

Building Your Youth Soccer Team with Real Team Players

15 traits — good and bad — that coaches should identify when looking for a true team player in youth sports. Is there anyone more passionate in the world of sports than a soccer enthusiast? And if you coach youth soccer, you likely have a deep and abiding love for the game.

You also want your players to love the game, have fun and hopefully achieve some “success”.

For you, success means far more than wins and losses. Oh, you want to win. Any competitive person young or old, coach, player or parent — generally wants to win, even in so-called “youth” sports. But beyond that, you really do aspire to help build character in the young people in your care, and to build a team that plays hard and tough but fair.

So, if you have the responsibility for selecting players for your all-star, select or “rep” teams, what are you looking for as you build this competitive young team? Players with talent, to be sure. Young athletes with a passion for soccer, absolutely. But, if you really want to have a “successful” team of young players, based on the above criteria, you will need to find true ‘team’ players.

So, what are you looking for? What is a true ‘team’ player in youth sports? True team players may not always be the most talented or naturally gifted players, but they make your team better by their sheer presence. The poor team player has an attitude that can spread like a disease, and over time can kill the harmony and chemistry that is often critically important in helping you attain the positive goals you have set out for your young squad.

Here, then, are some qualities, attributes, characteristics and/or behaviour patterns you will — and won’t— want to have on your team

1) Positive attitude:

It’s an easy term to throw out there, but more than ever, in a generation filled with bulging egos and self-interest, a positive attitude — toward others and your team — is critically important in choosing an athlete for a high-level team. What are tell-tale signs of a good — or bad — attitude in a young athlete?

Does the player listen, or does he/she slough off input from coaches?

Does the player have a strong work ethic all over the field?

Does he/she, have the ability to self-reflect, to really look at themselves in the mirror and see when they are not performing the way they should?

Does the player work out on their own?

Does the individual accept constructive criticism?

Does the player work on their shortcomings, or only focus on the things they like to do or are good at?

As a coach, you can fill in the blanks with many other attributes relating to the importance of attitude.

In short, you want the player who will play a role when needed, accept the non-glory jobs, play (as much as is reasonable to expect of a young athlete) for the team more than simply for scoring goals or their own egos.

2) Work Ethic:

The willingness to work hard (really hard), to improve your skills is vital. Pele was the world’s greatest soccer player, but also perhaps its hardest worker as he worked relentlessly to hone his abundant natural skills. Wayne Gretzky was a hockey phenom, but worked and worked to get better every day from a very early age.

Does being a diligent worker make you a great team player? Not necessarily, if you don’t associate with and respect your fellow players. But the vast majority of young athletes who work hard do so because they love the sport, truly want to be the best they can be, and by extension are great influences on their teammates.

Being a good teammate and team player is not necessarily being the most 'popular', but it can include setting important examples, especially in terms of work ethic.

3) Picking up and supporting a fellow player when they are down:

The player you are looking for can identify when a teammate is struggling, needs a pat on the back, and a shot of confidence. This is tough to expect when players are really young, but by the time a young person is 12 or 13, it is a quality that you can look for.

I remember a few years ago, that I asked one of my clients, an NHL player, a question that I sensed he had never been asked before. I asked him if he could identify one player in his pro career who he thought of as a truly excellent teammate and team player, specifically someone who didn't blame others and supported his own teammates when they were down. He named James Patrick, the long-time defenseman, who has had a quiet but lengthy and distinguished career in the NHL. That has always stayed with me.

As a youth coach, you want to find as many James Patrick-type players as possible!

4) Helping other/younger players:

This does not necessarily apply until older ages when say, a 13 or 14yr old is playing with older athletes, but it can be a very important attribute in an "older" youth player. The great team player senses when a younger player is struggling, uncomfortable or anxious. He/she will spend some time with the younger player, talk with them, make them realize they are a part of the team, and generally include them in team activities.

I remember many years ago, when I was coaching a youth baseball team. One of my four sons, was on the team. (Yes, I was one of those coaches with a son on their team!). There was quite an age spread on this particular team, 13 to 16. During one game, I came down very hard on my son, in a way that I likely would not have with any other player. I unloaded. He accepted it and but was hurt and upset and quietly went to seek a quiet space in the corner of the dugout.

One of his teammates, a 16yr-old catcher and true team leader, quietly went over and knelt-down in front of my son, took him gently by the shoulders and just spoke with him privately.

That response lifted my son's spirits and made him feel much, much better, it also showed the quality of character of this young person.

That day, a 16yr old did a lot more for my son's growth and development than I did. He also reinforced for me what a true team player is, at any level of sport.

5) Showing genuine happiness when others succeed:

This is hard for most of us as adults, so it is quite an expectation for us to have of a young athlete.

This is especially difficult during the tryout process, when players are obviously competing for positions on the team. But once the final squad is selected, it is important that players support one another in good times and bad. It can be particularly challenging to find joy in the success of your teammates, but if you can, it is a wonderful gift to share. The coach who identifies a lot of players who can do this will have a strong team, on and off the field.

6) Negative body language:

Visit any soccer pitch and you will see young players, very young players, demonstrate negative body language that must have been learned by example: an example perhaps set by watching older players on TV, or in their own homes. Some specific examples of this behaviour?

Players shoot the evil eye at teammates when that other player is thought to have made a mistake; They throw their hands up in the air whenever an officials' call goes against them or their team (it seems to be human nature to disagree with calls by referees on occasion, but when a player reacts repeatedly, it is a problem); they won't look their coach in the eye, or simply tune their coach out. All these can be small but important signs that this particular player will let you — and the team— down at crunch time.

7) The selfish player:

Selfish play doesn't only show itself when a player won't "pass the ball". That does happen, and can pose a problem, of course, if a young player repeatedly refuses to look for the open man when the opportunity calls for it. But selfish play shows itself in a variety of ways, and youth coaches need to be on guard. The player who incessantly harps at game officials is not a team player, because he/she is only hurting their team by complaining constantly to officials who, being human, may take out their own frustration against your team.

The player who constantly throws his hands up in the air when a call goes against him is being selfish. I recently saw a youth soccer player called for a foul in the middle of the field. No damage to his team, really. But after twice elbowing his opponent near the head and being called, he acted as though he had done nothing wrong, and proceeded to throw the ball out of bounds, delaying the game. The referee promptly gave the player a yellow card. Was that helping his team?

Again, the example is often set at the pro levels. When Tie Domi hit Scott Niedermeyer with a violent elbow to the head — for no apparent reason—in the dying seconds of a critical NHL playoff game a few years ago, many believe the thoughtless act wrecked any chances his team, the Maple Leafs, had of upsetting the favored New Jersey Devils. Domi was suspended for the senseless act, and rather than focus on a great game the Leafs had just played in victory, the media and the hockey world focused solely on Domi's actions. A thoughtless, selfish play hurt his team, badly. The Leafs lost the series.

8) The blame game:

Perhaps it is a reflection of the way some professional athletes act out, or maybe it is that too many of us as parents have gone overboard in 'supporting' our own kids. Whatever, far too many young athletes simply look to blame others when things go wrong. Rather than look at their own performance, they pick at teammates, blame others for goals that are scored, and generally fail to recognize their own errors while focusing on the 'mistakes' of others. This attitude can spread like wildfire, and is highly toxic.

9) "I'm better than you:"

Everyone is, of course, entitled to their own opinion. Stand on any soccer sideline at youth games and you'll hear plenty of them. Opinions become an issue, however, when parents start thinking their kid is better than everyone else's. And when the young players themselves act as though they are better than their teammates — either in the actual things they say, the tone they adopt when interacting with fellow players, coaches, or the way they exclude certain teammates on or off the field, it is a major problem. Young players who think they're great and better than everyone else and that others are the problem create an environment for failure, on many levels.

10) "I'll play anywhere, coach:"

Most every coach loves the player who is versatile, can play different positions and accepts tough roles. Often, part of being a good team player is being the kind of player that a coach can count on to embrace sometimes low-profile but difficult assignments.

If you can find players with the willingness to take on different tasks, you'll be doing well.

11) Humility:

Genuine humility is difficult to find, at any age. We are all taught a kind of superficial, false modesty at a very young age, and that is socially encouraged, to a certain extent. And human nature being what it is, we all have pride. That's OK.

But developing a truly humble attitude is a wonderful trait in a young athlete.

To take pride in working toward or achieving a goal is generally a healthy thing.

But reminding him or herself that few if any athletes accomplish things totally on their own is a good thing for young athletes. You usually need helpful and supportive parents, excellent coaches, teammates who also strive to be better, as part of one's support system.

Even world class athletes in “individual”, non-team sports such as gymnastics, figure- skating and swimming need the support of others to attain great things, whether that support is financial, emotional or otherwise.

Goodness knows the professional sports world is filled with individuals who think primarily of themselves. The youth sports world — and your team— can always do with some humility.

12) A Focus on Fitness:

There is more to being a good soccer player than technical skills. There is no question that if a young person wants to be an elite athlete, they need to get into outstanding physical condition, especially in soccer. Is your potential player willing to do additional training on their own and with teammates, beyond games and practices?

Some may think that just being a soccer player — with all the running that entails — will keep you in top shape. In fact, to get to an elite level, to become the kind of player that won't shut down late in a tough game, you need to be in better physical condition than the player opposite you.

By being in great condition, a young player won't let themselves down, and they won't let their team down, either.

13) Welcoming “new” players to the team:

There is often an awkward transition period for any athlete, but perhaps especially young athletes, when a player changes teams or joins a new team.

The young player may not know many of his/her fellow players and teammates, and there may be a period of discomfort.

The team player will welcome newcomers to the team, answer their questions, share experiences and generally offer a genuine and warm welcome, both on and off the field.

14) A player who shows respect for the coach, teammates and themselves:

No player, from the youngest “house league” player to the star professional, will always agree with their coach.

Whether the issue is playing time, method of instruction, discipline, whatever, there will always be the possibility of disagreement.

But the team player will recognize that the coach may see the ‘big picture’ and will follow the coach's plan for the team. This player doesn't freelance and simply do his or her own thing.

The team player will do his or her best to adopt the strategic recommendations of the coach, and respect the coach's philosophy — assuming, of course, the youth coach is of strong character with solid values. (On this point, parents have every right to disagree with a coach, but those disagreements should be discussed privately, away from other players and parents.

If the conflicts cannot be resolved, the parents have the option of raising legitimate issues or concerns with a “higher authority” or seeking an alternate program for their son or daughter.)

Assuming good will on everyone's part, the player with the team uppermost in mind will respect not only his coach, but also his or her fellow players. That final point should not be undervalued. A player who respects their teammates is worth their weight in gold.

This doesn't mean there won't be joking, camaraderie and even some healthy competition and occasional words of criticism. But if the basis of the relationship is genuine respect, then the relationship can build and flourish.

15) The follower:

Not every person — or athlete — is a leader, so it is certainly not reasonable to expect that every young player will be a leader.

Our course, one thing to be aware of as a youth coach is the young player who is not only a follower, but who follows the wrong kind of example.

The follower is the one that easily falls in with negative peer influences, displays immature judgments or inappropriate outbursts with coaches, fellow players or officials, for example.

One influential player with a negative attitude can carry other players who fall into the 'follower' category with them, and that can seriously impede team harmony.

Final thoughts.....

Beyond these 15 points, there are, of course, other attributes as a coach that you will have taken note of over the years in building a youth team. But these 15 things give a coach some points to seriously consider, as they go about building a real "team" in youth sports.

A final thought: Too many teams are kept together from year to year in youth sports, because of a variety of factors, including politics, with no room for "new blood".

This can be troubling for a couple of reasons. By almost automatically keeping the same players year after year, regardless of attitude or work ethic, players and their parents develop a sense of entitlement that they, without question, deserve to be on a particular team.

Also, a youth coach, in adopting this restrictive approach, may miss some players who would be excellent additions to their squad, and be real team players.

Unfortunately, the "tryout" process is often way too short. The longer a coach can carry on their tryout process, the better they will be able to identify the traits, qualities and characteristics that will help them locate players who are hidden gems.

And a team player is just that: a gem.

Michael Langlois, founder of Prospect Communications Inc., is the author of the book, "How Well Do You Communicate? A Guide to Better Communication with Players and Parents for Minor (Youth) Soccer Coaches". Prospect's web site is located at <http://www.beyondthegame.net>