

Cash-for-Goals in Youth Soccer: Adults Gone Wild

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by

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Abstract

Addressed are the potential disruptive effects of extrinsic rewards, such as, cash or toys for performance in youth sports. It is argued that “cash for goals” is immoral since it shows disrespect to the spirit and the written rules of the league, and it is demeaning to both teammates and the kids on the opposing team. Existing research on extrinsic motivation warns that extrinsic rewards may be described as the “enemies of exploration.”

Rather than getting too focused on their personal expectations and aspirations parents should honor and support the original youth soccer program goals that were set in place to serve the needs of children.

Introduction

Since I first launched the “Kids First Soccer” website (<http://www.kidsfirstsoccer.com>) during the summer of 1997, I have received and replied to thousands of email messages from parents, coaches, educators, sport administrators, and many professionals from all over the world. Some writers ask about appropriate soccer programs for their child in the area they reside, others ask about skills progressions or game strategies for youth soccer. Many of the messages and questions I regularly receive include comments about the site and the writer’s and her/his child’s soccer experiences. I have addressed many of the comments I receive through a questions and answers section on the “Kids First Soccer” website. Not all questions and/or comments, however, paint a rosy picture of what ever it is that takes place on the soccer fields during regular youth soccer seasons. In this article I would like to address an email message I received from a reader on October 8th, 2009.

In essence, the writer whose “children have all played soccer and are now all grown,” reported observing soccer parents and other family members “doling out cash...\$5.00 to \$10.00” as a payoff for scoring a goal. As inappropriate and inexcusable as such behavior is, the writer was further appalled by the fact that the act involved players “5 to 7 years old!”

What’s Wrong with this Picture?

As the creator and author of the Kids First Soccer website my position about the question at hand is very clear. The practice of paying a child for scoring a goal in youth soccer amounts to senseless bribery that is bound to result in long-term harm to a child’s intrinsic motivation. Handing out cash while the game is still in progress, on the other hand, amounts to outrageously inappropriate conduct by very irresponsible and misguided adults. Furthermore, the practice of paying a child off for scoring a goal is immoral since it shows disrespect to the spirit and the written rules of the league, and it is demeaning to both teammates and the kids on the opposing team. One may also challenge the legality of such practices in an amateur, non-professional sports league. Following a very successful season, is a child who scored a multitude of goals required to declare her/his earnings as taxable income?

One may frown on the above scenario and consider it an isolated incident that does not deserve the time and/or effort to report. In addition, I suspect that a negligible number of the readers of this essay would support a “cash for goals” motivational intervention in youth soccer or any other sport. Yet, unfortunately, the parental practice of “cash for performance” is alarmingly wide spread. For example, in a survey commissioned by BBC Education explored parents’ attitudes towards their children’s exams, results indicated that 43% of respondents used cash or gifts as an incentive to retake a test (BBC Education, 1999). Some 10% of survey respondents admitted that they bribed their child to work harder since their child’s success will make them look as better parents (BBC Education, 1999). Another report published on stateofthedivision.blogspot.com (2007) presents the case of a father that “promised a child a Nintendo Wii game system for scoring a couple of goals in a soccer game.” More evidence of parental attitudes toward bribing their children may be found on the Helium.com website that provides visitors with a “Parenting & Pregnancy: Child Behavior & Discipline” page. On that page, Joseph Whalen (2010) has a Blog under the “Discipline Strategies” tab where he poses the question “Should children be bribed to help with household chores?” On January 8, 2010, the day I last checked, of the 264 individuals that answered the question, 64 or 24% selected the “Yes” option.

"Pay for performance" is a well established modus operandi in business (Sodden, 2007). Given the recent scandals in world banking that contributed to a financial Tsunami for millions, one may ponder whether ridiculously high rewards for

performance (e.g., CEOs' salaries and benefits and cash and electronic games worth hundreds of dollars for scoring a goal) may be considered an appropriate path to follow. What would the cash value of scoring a goal to win the U7 youth soccer league's championship game be?

According to Dr. Virginia Shiller, Professor of Psychology at Yale, "Rewards can play an important role in motivating kids, but the cash-for-grades game isn't the best way to the Ivy League (Cited in Roberts-Grey, 2009)." A logical extension to Dr. Shiller's observation would be that cash-for-goals also isn't the best way (to put it very mildly) to the Major Leagues.

An important goal of education in the classroom and/or on the soccer field is for the child to gradually reach both independence and self-regulation. These two attributes thrive on a self-driven internal motivational force. The introduction of an external reward for a task that the child is already enjoying to do is counterproductive and will most likely lead to an expectation for an ever growing reward for the same or lesser performance.

Likely Effects of Cash-for-Goals on Teammates, the Coach, and the Opposing Team

Parents are seldom present at a classroom's "sideline" to reward their child on the spot for a stellar performance on a particular test. Unlike the case of cash-for-grades, in the sport context, one cannot ignore the possible ripple effect of the practice of cash-for-goals on the coach, teammates, and players on the opposing team.

Cash-for-Goals: A Coach's Perspective

The practice of providing a child with monetary rewards on the sidelines during a game is disrespectful to and interferes with the coach's leadership position and educational role on the team. A critical function the coach must fulfill is to treat all players equally and fairly. A coach that ignores or allows a cash-for-goals behavior on the sidelines is tarnishing her/his impartiality. Any success on the soccer field must by its nature reflect a team effort. The worn out cliché that "there's no 'I' in a team" is a fine reminder that a good team effort must not be acknowledged by a payoff to the one child that scored a goal. While parents are encouraged to support their children from the sidelines, they are also expected to follow the coach's philosophy and goals. A good game plan does not necessarily include a designated scorer. Rather, a conventional game strategy would suggest that the player in the best position to score should be the one getting the last pass prior to a shot on goal. It would thus be reasonable to expect that the child that gets paid for a goal will be less likely to pass the ball to a teammate in a better scoring position. As a result, the external monetary incentive has the potential to reshape the player's goals for a game regardless of the coach's

master plan. Also, will a child expecting cash-for-goals be content to sit out his/her turn during a game? Will he or she accept the assignment of a defensive position and stay in that position as game conditions dictate? Clearly, what may have started as an internal joke or as very poor judgment by misguided adults may lead to some serious expected as well as unexpected disruptive consequences.

Cash-for-Goals: Possible Effects on One's Teammates

Walking home at the conclusion of first grade I stopped with my best friend Aaron at the local family owned grocery store. We both proudly held our report cards in our hands as we entered the store looking for candy. Mr. P., a close family friend, asked me to show him my report card. "Wonderful, all 'As'" he exclaimed and immediately grabbed a large milk chocolate bar from the shelf and handed it to me. Aaron, turned to Mr. P. and remarked that he too had a perfect report card. "I wasn't talking to you, I was taking to Dany" was Mr. P.'s reply. We were six years old when this incident took place, and more than fifty years later I can still clearly recall every word that was uttered, and I surely wasn't the one who was "stuffed." I am left wondering how do kids that have given their all in a game for the team feel when they see one of their teammates collecting a \$5.00 or \$10.00 bill for scoring a goal. The above observation is reinforced by Morgan's (1983) report that subjects who observed a protagonist being rewarded for performing a task experienced a decrease in their own level of motivation to perform.

An additional concern stems from the results of a pilot observational project on youth soccer in Southern California (Frankl & Wright, 1997). The analysis of the data revealed that in games played by children 5-8 years old, 7 to 9 players a side, less than 30% of the participants dominate the game for more than 70% of the action. For example, analysis of game performance of an AYSO 1996 Boys' Division 6 game via videotape and Second Look for Soccer software, revealed that of a total 312 contacts with ball by 9 team "A" members during one 40 minute league game, four players made a total of 260 (80%) contacts with the ball. The remaining five players (played equal time and were rotated, including the goalie position) contacted the ball a mere 52 times, or 10.4 contacts per player for the game. Assuming that the above observation is still representative of the current state of affairs in U5 through U7 soccer, one could contemplate the deleterious effect of an external monetary incentive to select players on a game that is already markedly lopsided.

Cash-for-Goals: An Opposing Team Player's Perspective

In a reply to a "Question of the Week" on September 2004, I have addressed the issue of excessive cheering after a goal is scored in a youth soccer match (Frankl, 2004). One concern mentioned was that excessive parental cheering from the sidelines disproportionately highlights a single player or event. Systematic observations of U5 –U7 youth soccer games reveal that quite often a

goal is the result of goalie error rather than a skillful performance by the scorer. Excessive celebrations, especially following a goalie error, place undue pressure on a poor 7-year-old goalie and contribute to intra-team resentment. Partisan cheering by the parents, as contrasted with genuine cheering for any of the players that demonstrates good skills, effort, sportsmanship etc., is more likely to promote an atmosphere of alienation than one of friendship among players on opposing teams. Children's sports should not be dressed up as mini wars where the opponent is the enemy that should be defeated and humiliated. The introduction of "cash-for-goals" into an already tension loaded atmosphere in youth sports will most likely worsen an already grim situation.

The Effect of Extrinsic Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation

Citing research on extrinsic motivation, Kohn (1991), warns that extrinsic rewards have been described as the "enemies of exploration (p. 83)." The negative long-term effects of the pairing of the inherent joy of scoring a goal in a soccer game, for example, with an extrinsic reward (e.g., cash-for-goals), are very well documented by leading motivation scholars (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagne, M., & Deci, E.L., 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). At the conclusion of a scoreless yet well played game, how are players that get cash-for-goals supposed to feel? Should they feel just as cheerful as they felt following an easy game in which three goals were practically "handed" to them by an inferior defense and goalie? Or, should they feel very disappointed since regardless of how well they played they will still walk off the field "empty handed?"

Concluding Remarks

One is left to ponder why would a parent chose a reward system that has a very poor long-term prognosis on their child's attitude toward the game and her/his passion for the activity? How could an adult justify such unbecoming actions?

Apart from the rationalization that "some parents simply do not know better..." (not a legitimate excuse) one possible explanation is that some parents may be compelled to engage in such and other misguided behaviors as a direct result of getting all caught up in the "reverse-dependency trap" (Smith & Smoll, 1996). In short, these parents define their personal self-worth based on their child's or the team's success. Some parents get so focused on their personal expectations and aspirations that they lose sight of the original youth soccer program goals that were set in place to serve the needs of children--not their very own selfish and self-centered needs.

Youth sport parents are advised to consider the possibility that their most prized possession, their exceptional child, the "center of their universe" may be dismissed as "a faceless child" by somebody else. In youth sport leagues where all kids count and all kids are treated with dignity and respect, every child is

appreciated and made to feel welcome. Where else would it be easier to implement the moral principle of "love thy neighbor" than in the company of children? Once sports parents embrace an attitude of caring and respect towards all the kids on the playing fields, little league will become a much nicer place to visit. We can, and for the love of our children, should strive to do our best for every child.

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