

# WHAT IS THE COST OF WINNING?

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST COLM Ó RIAGÁIN EXAMINES THE IMPACT OF COMPETITION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG PLAYERS

**T**HERE'S a new buzzword in town- Long Term Player Development (LTPD). A concept designed to get the best out of players through their career and beyond, a way to keep kids enthused and involved, an antidote to the perils of competitive environments.

All sports will have LTPD prominent in their websites and most sports will stress how this approach now underpins their coaching and playing structures. But does this translate into what we as players, coaches and parents experience on a weekly basis and is competition such a bad thing?

Some pressure is good. Competition, in its proper place, provides that good pressure. It is a great motivator. The game teaches players what their strengths and weaknesses are in an environment of fun. It is satisfying to compete because it allows you to test and measure yourself against an opponent.

In order to develop, a player must challenge himself when it counts. Playing with and against the best players, under the guidance of a good coach, is the best way for a player to improve. Isn't it?

Gaelic games and soccer have been embracing the idea of pathways to development in their games. There is a recognition that we need to take account of the technical or skills development and the physical, psychological and social development needs of young players starting out.

This has given rise to lots of initiatives such as Blitzes, Go Games, small sided games, drills focussed development, no competitive games until the teenage years. Indeed the FA model is based on stages that are age related -

- \* Learning the fundamentals and enjoying practice (5-11yrs)
- \* Developing practice and Training for competition (11-16 yrs)
- \* Understanding competition and developing winning (16-20 yrs)
- \* Training to win ( 20yrs plus)
- \* Retaining people in football

Does such a model, as our associations are trying to embrace, translate into the actual experiences of players, coaches and parents? Even the most solid model will fail if the implementation of the structures and philosophy is compromised by poor coaching, an unrelenting club ethos of "winning", and pushy parents!

Arguably, Gaelic games have made more progress than soccer in Ireland at getting a balance between a focus on results of competition and attention to the learning process.

Even small sided games in soccer, involving children as

young as 8 years of age, can be and are "avidly" followed on the internet (A-Z of soccer). The desire to see "the young fella just playing a bit ball" is quickly overtaken by the scrutiny of what team he's playing on and which club is best. Soccer clubs seem to devour very young "talent" and "poaching" is widespread.

Poaching of course is only really possible in a culture where winning is all and promises are easily made. Winning is not always the same as achieving potential or the product of good coaching. Coaches who use the competitive arena as a way of providing valuable feedback and not as an end in itself are more likely to produce players who are self-motivated and interested in developing more.

Both 'coaching to win' and 'coaching for learning' have merit. Sole reliance on results in youth sports is detrimental due the many reasons that one team can be superior to another. Discouragement is a natural consequence.

Equally, focussing only on acquisition of skills in a training environment is limited because playing in competitive situations is an overt goal of sport and a form of feedback or measurement of progress. Coaches and organisations should strive to get the balance right.

This is where the motivational climate created by coaches and peers becomes important. It is also where educating parents becomes crucial.

If you've ever stood on the sideline of a Saturday or Sunday morning you soon get a feel what model a kid is being exposed to.

From the coach who shouts and roars and wouldn't know a well executed skill if it jumped up and bit them to the lad who praises each and every effort and encourages more effort.

It's also interesting to see that if the coach is consumed with winning, the behaviour and attitude of the team is likely to be equally "off", with players moaning about decisions and teammates.

And then there are the parents! Parental pressure is a strongly associated with fear of failure. Punitive parental behaviour can range from excessive criticism to excessive instruction to bad sportsmanship.

Coaches and clubs can set down good markers for parents. Tolerance of bad behaviour is storing up problems. Even referees can play a role in curbing parental excess although it might be a tough ask at some grounds!

It is often the combination of bad coaching, the ethos of win at all costs and tolerance of poor parental and child behaviour that gives competition a bad name - not the idea of competing itself. ■

