

They are Children, Not Pros!!



It is essential in Ladies Gaelic Football that we can continue to develop our young girls at their own pace and the key people involved in this are the youth coaches and thankfully the majority of coaches we have at this level excel in bringing the best out of these children but is that the case with you? Are you one of these key developmental coaches or are you sacrificing this opportunity that girls should have to develop a love and understanding of the game just because you want to say you won something?

Coaching standards have increased rapidly in the past few years but every sport still has a number of coaches involved at underage level with a chip on their shoulder with this need to just win and leave no room for children with a perceived lack of ability as that would require taking additional time to develop their skills, but isn't that exactly what youth coaching is about? It should focus on skill development, building up the child's self-esteem, teaching good sportsmanship and most importantly having fun! Instead we have coaches thinking they can coach girls like they will be competing in the senior championship and at games think it is ok to confront referees, other officials or opposition managers. These coaches are in the minority but we need to remember 'They are Children, Not Pros!'

Go Games were introduced a number of years ago to nurture this environment and the non-competitive nature of these games was key to making it easier on the coach as all players were given the opportunity to play regardless of their ability and there are no scores kept so no pressure on the coach to win. The coach's role now involves developing every child on the team and ensuring each girl knows their importance to the team, they feel good about themselves, have fun and continue to want to be involved. As mentioned previously the majority of our youth coaches have not forgotten that this is what underage sports is all about but at some levels we are still getting infiltrated by misguided coaches who have lost sight of what youth sports is all about. There is no place in the sport for these misguided coaching philosophies especially with all the turmoil many children are already facing in today's society. The child's best interest has to be at the centre of all youth sport and the sport itself should be a fun, learning tool to good social behaviour and a place where kids can develop these skills needed to understand and develop a passion for ladies gaelic football.

Intense training sessions and the pressure to win will ensure the opposite effect will occur on girls and increase drop off rates. Children will pursue new interests that will allow them just to be kids. Not only are the youth players at risk of emotional burnout but may also develop injuries that plague them for a lifetime due to the coaching being received. Girls will create their own competition but this is different from the competition driven by a coach and will ensure they keep fun involved. Everyone is fully aware that there are coaches, and parents, who see the girl as the next All Star but will they really reach those potential heights if they are driven out of sport at a young age. Parents or coaches who push too hard too young can easily wipe out a child's motivation to play regardless of their ability.

It is very easy to get caught up in the pressure of turning our kids into the next super athletes and county players but when this happens we expect our children to train like adults but they are not adults! Yes the coach will allow them to focus on doing their best, but their bodies are not able to

bear the strain of adult competition and training. Plus the joy of sport is having fun. If you expect your 10 year old player to have the same focus and work ethic of an adult player you are expecting too much. Youth sport has to continue to be a tool to educate children about sport and life and not a place where adults go to be entertained by kids. There is not a single sports scientist, physician or fitness expert who would recommend this elite pathway for younger players. This 'adultification' of youth sports prioritises the adults' needs and values over those of the child yet they just want to play. It turns the focus from process to outcome and from free play to deliberate practice.

Sport is a place to win and lose but most importantly to learn and develop not just as a player but as a person. The win at all costs coaches are leading the charge for early specialisation, the formation of 'elite' teams and the cutting of players at far too young an age, all in the name of 'competition'. Children will learn to win and lose but when they are ready and not when the coach is ready. Realistically when competition is introduced at the correct age, after Go Games, the children get over the result long before the adult ever does. Children need three things for long term achievement: autonomy, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. If you take any of these away you are setting your players up for failure. Think about your own life. If you enjoy going for a walk, you will walk more. If you have fun going to the gym, you will go more. So why do we think that if we make sports less fun that kids will want to play them more? They won't, they don't and they will quit for other activities. Our girls need to be in the moment, laughing, and free of the fear of failure. They must fall in love before they pursue elite performance. They must play!

So what are the key things we need to remember when coaching our young girls? Firstly there is nobody in the world who can predict a future players' talent at age 10. Youths develop at different rates both physically and emotionally and therefore change as players but we can provide a nurturing environment to ensure every child develops and progresses. As a coach we must also remember that we do not 'own' the child and girls may play a number of sports or get involved in other activities. Studies have shown that most elite athletes have a history of playing many sports and each of these develops something new in your player. Do not make your player choose at that young age but rather make sure they love yours and want to come back. Ensuring that young girls want to come back and play ladies gaelic football means having appropriate training while still keeping that fun element. If a child falls in love with a sport and has a real talent for it, she will excel anyway without the insanity of over training and too much competition. Your coaching philosophy must be fully focused on the children in front of you and how you can look back in years to come knowing they are still involved because of the spark you ignited in them and respected them for the players they were. Remember 'They are Children, Not Pros!'