

## **Interview with Omid Namazi U18 Men's National Soccer Team Head Coach**

**Gary Christopher:** Okay. Hi everyone. This Gary Christopher with GetFastToday.com, and today we have the pleasure of talking Omid Namazi. Omid is the current Head Coach of the U.S. Men's National UA Teen Soccer Team, and prior to his head coaching position Omid was an Assistant Coach with the U.S. Women's National Team. Additionally Omid holds a U.S. Soccer A Coaching license and was a professional player for over 17 years.

I had the pleasure of meeting Omid when he was the Player-Coach for the Philadelphia Kixx where they won the MISL championship in 2002. Omid, thank you very much for your time today; we look forward to talking to you and getting your insights.

**Omid Namazi:** My pleasure, Gary, to be here with you and to your listeners. Again it's good to be able to pass on some knowledge that I've acquired over the years about soccer, youth soccer, the physical demands of the games and so forth.

**Gary Christopher:** Terrific Omid, terrific. Well speaking of your experiences you know you've got experiences obviously as both a player and as a coach. So I guess my first question is what in your opinion are certain things that youth players should be doing to make themselves better players, anything in particular?

**Omid Namazi:** Well, I would say in general the youth players would need to have a mindset where even though it's about having fun and it's about enjoying it yourselves out there and trying to learn a new game, they need to have a lot of practice. When I say practice, I mean a lot of repetition. Something that's gone by the wayside is we do have practices. We do have training sessions with our kids, but a lot of times that balance between having fun and actually teaching and coaching is not the right one. I believe we need to pay more attention to the practice of getting the basic skills down and introducing a skill set to the players where they constantly are repeating and doing it over and over so that it becomes a part of their game. I think when you go abroad and you look at countries like Holland, Germany, some of the top European countries and their top academies, that's what it's all about. It's fun, but the fun is through competing. The rest of it is repeating the basic skills and making sure it becomes a part of you basically.

**Gary Christopher:** Yeah. No, that make so much sense, and I think you're right. I think a lot of times players and/or coaches want to introduce something new and they really haven't mastered some of the basic things that are the foundational skill set that every player needs.

**Omid Namazi:** Right.

**Gary Christopher:** So you know with your experiences and again I've talked to many other coaches and some of them talk to me about mental toughness and things that players need to be prepared for. Are there

some things that you've done in your past that have helped you with your mental toughness, develop a stronger mental toughness?

**Omid Namazi:**

I don't think there's been a practice to make me mentally tougher. I think in everyone's career there's certain incidents where it could present a situation where if you're not mentally tough, you're not going to be able to survive in the game.

I'll give you an example. In 1988 I started playing professionally out of college for the Washington Diplomats back in the American Professional Soccer League straight out of college. I remember in college I was the attacking, creative player, and here I come to the pros and everyone on the team had as much or more flair and attacking ability than I did. So it made for a situation where I had to adjust and now as a rookie especially I was the worker on the team so to say, and they were the stars. So I remembered half way through the season we're playing in a game in Miami and there was a 50-50 ball in the middle of the field. You know I sort of jumped out of this challenge, and the Miami player won the ball. They went down and created a chance goal scoring opportunity, but after the game we had a Chilean coach who spoke very little English. Just in his broken English told me that that doesn't fly with him, that I need to be tougher and I need to win the challenges in the middle of the field. You know so from that day I was in the dog house, and I think it was about two to three weeks ago they called me in and basically handed me my release papers. So I was cut from my first professional team in 1988 and that sort of, you know, put something in my mind that if I wanted to survive in this game, I need to do more and I need to be tougher.

So I continued to practice with the team and try to show that I can handle the physical part of the game. The season ended, and for the next season there was a change in coaching. The new coach brought me in to try out in pre-season, and I ended up making the team and actually became one of the better players on the team the following year. That incident of getting cut from my team just set off a switch in my brain that I needed to be tougher, and I needed to be able to challenge the physical part of the game. Soccer is a physical game, and there's no room for not standing up to a challenge.

So therefore...

**Gary Christopher:** Sure.

**Omid Namazi:**

...I used that experience as something that propelled me to become a little bit tougher, not only physically but also mentally, but I also think one of the things that will help young athletes to become mentally tougher is to be good. Meaning when I say to be good, if someone is good in every department, whether it's foot skill, whether it's tactical knowledge, awareness, if they're physically strong; if they're well rounded, that makes them a player that no matter what the situation they're facing, they'll have an answer. That just makes you that much tougher. I always use an example of a different sport, but think

about the mentally tough player in all of sports, and I can't think of anybody else but Michael Jordan.

**Gary Christopher:** Yes.

**Omid Namazi:** Why was Michael Jordan so mentally tough is because Michael Jordan didn't have a weakness in his game. He knew if he had to battle in the lane and drive and get hit that he would take the hit and come back again stronger. He knew if had to defend one of the top players in the league that's good at attacking the basket, he was good enough to do that. So he was well-rounded enough to be able to answer to any challenge, and I think that alone made him that much tougher mentally. That's something that I always try to preach to our players that try to be as good as you can in every department of the game, and that will make you a stronger player, a mentally tougher player.

**Gary Christopher:** That's a great point. I never thought of it that way. That's a very valid point on that. You know you spoke earlier about repetition and getting better at some things, and this Malcolm Gladwell, the author of the Outliers, he's the one that kind of brought prominence to that 10,000 hours of practice that you need to do to become an expert. However, as we both know, we need to make certain that we're practicing the right things. When you were talking about your repetitions and just making certain, are there some things that when you look at youth players, and for now maybe I'd look that 12 to 16 year old player, are there some certain things that you would recommend that they do on a repetitive level again to help their skill set?

**Omid Namazi:** Yeah absolutely. I'm directing a club just outside of Philadelphia, and I introduced a series of skill set that I gave to my coaches and asked them to make sure that every player that graduates from our youth or teen age group...

**Gary Christopher:** Yes.

**Omid Namazi:** ...is proficient in these skill set, and there is probably about 30 to 35 different types of skills that the players need to be proficient at, whether it's passing with the inside of the forefoot, passing with the outside of the foot with the shoe laces, turning without of the foot, turning with the inside, you know all the different dribbling moves. You're driving the ball off the ground, just anything that you can think about. You know receiving the ball out of the air, chesting the ball, heading the ball, shooting, placing the ball, hitting it with power, all those things I've put it in a document, and I gave it to each coach. I asked them to make sure that every player that graduates for U-13 team is proficient in all of these. They don't have to master all of them, but they need to be basically good at it meaning...

**Gary Christopher:** Sure.

**Omid Namazi:** ...you know, you think of some of the top players in the world, let's say Messi, okay. We asked our players to practice both feet, left and

right, and be able to pass with both, pass with the right, pass with the left. You look at Messi. He hardly ever passes with his right, but if he had to he could. That's what I mean. You know every player picks one dribbling move and makes it their move, and they master that. It would be good if they know all the other dribbling moves just that they're that much more well-rounded and if the situation arises where they've got to use that skill, they can. So that's the idea, and it's just a lot of repetition, a lot of hours of just doing the same thing. We've introduced a series where before each practice the players come in 15 minutes before, and there is a series of skills that they go through on their own. Then the coach comes in, and he does the same thing for the next 15 minutes. So only 15 minutes of the actual schedule is spent by the coach on doing these skills set, but you literally have half an hour because the players have do it for 15 minutes on their own. So half an hour...

**Gary Christopher:** That's terrific.

**Omid Namazi:** ...of repetition, repetition, repetition and then applying these skills in the game under pressure, and that's the key word. It's okay to be able to do a lot of different things with the ball without pressure, but the top players are the ones who can do it under pressure. That's what a coach needs to create in a practice environment. Create that pressure environments that competitive environment where players now they are learning as what I call on the edge. It's not easy for them, but it's not too difficult either. It's attainable. Sometimes they fail, and then by failing they realize what they did wrong. The next time they're a little bit better, and this gradual improvement is what we're looking for.

**Gary Christopher:** Terrific. When you were just talking there, it reminded me of something. Are you familiar with soccer genius?

**Omid Namazi:** I'm not, no.

**Gary Christopher:** Okay. It's a company and what they do is, and I'm actually a part of that as well. We have five skill sets that are measured dribbling, passing, receiving, accuracy, shot [inaudible] [13:18] and then we also have a speed and agility piece to it, and it's all done timed. Players, you talk under pressure in that, what happens with the timing part of it, it kind of puts them under pressure. They've got to be able to do the movement or do the skill set as quickly as they can as well as the can, and it's been an interesting thing to see here. I'll have to share that with you at another time and get you thoughts on it. [Crosstalk]

**Omid Namazi:** It sounds like an interesting concept. I think time obviously puts pressure on them, but I'm a strong believer of a live body in front of the player...

**Gary Christopher:** Yes.

**Omid Namazi:** ...is the biggest pressure. You know we just had an experience with the U-19 team, and we traveled to Spain and we played France. Our players here at the development academy they all look good, and they're the best players of each of their own teams. When you go and play against France the speed of the game and how they close you down, it's completely different. It's faster. So you get less time on the ball; you get less space on the ball. That's where we start making mistakes and then you realize, okay maybe we need to make those practice environments here in our country a little bit more competitive, a little bit tougher so that the players are ready for international competition.

**Gary Christopher:** Right. Well you know what and myself being an athletic performance coach is, how do you view the speed agility? How important is it for today's players, and how much emphasis is there placed in this area with national team development?

**Omid Namazi:** It's extremely important. I mean with each national team we have obviously a fitness coach, and a bulk of their attention is to speed and agility and making sure that the players are sharp. The game's speed is increasing every day in the modern game. You look at championly games. The speed of the play is incredible, and unless you have some sort of athletic ability combined with the skills and speed of thought, you're not going to survive at the top level. So you know when you talk about the national team, we're trying to produce players that can compete at the world level. So speed and agility and being able to do things at a fast rate, whether it's moving the ball, whether it's running into space, crossing the ball, finishing, everything has to do with speed and agility and your ability to get from point A to point B as fast as you can.

**Gary Christopher:** Right. You know some of the people that will be listening to this are also youth coaches, Omid. You know you have kind of a unique and I think an important perspective to offer, meaning you've coached at a high level here in the United States and also internationally. You've mentioned when you were just talking about when your team was playing France and the speed there. Are there some things that you've noticed from your international coaching experiences that you think U.S. clubs should be doing more of for player development?

**Omid Namazi:** Yeah. There's one piece of the development that I think has hindered our development here of players at the top level is that free-flow play within a club. I use the example of England. England most kids they're in school, and then in the afternoon they go and train with their club teams, but in school they play. That play is free. I mean there's no coaching done. It's very unstructured so to say, and they get to express themselves. They get to learn by making mistakes. They get to learn by competing against each other for bragging rights. So I think there's a lot to that that we miss here. Here in our country the sport has become such a business, and it's very structured. It's taken away from that free play that the kids should have on their own without any sort of coaching because at the end of the day, it may sound like a cliché but the game itself is the best teacher. We need to

let the kids sort of do things on their own, and then yes, you bring them back. You bring them into a structured environment, and you coach them. They need to have that free play as well, and that's what we're missing.

**Gary Christopher:** Got you, yup, great point. You know we talk about development and such and I've read. I read about some players who have played at the highest level in a variety of different sports, and they've played other sports as kids growing up. Were you that type of player? Were you soccer only? Did you play other sports growing up, and what's your opinion on developing players today? Should they be playing other sports? When should we start to specialize on just playing one sport in your opinion?

**Omid Namazi:** No. I think, Gary, on hundred percent absolutely the athletes today should be well-rounded athletes meaning that they need to experience other sports. I personally grew up in a very athletic family. My mom and dad both were athletes. One played basketball and one played volley ball, and if I told you I played almost every sport. I grew up from six years old to 18 in Iran. So we didn't have baseball, but any other sport at all I played it. I played tennis...

**Gary Christopher:** That's great.

**Omid Namazi:** I played ping pong. I played basketball. I played volley ball, and I was pretty decent at a lot of them. Obviously my love was the game of soccer, but I would play every sport. I think that helped me so much with, you know, being able to read the game with my footwork, coordination, with a lot of different things. I just think today again sort of how I said in [inaudible] [20:14] environment everything is structured. Now too they try to specialize these kids too early into one sport and playing one sport. I don't think that's the right way to go about it. So yeah I absolutely believe that the kids need to play different sports, and you know at some point obviously in the latter stages of their youth careers, they need to pick one as their main sport and go with it.

**Gary Christopher:** Yes. Well that sounds great. You know you also I think have another unique perspective in that you've coached on the women's side and also on the men's side. If we're training kids today, is there any differences that we should consider when we're coaching on the boy's side or the girls' side?

**Omid Namazi:** Yeah of course. I mean obviously the girls are wired differently and you've got to be more sensitive to their needs. Their needs are basically more communication. From what I've experienced if you communicate more with women and you're open with them a little bit more than you are with the boys, I think you can succeed. They're just very emotional, and you've got to be conscious of that and make sure that you're constantly talking to them. You're constantly explaining to them, but I'll tell you what. Girls offer such a great environment to work in because they're like sponges. They literally will do whatever you ask them to do. If you ask them to go through

the wall for you, they will, but again that's part of the game where you need to understand that they're wired differently. They're emotionally charged differently, and you've got to communicate a great deal with them.

**Gary Christopher:** Right. Other than being an athletic player or having great soccer skills, are there any other intangibles if you will that you think players need to focus on, develop and maybe I mean like how important is nutrition and how important is sleep to these kids that you're now coaching? Is there an emphasis placed on all of that as well?

**Omid Namazi:** Yes. I mean all that you just mentioned is very important. Obviously you know you don't want a kid at 10 years old worry too much about what he eats every day, but...

**Gary Christopher:** Right.

**Omid Namazi:** ...at the end of the day, once they grow up and they get to ages where they're competing at a high level, the game is fast and they need to perform; in order to perform well, they need to have the proper nutrition, proper hydration, proper rest. Obviously sleep is very important. So yeah at the national team level we do hydration tests every day with the players. We make sure that they sleep plenty. Their diet is very controlled, and when I say that is when we're in training camp, the menu is given out by our nutrition expert. The players obviously follow that nutrition. Now when they go back to their clubs, we ask their clubs to sort of follow the same routine and make sure that they're get the proper whatever, rest, food, hydration and all that stuff. So yeah it's very important because where the game is going. The game is becoming faster and faster, and it demands high performance from all players.

**Gary Christopher:** Right. Well Omid, I really appreciate all of your time. It's been so much fun to listen to your thoughts and great thoughts, great insights for everyone who will be listening to this. So thank you very much for that. Is there any other topic that we haven't covered that you wanted to chat about? We covered quite a bit here.

**Omid Namazi:** I think we covered a lot. The one thing I might want to add is that one of our challenges here in the U.S. is we're used to being winners, and we want to win. We want to win in soccer. Obviously on the women's side we're if not the best team in the world, we are one of the best. On the men's side we've got some work to do, but you know it all starts at the youth level and us developing good, young players who can come through and work their way up to the Senior Men's National Team. In order for that to happen we need to make practice environments, training environments more and more competitive for the players, high speed, a lot of demand on the players with consequences because I think today in the academies and the clubs here in the U.S. it's become such a business that everybody's just thinking about, you know, where their kid can be seen. The coach is thinking about winning all the time, and it's hindering our development. We just got to make it very competitive,

and when I say competitive there's got to be an emphasis in development of skills and game awareness but also everything through a competitive environment where the players are becoming tougher, faster and everything that we talked about throughout this call.

**Gary Christopher:** Yeah that's a great point, and I think one of the things that you'd mentioned earlier is you passed down to your coaches a certain level of proficiency that your players must have, and that would be great to see because I do agree with you. I think sometimes anymore we're getting club coaches who make a living now by coaching, and sometimes to validate their paycheck they believe that they have to win at [inaudible] [26:46] cost and sometimes development might [inaudible] [26:50] there a little bit.

**Omid Namazi:** Yeah absolutely...

**Gary Christopher:** So...

**Omid Namazi:** ...and that's an issue but with the introduction of MLS academies and some of the academies following their footsteps I think we're going to get better. We just got to make sure again we put the right coaches in place to develop the right players, and that's the key. I mean Germany 20 years ago they thought they were falling behind, and they decided that they really needed to work on their coaches. In turn those coaches work with their players, and they went after coaching education and made sure that they had the right people in place. That's exactly what we need to do as well.

**Gary Christopher:** Great point. Well Omid, again many thanks. I really appreciate your time.

**Omid Namazi:** Sure, no problem. Thank you.