776.

Table 2

Summary of Paired-Sample t-tests

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-Post Avg.	-.374	.458	.053	-7.023	.000
Pre-Post ME	-23.784	4.089	.475	-50.036	.000
Pre-Post GSE	-2.270	3.724	.433	-5.244	.000
Pre-Post TE	-.352	1.839	.214	-1.646	.104
Pre-Post CBE	-21.892	5.498	.639	-34.284	.000

Note. $df = 73$, $\alpha = .05$. Pre/Post Test = Coaching Efficacy (CE), ME = motivational efficacy, GSE = game strategy efficacy, TE = technical efficacy, and CBE = character building efficacy. From “A conceptual model of coaching efficacy: Preliminary investigation and instrument development,” by D. L. Feltz, M. A. Chase, S. E. Moritz, and P. J. Sullivan, 1999, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91(4), p.765-776.



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Discussion

The National Youth License was the first course within the US Soccer coaching education programs to take a child-development approach. This was based on the belief that you cannot coach/teach a seven year-old how to play soccer without first learning how to teach a seven year-old. Essentially, child first, game second. For example, if you were to take a picture of a little league game and a major league game from the “Goodyear Blimp” the images would look very similar. However if you were to capture the same picture with a U6 game and a professional team, one photo would show players spread out with some sense of organization (the professional team) and the other one would be one big dot. The conclusion therefore, was that at least in soccer, the youth game does not mirror the adult game, largely because it is a conceptual game, based on a set of playing principles; truly a players’ game.

Additionally, the coaching pedagogical approach moved from a more direct or command style (technical model) to a problem solving and guided discovery coaching style. Play as a tool for human development (Torbert, 1980) and the teaching games for understanding approach championed by Bunker and Thorpe (1982), and Werner, Thorpe and Bunker (1996) provided a foundation for the development of the NYL.

The course also encourages coaches to foster a more street, sandlot, or pick-up soccer environment. This is not easily attained in today’s highly structured youth sport practices. However, one quality of this course is that it helps extract those qualities found in free play (ownership, decision-making, creativity, balanced competition) and places them in a semi-structured, child-centered, safe environment, in other words deliberate play in action.

Interestingly enough, Jürgen Klinsmann, the US Men’s National Team coach commented in an interview with Mike Woitalla from Soccer America, “Soccer, in my opinion, is self-teaching. The more you play, the better you get. You don’t see kids play in the park these days. It’s only in an organized environment. We are starting to have that similar problem in Europe, as well. Certain things are not teachable” (Woitalla, 2011). However, it is clear that, through the NYL even experienced coaches can improve their coaching confidence through a child-centered game/activity based approach that come as close as possible to the “park play” that Klinsmann states.

Despite the authors (NYL) beliefs and anecdotal evidence on the positive impact, of *The Game in the Child* model, no empirical assessment of the NYL has been conducted. One way we have started to address this deficiency was through the application of the Coaching Efficacy Scale. The participants in our study self-reported a gain in their ability to have a positive effect on their athletes, especially when it comes to the psychological states (i.e. ME) and personal development (i.e. CBE). Although the statistical results of this study cannot be generalized across all sporting populations, it is evident that the NYL influences coaches in such a way that candidates are excited about



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implementing the philosophical (e.g. child-development) and pedagogical (e.g., games-approach) aspects of the curriculum.

The candidates' pre and post course reflections and as well unsolicited communications, helped connect the implications of lessons learned during the NYL to an increase in coaching efficacy. The reflections from coaches about children wanting to play more on a hot day, a coach having to send kids home sulking because practice was over, coaches hearing from the athletes that because of the games-approach the last practice was the best...not only indicate a change in athletes' attitude about practice, but the coaches' willingness to change their coaching habits (i.e., behavior). This willingness to change coaching practices is likely the result of games/activities within a deliberate play framework, because it creates a sense of "confidence to integrate those skills into a course of action and perform them under a variety of circumstances" (Feltz, Short, & Sullivan, 2008, p. 6).

This NYL appears to be addressing many of the coach education deficiencies discussed in the literature, such as, the question of a lasting effect and actual changes in coaching behavior (Trudel, Gilbert, & Werthner, 2010). We found that the NYL not only changed coaching efficacy, but also changed it significantly with some experienced coaches. We also believe that one of the strengths is that candidates are able to see dramatic changes in growth and development as a result of experiencing a different age group each day. This in itself was a new experience for most coaches as they are more commonly only dealing with a single age group each season. Thus they are disconnected from what happens during the previous age group as well as what will be expected at the next age group.

Others have asked 'how does coaching education influence player social experiences?' (Côté et al. 2003). This is evident when both coaches and young athletes continue to comment on the enjoyment of practices when *The Game in the Child* is employed. In concert with an increase in coaching confidence, the NYL appears to be succeeding in using coaching education to nurture self-improvement, character development and effective teaching practices, all characteristics advocated in recent portrayals of effective coaching such as the Pyramid of Teaching Success in Sport (Gilbert, Nater, Siwik & Gallimore, 2010).

It is believed that as a Large-Scale coaching education program the NYL has begun to bridge the gap between the acquisition and experience metaphors (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006), and support what Côté et al. (2010) advocate as positive experiences in developmentally appropriate settings. For example, when the candidates work with the age-appropriate children during the course they are solving context specific problems through participation (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). This was made evident through candidate reflections, especially from those whose players requested to have more of the 'new' game/activities. Coaches also felt that their own motivation increased with their players' new level of excitement, empowerment, and creativity.



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Future Recommendations

Future research recommendations are two fold. One is to continue to investigate the effectiveness of the NYL on long-term athlete and coaching development through formal and anecdotal evidence. For example, conducting a more in-depth longitudinal study looking at all components (i.e., facilitators, candidates, and curriculum) of the NYL or a focus group study investigating what coaches are doing now (5-10 years out). These types of studies could shed some light on sustained behavioral changes in their coaching practices.

In the immediate future, investigation of the NYL will start with contacting those coaches who attended the NYL in 2010 to determine if their level of coaching efficacy has decreased, stayed the same, or increased, as well as identify significant changes in behavior. In addition, the researchers plan to contact through the US Youth Soccer National Office, coaches who have completed the NYL since the inaugural year in 1996 to determine how and if coaching behavioral modifications were made and retained as a result of the NYL. Moreover, research is needed to determine if the application of *The Child in the Game* is applicable to other sporting contexts. For example, researchers could work closely with other L-S programs that are transitioning to a more athlete development game/activity model to unlock the game within their athletes.

In conclusion, it is suggested that the NYL sheds light on the development coaching education programs through the use of both the acquisition and participation metaphors. *The Game in the Child* model and the NYL curriculum provide the contextual framework for an effective L-S coaching education program.



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