

The Coaching Life

(By Dan Woog -- "Woog's World" -- Westport News, November 25, 2005)

Between August 28 and November 10, almost everything I thought about was soccer.

It did not dominate my entire life – at random moments I wrote my newspaper column, launched my history of Staples High School book, juggled other writing projects, ate and slept – but even while working at my day jobs, or performing those tasks that make up much of our daily existence, soccer was not far from my mind.

As the head boys soccer coach at Staples, I'm in charge of nearly 70 teenagers. I run the varsity program, and oversee the junior varsity and freshman teams. There are training sessions to organize and matches to be played; paperwork to handle, and weather to worry about. College coaches must be contacted, teachers and parents talked to – and always, morning, afternoon and evening, players' issues must be dealt with. This may not sound like your cup of tea, but it's mine.

Several elements separate soccer from every other sport Americans play. For one thing, it is a player's game. Once the opening whistle blows, the outcome is in the players' hands (or, more accurately, their feet and heads). There are no timeouts. The 11 athletes on the field make their own decisions: who to mark, where to run, when to pass or take men on, how to attack and defend. As a result, soccer attracts intelligent, creative athletes. They revel in their independence – but they can succeed only if they work together.

Blending free-spiritedness and discipline is not unique to sports – basketball also combines both – but soccer's lack of timeouts and low scores adds an exciting, unique dimension. Getting a goal in soccer is astonishingly difficult (despite how easy it may look to spectators standing atop a hill). The better team does not always win, no matter how hard it works. One mistake – an errant pass, a momentary lapse of concentration, a slip on a wet field – can, in the span of two or three seconds, determine the outcome of an 80-minute battle. In basketball a lead can change hands dozens of times, and the final two minutes of a game can take 20 minutes to play. In soccer a one-goal edge can be immutable; the final two minutes race by in exactly 120 seconds.

Soccer is also the only team game that is best learned by playing. Most sports practices are filled with drills. Athletes line up to take shots, run patterns, or simply run to “get in shape.” In soccer, we play. Not full-field, of course; that's not the best way to put athletes in pressure-filled, decision-making situations (and besides, at Staples we don't have enough space for each team to train on a full field). But every day is filled with games, and as much as possible, those games are fun.

Which brings me, in a roundabout way, to the good feeling that permeated the varsity team's fall season. From the opening day of practice, when many dozen boys showed up in the broiling August sun to show their stuff during two-a-day tryouts; through the early-September process of figuring out who works best together, and where; on into an intense 16-game regular season, punctuated by rains of biblical proportion that forced an unprecedented three-away-games-in-three days scenario that was inhumane in its physical toll but awe-inspiring in the focus the players gave; all the way through to the final match of the year, a state tournament game that, despite the team's finest performance of the fall, ended in a 2-1 defeat to a Newtown squad that was, at that point,

ranked eighth in the country – during all this the 22 players, assistant coach Kurt Dasbach and I felt, more often than not, great excitement and pride and, yes, joy.

We felt joy watching these youngsters race onto the field for practice. They warmed up on their own, testing each other with good-natured yet challenging games of skill and power. Every afternoon, we gave them problems to solve; each time, they worked together to do it. On game days, they gathered with exactly the attitude high school athletes should have. They were quick to laugh, but equally capable of focusing intently. They played with passion and poise; when they made mistakes – as everyone does – they shook them off. They reveled in their victories, but never let winning go to their heads. And when they lost – as everyone must – they never searched for blame, got down on themselves or doubted each other. They looked ahead, and got ready for tomorrow.

There were many obstacles. Our leading scorer got hurt, and missed key matches during the regular season. Our starting goalkeeper was injured, too. Late in the year we faced a dire situation: We had to win our last six games, compressed into just 15 days, in order to have a shot at the league playoffs. The players pulled it off – winning five of those contests by shutout – and then, seconds after the final victory, learned that Trumbull had upset New Canaan and snuck into the playoffs ahead of us.

The players took the news in stride. They turned their attention to the state tournament, where they gutted out a sudden-death overtime win, then gave defending state champions Newtown all they could handle in a thrilling, bone-chilling match.

The final score was 2-1, and we did not get the 2. It was a bitter end to a wonderful season. Just like that, the year was over. The horn sounded, the teams shook hands, and we trooped to the bus. There would be no more pre-training warmup games of Knockout or Slam; no more freewheeling practices or down-to-the-wire matches; no more pasta dinners, pre-game huddles and post-game cooldown runs when the fans always applauded, win, lose or draw.

It was all over. Kurt and I had given the players one goal in August – win the last game of the season – and as a team we did not reach it. After hundreds of hours of hard work and preparation – mental and emotional, as well as physical – we'd fallen short of our goal.

But the Staples athletes held their heads high. They knew they'd accomplished a tremendous amount, and grown even more in the process. Being teenagers, they bounced back quickly. The seniors reflected on all the fun they'd had; the underclassmen began thinking about next year.

As for me, my afternoons are now my own again; I no longer spend every morning and evening thinking about every player, every game, and every opponent. I do not have to call and email parents, teachers, college coaches and reporters. I finally have my non-soccer life back.

Too bad. I was having such a great time without it.