

GetFastToday.com Podcast - Sam Snow

Gary Christopher: Okay. Hi everyone. This is Gary Christopher with getfasttoday.com. On today's podcast, we have the pleasure of talking to Sam Snow. Sam is the coaching director for U.S. Youth Soccer, which is the largest youth sports organization in America.

Sam is nationally known for his ability to teach both the player and the coach in a manner that is both professional and enjoyable. Sam holds many licenses, including the USSFA license, the national youth license, premier diploma and a national goalkeeping coaching license.

He has coached at the high school, collegiate, state and national levels. Thank you so much, Sam, for taking a few moments with us today.

Sam Snow: My pleasure, Gary.

Gary: Sam, in looking at what you do and all that, I'm a soccer guy but I thought that it might be interesting to know a little bit more about, what is it that you do for U.S. Youth Soccer? What are some of the responsibilities that you have there?

Sam: Primarily I'm involved in coaching education, be it developing materials that we have up on our website. Some of those are print materials. Some of those are videos. Those types of things that are accessible to coaches.

Most of those things are up there for free access so I would definitely encourage coaches that are listening to go to our coaches section of the U.S. Youth Soccer website and start taking a look and grabbing some of the articles and videos and so on that you would like to have.

Then, largely, I also support the state association technical directors with their coaching education work and some of the projects, if you will, that we try to work on together. As an example, youth academies for 10 and younger players.

Developing other programs or refining programs that are existing such as our top soccer program which is for disability athletes and the coaching education that we have that goes along with that. Those are just a few examples, along with kind of our center plank as the national youth coaching course, which is aimed at coaching children 12 and younger.

Gary: That's terrific. If coaches wanted to go on it, what's the website that they would go to for that?

Sam: It's usyouthsoccer.org, O-R-G.

Gary: .org, okay. Perfect. Again, many of the people that will listen to this are coaches. Are there any suggestions that you have that you'd recommend for coaches to implement into their training or into their practices to help in the development of players? Not so much drills and such but more of, is it a work rate? Is it fun? What are those types of things that you

look for to help player development in that way?

Sam: One of the center philosophies or the center philosophy that U.S. Youth Soccer's had for a long time. If you go and check with U.S. Soccer, the F, E or D license now, I think it's also permeated into the C, perhaps the B and the A. That is a player-centered training and game day experience rather than a coach-centered training environment, a coach-centered micromanaging the players during the match on game day.

That most certainly is something that's at the center of what we're getting across in our coaching education is that it's a player's game so it needs to be player-centered training sessions. On game day it needs to be about letting the players get on with it. Give them a little bit of guidance, a little bit of advice but most certainly not over-coaching during matches.

Then with that player-centered philosophy comes some actual coaching method of setting up activities as opposed to drills. We want coaches to get away from drills because the biggest component among several, but the biggest component that's missing in drills is decision making yet the nature of soccer is constant decision making.

Why are we taking that away from the players since it's probably the most important skill for them to have in the game is to develop that soccer brain and therefore make sound decisions when they're out on the field about what to do tactically and then technically. Then, of course, having the physical engine to execute it all. It kind of goes in that order, if you will.

A lot of what we get across in our coaching education is about, how do we affect their tactical awareness, their decision making beginning at age five with very, obviously, very rudimentary things. Very fundamental concepts and then gradually getting into deeper and deeper water as they get older, both mentally, physically, technically, all of those things progress as they move on up towards early adulthood when it's beginning to all come together.

Gary: Right. That's terrific. I love that approach for it. You talk about youth players and even starting at the age of five, which is tremendous. Are there things that, in your opinion, our players kind of need to do or should be doing or we recommend doing on their own?

Sam: I don't know about you but I know for me, being a baby boomer, back when I was a kid in the '60s it was pick-up games. It didn't matter what sport it was. We played a little bit of soccer, a little bit of baseball, all of it, right?

Pick-up games need to be one of the things that today's children need to be encouraged to do. Be that at the soccer club itself, at the fields at the soccer club that they belong to.

The club says, "Every Thursday night all the 10-year-olds are invited to come out. We'll be here and flip the lights on. We'll be here for safety and supervision but otherwise we'll stay out of your hair. Kids, have that and get some games going" or having games at recess if they're

allowed by their school. In the neighborhood, et cetera, et cetera.

Wherever it's a good place for them to play and they can get together with some other kids. That would be certainly something that would have quite a positive effect upon their soccer development. It's a whole lot of fun for the kids, which is the core piece of why anybody starts out playing in a sport.

Look at a pro in any sport. It started off being, before it became a job, something that's fun for them. I talk to coaches all the time. You can watch professional teams and tell which players, which teams are still having fun and which ones are just punching the clock and just doing their time and waiting for the workday to get over.

Fun, for sure, in youth soccer is a centerpiece. Part of that comes from those pick-up games. Kids today need to be encouraged to do that because a whole lot of them don't know how to have a pickup game. Their total soccer experience has been adult-controlled.

Part of this is the adults loosening up on the reins and giving the game back to the players. It's an odd situation that we're in that many of today's kids need to be taught how to have a pick-up game as opposed to just, "Well, there's the field, here's a ball. Go have at it".

Gary: No, I agree. I love that. Again, you're right. That's how we did it as kids. I find it in my business, I'll find kids that how they move and how they run. They don't even know how to skip, necessarily. It's because, I think, we are just so accustomed to giving them everything. The structure is always there. The organization is always there.

That's pretty refreshing. I love that concept. Do you think that there's any challenge? One of the things that I've seen with youth soccer anymore, it seems like it's become a business. We have many great coaches but they are paid. To allow them to now take some of the reins, if you will, I love that analogy by the way, and let the kids play a little bit.

How do coaches react to that, do you think? What are some things that we can say to them to allow them to just take some of the pressures off and allow these kids to kind of develop and grow the game on their own?

Sam: Well, we actually get into it in pretty good depth during the national youth coaching course where we have a whole session on what we've titled street soccer. It's about free play. It's about pick-up games, a kick-about. Lots of different labels for that street soccer experience.

We do a little bit of classroom stuff and then we actually go out onto the field and the coaches play in those "pick-up games". We talk about, could this be a part of your training plan as a way to begin to introduce it?

Every three weeks or whatever frequency the coach wants, okay, this afternoon as the kids show up the coach has already got the cones and

the balls and the bibs lying out on the side of the field and tells the kids, "There's the equipment, there's the field. Organize yourselves however you want, 3v3, 5v5, what have you. Get playing".

It shouldn't be 20 versus 20. It should be small-sided so that everybody maximizes their time and experience technically, tactically, physically, et cetera. There it is. It could be that today's whole training environment is from a pick-up soccer or you've got 15 minutes, 30 minutes, an allotted amount of time out of the 60 or 90-minute training session the coach might have and let them begin to get on with it.

My experience has been, from doing that with players, some of them initially stand there and look at you like, "What in the world are you talking about?" They've never not had the coach not already have all the field laid out but also say, "You four kids go put on blue pinnies. You four kids go put on red pinnies. Blue plays red" and organize everything. Now it's thrown to the kids to do.

There may be a learning curve on the part of the kids. Let's say you give them 15 minutes. It might take them 14 minutes to get it organized the first time you do it. You play for one minute and the coach says stop. The kids say, "Wait a minute. We just started". "Well, okay, hold on. Next time we do this, get organized a little faster".

It's amazing the effect that that has upon the kids. Now, all of a sudden, they start taking control of their own experience. Some coaches have done that at their own training sessions and it's started to become a part of what they do.

Then others, particularly if they're in leadership positions within their club, coaches that take the national youth coaching course go back to their club and they're able to organize it, perhaps, club-wide. They'll put it into the curriculum of the club and expect all of the coaches to do it.

Obviously with the U6s it's going to take a little bit more hands-on from the coach. With the 16-year-olds it should take virtually no hands-on at all from the coach. Just be there for supervision and safety reasons.

That has happened in a number of clubs all across the country where they've gotten that going. We've even been pushing it out for the last three years, I think it's been, that youth soccer month, which is September. That's a program that we've had in place for about nine or 10 years, youth soccer month.

We started about three or four years ago, saying the first Wednesday of youth soccer month is national pick-up soccer day. National street soccer day and so on. Street soccer day, we're encouraging all clubs, that day is a street soccer day that you know as an 11-year-old, a 15-year-old, you're playing in this pick-up game and so are kids in thousands of soccer clubs all across the United States.

Gary: That's tremendous. That's a great idea. I love that. Well, it also sounds like there's a couple of new initiatives, at least two that I'm aware of, maybe more but at least two that I wanted to touch base with you about, that are being brought forward through U.S. Soccer.

One being small-sided games where I guess it's being developed a little bit more. Then also the calendar year age groupings. I can tell you, in talking with quite a few parents, I'm not certain if they, upset might be the wrong word for it. They have some concerns about it.

I think that it might just be that they don't understand it fully or don't understand the rationale behind it. Maybe it's just a small group of people that I know. Are there some things that you can talk about that could help parents and coaches? I think a lot of parents, anyway, primarily just calm down from this and wrap their heads around this a little bit better.

Sam: Well, one piece where everybody needs to understand, parents, coaches, administrators, what have you, is this is actually youth soccer in America going back to what we used to do prior to the mid '80s. It was in the mid '80s that we changed player registration from birth year to school year.

That's been the norm since somewhere around '83, '85, something along those lines. I don't remember the exact year. Somewhere in the mid '80s we changed from birth year registration to school year registration.

For a whole generation, generation and a half of players and the parents of those players and a lot of their coaches, administrators of the clubs, et cetera. That's the only thing that they've known. Some that are older recall when, in the '70s and prior, we did birth year registration of players. Clubs were still able to form teams. Everybody still made soccer friends and still did all of the things that they're doing now in regards to youth soccer.

We're just kind of flipping back to what we used to do, which puts us in line with the rest of the planet, which has been back on that for a few decades, back on birth year registration. Clubs are allowed to form teams however they wish. The thing that they must do, beginning in August 2017, is to register their players by birth year.

They want to do dual-year age bands if they want to have players play up, what have you. How they form teams is still completely up to the clubs and whatever local league rules and so on that they might be playing under.

The only national thing that they have to do is turn in the registration information by we have x number of male players born in the year 2002. We have x number of female players born in the year of 2002 and that sort of thing in terms of the registration process of players.

It's a little bit simpler, perhaps, than people think. Some of it has been about kids playing with their friends and such. Hopefully their friends

are, even if they're no longer on the same team, they're still in the same club.

That goes on now anyway, whether it be via tryouts or families moving to different towns, moving to different clubs, et cetera. There's always a little bit of churn of players and coaches and such, regardless of how players are registered.

Gary: Well, thank you for that. I guess the other initiative was in reference to the small-sided games. I know you've been a huge advocate of this for many years. In your opinion, how do small-sided games help now in player development?

Sam: Well, the first thing that it does is it levels the playing field so all of the youth soccer members of U.S. Soccer are now playing by that format. We're also in the process. We just finished a meeting last Wednesday of all of us getting together, that being AYSO, U.S. Clubs, SAY Soccer, USSSA, U.S. Futsal, U.S. Youth Soccer, MLS Youth.

Those seven organizations, along with U.S. Soccer. Those eight organizations got together last Wednesday and we finalized, we've been working on it for a few months. We kind of finalized the first official draft of the playing rules for sixes, eights, 10s and 12s.

The next step, there's a little bit of refinement and then pass it through the referee organizations for their input. Then we're pushing it out to all of our various members. In addition to the playing numbers, numbers of players on the field, going from four-a-side to seven-a-side to nine-a-side, they'll also all have a uniform set of playing rules, modified FIFA laws of the game, for all of the youth soccer to play by.

That piece of it, organizationally, administratively, we've got everybody on a level playing field. That's going to help tremendously. The direct impact on player development is, to most soccer coaches, soccer players, it's pretty straightforward logic. You take the adult game of 11-a-side soccer. You make it simpler so that children can understand it and play it. A way it begins to help them go in their development of young soccer players.

Thank goodness we're not taking seven-year-olds and asking them to play 11v11 on a 120 by 75 for 90 minutes to an eight-foot by 24-foot goal with a size five ball. That's the adult game. We've modified it. We've modified the time, the equipment, the size of the field, the number of players.

Having fewer players on the field impacts them mostly tactically. I know you hear a lot of people talk about, "Oh, it's more touches on the ball and it impacts them technically", which it most certainly does. It mostly impacts them tactically because now they're going to be in both attacking and defending situations with much greater frequency because the field fits their body size. The field fits their physical fitness capabilities to get from end to end, touchline to touchline.

Gary: Makes perfect sense.

Sam: It's building blocks. It's from four-a-side to seven-a-side to nine-a-side. Within those building blocks of small-sided games, coaches are expected to teach the concepts of the game, principles of play and then the tactics to execute principles of play. Also ball skills and then growing physical capabilities to help them with that as they go from childhood into puberty, eventually into adolescence.

The whole thing continues to progress. It's just a logical progression, really, in many ways, not any different than their academic progression from kindergarten and first grade and eventually hopefully earning a college degree. That's a long-term process.

Gary: Terrific. That's exactly right. Well, being an athletic development coach as well, one of the things I was also going to touch upon, if I may, with you is, with the small-sided games, maybe speed of players is also developed.

As you said, the quality of the touch, obviously, but the decision making and the tactics behind it. Is speed of play also something that we need to look at and develop as well? How important, maybe, is the development of speed and agility skills for youth players?

Sam: Well, the physical speed and agility is certainly important. The first thing when we talk about speed of play is mental speed and decision making within that. That's going to absolutely occur in small-sided games because, again, there's going to be transition more frequently. Our players will get better at transition.

Transition is that moment of the ball changing possession between the two teams. Now, I'm either changing from an attacking role to a defending role or vice versa. How fast I do that mentally then impacts how fast I do that physically.

Hopefully it's in the blink of an eye that I can make that mental switch from attacking to defending or defending to attacking and then physically execute it. Then, absolutely the physical engine becomes a part of speed and agility and endurance to be able to do that with frequency throughout a match, throughout a half.

For us, it begins with a heavy emphasis with the kids, four, five and six-year-olds. Then still with the seven and eight-year-olds but not quite as heavy. That is physical literacy. Not that physical literacy ever goes away but we look at that being the foundation at the youngest ages. That's the foundation to it all. We make the comment of, how can you expect the player to control the ball if they can't control their bodies?

Gary: Correct.

Sam: We work on physical literacy and then we begin to work on ball skills. With that, always the decision making. The speed and agility part is a big piece of it. Through an emphasis on physical literacy and coaches learning those things, those principles and how to execute physical literacy. Learning, as the kids get a little bit older, body resistance exercises to

begin to work on their strength.

Then we have advocated for a long time, at least in the Olympic development program, that with our kids 13 on up, that they're doing the FIFA 11 plus routine as a piece of their physical development. Given the fact that the Olympic development program has the players for a small amount of time on an annual basis, certainly in comparison to their clubs.

Those are the things that we're advocating. When it makes physiological sense, as kids move from childhood into puberty into adolescence, then the athletic development of them needs to continue to change gears. It's an important part of the sport. You have to be quick. You have to be mobile. You have to be agile in order to play our sport.

Gary: Then again, it goes to what you were just talking about as you were just saying there. Based on the biological age, if you will, or even the chronological age of a player, they gradually need to ramp up just like they would with the skills from the 4v4, 5v5, 7v7, 9v9. Ultimately it's the same thing. When you talk about physical literacy, are you referencing some of the long-term athletic developments, the LTAD stuff that's out there as well?

Sam: Yes, absolutely. When you look at the player development model from U.S. Youth Soccer, if you look at the curriculum from U.S. Soccer, you'll see a lot of long-term athlete development principles in there, some of it directly stated and cited from the original materials.

That's part of it because that's the nature of our game, whether it be in the physical fitness component, the technical, tactical, psychological principles. Our sport is one that is long-term in its development. You don't really come to your peak as a player until at some point in your 20s, usually.

Gary: Right, right.

Sam: It's a long-term process.

Gary: I am a big fan of the LTAD. A lot of the things that we try and do work off of that because you're right. If we can't move properly it's going to be hard for us to be expected to collect the ball properly as well.

Sam: Absolutely.

Gary: Great point.

Sam: It's a really vital piece.

Gary: Yes, yes. Anything else that we missed that you wanted to do a quick mention about, Sam? I think we covered some very good topics here. I really thank you for that. Anything else that you wanted to touch base on?

Sam: Well, I would certainly encourage coaches out there to take advantage of all of the

formal and informal coaching opportunities, coaching education opportunities that they can find. I would encourage clubs for their coaches to develop a mentor system, particularly for their more novice coaches being connected to some of the more experienced coaches in the club.

That's a piece that I think, on an organized level, most clubs are still missing. Some clubs have that. That would help a great deal to accelerate our coaching development. If we do that then we accelerate the player experience and development.

Gary: That's a great point. I would applaud anyone who can get that mentorship program started. That's terrific.

[END OF TRANSCRIPTION]