

**Title Page:**

**A NEW APPROACH TO EXPERIENCE COMPETITIVE SOCCER AND LIFE LESSONS**

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## INTRODUCTION

**“Life Skills Through Soccer” is an intensive development program for committed players who already have a foundation in soccer and are seeking a program, which targets development of the ‘whole person/athlete’ in an age appropriate context.**

Competitive soccer training and character development are enhanced through the “Life Skills” method, which focuses on individual as well as team member growth.

### I- LIFE SKILLS AND ITS OBJECTIVES

There are three important objectives that “Life Skills Through Soccer” strives to accomplish with its strategies, activities and curriculum:

1. “Life Skills Through Soccer” is primarily a high-level soccer training program, which focuses on the development of highly committed, skilled and disciplined players in the sport of soccer.
2. Unlike most competitive programs, “Life Skills Through Soccer” does not recruit or rely upon top players developed elsewhere, to enhance the program’s success. The program searches for interested athletes who would like to develop their skill through an educational process that first defines their talent, cultivates that talent and transforms it into soccer skills at the athlete’s own pace (soccer development). The program features a progressive methodology of training and a competitive schedule that does not skip important steps in the development process to promote winning as an end in itself. “Life Skills Through Soccer” at the youth development level is geared toward stimulating the player’s ability to create and appreciate the game being played with finesse and intelligence (“the beautiful game of soccer”).
3. “Life Skills Through Soccer” emphasizes the use of moral and ethical principles as the primary educational tool for accomplishing success. It demonstrates that young people can progress and excel in athletic, social and intellectual domains simultaneously.

### II- SOCCER AND SOCCER PROGRAMS

The chance that a young athlete will choose soccer as a lifetime sport is determined by the content of the program, the expertise and experience of the teachers (coaches), the social environment which the program enjoys, the choice of appropriate competition at each level and the vivid lessons provided by the learning process. The art of making a sports program successful lies in the ability of the instructors to choose the right topics for their lessons and select challenging competition based on the athletes' stage of physical and mental development. In other words, ***an athlete will feel successful doing a given activity when the activity matches his/her intellectual, cognitive and motor skills.***

The concept of readiness (or the capacity to assimilate contents relative to one's degree of maturity) should be a pre-requisite for any athletic activity in which children enroll. Consider how school operates: when a new child applies to attend school for the first time, there is a

process of evaluation that determines if the child is ready for the demands of the social relations and has the mental capacity for schoolwork. A teacher will determine if the child is ready and should attend school, or if the child should stay in a different type of activity where his/her mental and motor skills match the conditions of the program.

The subject of maturity is also important in the matter of motor learning. The success of teaching a given motor skill lies in the ability of the child at whatever stage of motor development to execute the new demands correctly. Learning how to roller-skate is determined by the development of balance and coordination. A child develops these two motor abilities after the age of four or five. Before that age, any attempt to execute such complicated activity usually fails.

The concept of readiness should also be applied to sports activities. **(See chart #1).** A crucial part of the coach's job is determining what kind of activities and competition the pupils are ready for. More importantly the coach should also determine the age at which children are ready to participate in grown-up formats of competition. Consider the 11v11 game of soccer being played on a 120x75 yard field. Common sense suggests that the athletic ability of children younger than 14 years of age wouldn't allow them to use big areas of space appropriately. If coaches want to promote participation in the game as possible from all the children, wouldn't it be better if the space were smaller and the number of players reduced in favor of active participation? In a 4v4 game no player can hide. Imagine an 11-year-old child participating in an 11v11 game on an adult size field. Chances are that a non-gifted player could go the entire game without even touching the ball.

The size of the field, the number of players in a game, and the nature of the competition can determine whether a player will leave the game feeling successful or defeated and whether a player will enjoy the game or not. The art of teaching lies largely in knowing for what activity (a technical move, a tactical behavior, or a complex competition) the player is prepared at a particular stage of physical and mental development.

Unfortunately the legacy of habits harms the participation of children in youth sports. The blind application of inherited programs that were conceived for adults remain the norm for youth sports development today. Most of these programs concentrate their effort in the development of highly competitive standards of participation, which wouldn't be wrong if it could be surrounded by a well-organized system of promotion, where the participants learn at the speed that their own maturity dictates. Otherwise, they may be forced to compete in situations that effectively drive the players away from the sport, denying them enjoyment in their participation.

Unfortunately, experienced coaches who focus on the competitive and professional aspect of the sport (most of the time because there is little financial compensation in youth sports), leave a vacuum where their expertise is most sorely needed. The true professionals are in short supply to teach the athletes at the most crucial stage of their development: the foundational stage.

There are occasions where experienced coaches do get involved in youth soccer. But the salaries paid to these coaches (mostly by teams with high expectations and parents who expect to win most of the time), force them to concentrate on short-term objectives, or skills that will merely

help them succeed in games. The alternative would be to provide a better foundation to help the athlete succeed, fostering holistic development over a longer period of time, even when that goal conflicted with short-term success in games. The current conditions of the youth soccer competitive environment interfere with the progression of the soccer learning process in ways that can be detrimental. Due to the environment in which kids compete today, and the pressure that their paid coaches get from the people who hire them, the concept of developing the whole athlete (respecting the kids intellectual and social development) takes a second row seat in favor of exploiting children's athletic abilities.

Youth soccer participation needs to be reviewed by coaches and soccer administrators to ensure that the existing programs fulfill the specific needs of the age groups' mental, motor and social development. There is a need for soccer programs designed to cultivate athletic skill and to be simultaneously grounded in core principles of youth development.

(Chart #1) "READINESS CONCEPT":

**EVOLUTION OF GROWTH AND MATURITY:  
COGNITIVE (INTELLECTUAL); AFFECTIVE (SOCIAL) AND MOTOR SKILLS  
(PHYSICAL).**

COGNITIVE SKILLS	MOTOR SKILLS	AFFECTIVE SKILLS	SOCCER DEVELOPM.	AGE GROUPS
<p><i>Poor span of attention. Interested only in things that cause pleasure.</i></p> <p><i>Their attention lasts only while the activity interests them.</i></p> <p><i>Great imagination, creativity, curiosity and impatience.</i></p> <p><i>Their perception is global and indifferent. Capable of following simple rules of precaution and safety.</i></p> <p><i>Great subjectivism. Egocentrics, who consider themselves the center of all attention.</i></p> <p><i>No capability for reflection and self-criticism.</i></p>	<p><i>Due to the growth of the big muscles, there is an imbalance in their equilibrium and coordination.</i></p> <p><i>Acceptable basic motor skills.</i></p> <p><i>Their endurance is low and children get tired relatively quick due to growth of the heart muscles.</i></p> <p><i>Major tendency to postural malfunctions. Regression to bad motor habits when tired.</i></p> <p><i>Little development of rhythm and time-space relations.</i></p> <p><i>Starting at age 7 there is an increase in quickness of execution but with low precision.</i></p>	<p><i>Difficulty in all but simple decision-making.</i></p> <p><i>Egocentric, self-centered and bossy.</i></p> <p><i>Low ability to be generous. Beginning stage of being cooperative within a group.</i></p> <p><i>Extremely sensitive to criticism.</i></p> <p><i>Enjoy those activities they are already familiar with. Great necessity to feel secure.</i></p> <p><i>In great need of adults' approval. Leadership and popularity are based on how well accepted and rewarded they are by the adults.</i></p> <p><i>Friendship is casual and fragile.</i></p> <p><i>Indifferent to gender combined activities.</i></p> <p><i>Easily mix reality and fantasy.</i></p> <p><i>Beginning understanding of the "we" concept.</i></p>	<p><i>PERCEPTION: "ME"</i> <i>Individual activities intended to develop basic personal skills and general coordination. (Not soccer specific).</i></p> <p><i>NOT "ME"</i> <i>(Focus external)</i></p> <p><i>Space, time and relational space-time activities.</i></p> <p><i>Specific soccer coordination: Eye-foot, eye-hand, and eye-head.</i></p> <p><i>Simple organized games/with small playing spaces and number of players on the field up to 3v3.</i></p>	<p><i>6, 7 and 8 YEARS OLD.</i></p>
<p><i>Span of attention increases.</i></p> <p><i>Intellectual curiosity and great disposition for adventures.</i></p>	<p><i>Due to the slower growth of the big muscles and the balance created by the growth of small muscles, there is a dramatic increase in their coordination.</i></p>	<p><i>Better capacity to make decisions.</i></p> <p><i>Great increase in capacity to recognize proper behavior.</i></p>	<p><i>Continuation of coordination development.</i></p> <p><i>More elaborate games in small spaces with numbers up</i></p>	<p><i>9, 10 and 11 YEARS OLD.</i></p>

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<p><i>Capacity for analytical thinking increases along with the ability to organize thoughts in space and time</i></p> <p><i>Predominance of reality over imagination.</i></p>	<p><i>especially eye-hand.</i></p> <p><i>Due to the stability of the growth of the heart muscles, there is an increase in endurance.</i></p> <p><i>Recovery time is shorter between physical efforts.</i></p>	<p><i>Analytic ability to recognize wrong from right.</i></p> <p><i>Decrease of shyness. Open and intellectual capacity for adventure.</i></p> <p><i>Cautious, enthusiastic, less modest and more reflective.</i></p> <p><i>Great desire for independence. Need the approval of friends and teammates more than the adults.</i></p> <p><i>Great need for acceptance.</i></p> <p><i>Development of gregarious instincts.</i></p> <p><i>Capacity to recognize the correct social behavior.</i></p> <p><i>Great interest in sports activities.</i></p> <p><i>Difficult to accept defeat.</i></p> <p><i>Beginning of the social desire to compete.</i></p>	<p><i>to 4v4.</i></p> <p><i>Great stage to introduce players to simple competitive games.</i></p>	
<p><i>Rational period with great development of attention span and capacity for intellectual reflection.</i></p> <p><i>Mature mental organization of ideas (induction-deduction).</i></p> <p><i>At the end of this period, the young teenagers show great perception, comprehension and analytical abilities similar to those shown by adults.</i></p> <p><i>Period for the development of "rational synthesis" (capacity to analyze details).</i></p>	<p><i>Due to another growing period especially in height, there are signs of great imbalances that affect the basic motor skills specially the development of coordination.</i></p> <p><i>Due to the growth of the muscular mass more in length than in volume, there is a degradation of joint support.</i></p> <p><i>Due to an increase in the heart's muscle development; there is a short-term deficit in endurance.</i></p> <p><i>Postural deficiencies are common in this period.</i></p> <p><i>There could be an increase in bone growth plate-related problems, based on excessive bone growth in this period.</i></p>	<p><i>The signs of secondary sexual characteristics such as: deeper voice in boys or feminine figure in girls, could notably affect social relations.</i></p> <p><i>Period of emotional instability represented by extremes from: exhibitionism to shyness, aggressiveness to inhibition, and enthusiasm to depression.</i></p> <p><i>Extremely vulnerable to criticism sometimes responding to it with aggression.</i></p> <p><i>Beginning of the stage of opposite gender attraction.</i></p> <p><i>At this stage youth commonly experience some family confrontation.</i></p> <p><i>Extremely jealous of their independence.</i></p> <p><i>Strong affirmation of personality.</i></p>	<p><i>Greatest age to reap benefit of competitive games.</i></p> <p><i>Capability to play in formal organized games in bigger areas, with an increase of numbers on the field preferably 9v9.</i></p> <p><i>Activities that could help to define specific located coordination.</i></p> <p><i>Quantity becomes more of an objective than quality in sports activities.</i></p> <p><i>Capable of great cardio-vascular activities at the very end of this period.</i></p> <p><i>Better prepared for endurance training than speed training.</i></p> <p><i>Great capacity to work on technical skills (execution of the mechanics of movement).</i></p>	<p><i>12, 13 and 14 YEAR OLD</i></p>
<p><i>Great capacity to concentrate and retain information.</i></p> <p><i>Predominance of analytical thinking.</i></p>	<p><i>Due to the decrease in bone and muscle growth; there is great reinforcement in motor characteristics.</i></p> <p><i>Due to the nearly finished</i></p>	<p><i>Realization of the most individualistic characteristics of personality.</i></p> <p><i>Great sense of group cooperation.</i></p>	<p><i>The greatest period to improve quality of technique, tactics and fitness, with the greatest increase in volume and intensity.</i></p>	<p><i>15, 16, 17 YEARS OLD and OLDER.</i></p>

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	<p><i>growth of the muscular frame; this is a great period for strength training and speed development.</i></p> <p><i>The cardio-vascular and respiratory systems reach their peak development, increasing capacity for endurance.</i></p>	<p><i>Great attitude toward group and team success before personal interest.</i></p> <p><i>Establishment of role models.</i></p> <p><i>Idealistic stage.</i> <i>Predominance of reality.</i></p> <p><i>Sports activities could become major priority in life.</i></p>		
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### **III- LIFE SKILLS THROUGH SOCCER**

“Life Skills Through Soccer” is the result of many years of experience with traditional methods of teaching youth sports, the demands of modern soccer dictated by the international soccer scene, the philosophy of the US Soccer Federation and my personal belief that high level soccer should be integrated with the education of the “whole person”. Whether a child becomes a professional or simply participates occasionally in the sport, one still needs to understand how the lessons learned in the practice of the sport can be applied in real life situations.

Let's be clear about the meaning of the program. “Life Skills Through Soccer” is not an academic program intended to teach a mainstream curriculum using soccer as a tool. “Life Skills Through Soccer” is primarily a high level, demanding soccer-training program that teaches players how to become proficient in the practice of the sport. Its goal as in other soccer programs is to enhance the player’s level of performance in the sport. However the program also intentionally focuses on teaching children to appreciate a variety of individual and group skills developed through the soccer experience and applied in non- soccer related areas as life skills. These are derived from working in conjunction with fellow athletes who share common objectives and goals.

#### **What kind of life skills?**

Although American society values self-sufficiency and independence, team-work is increasingly emphasized in numerous situations - in school, the workplace, and the community. **Teamwork represents the skills that allow individuals to interact with others in the execution of common goals.** Companies, unions, and other diverse organizations have modified their images with ideas and slogans that show the primacy of teamwork in achieving goals.

Due to the growing popularity of the concept, the acceptance of sports as the pinnacle of teamwork is becoming more and more popular. For example, a TV commercial might compare the skills and performance of a basketball team with that of teams inside a big computer company. The idea is to make people understand how to unify and leverage their efforts in the execution of a common objective. Also the creation of popular TV shows such as “Survivor” and “The Weakest Link”, proves how much value Americans place on knowing how to work as a team

Teamwork in sports is every coach’s dream. Sports embody the maximum representation of how working together can be effective, fun and appreciated by the masses.

***Teamwork is the final product of the combination of several other skills that need to be cultivated individually by every person (athlete).***

The art of teaching and coaching lies in the ability of the educators to define the kind of skills their students/athletes lack, and promote lessons and training sessions that will help those students/athletes acquire them. Even more importantly the teachers and coaches must know how to motivate their groups to help them apply those skills effectively in their games or life situations.

What kind of individual skills need to be cultivated in order to understand the real meaning of teamwork? Their variety is extensive. However in light of how teamwork operates and the kind

of chemistry that needs to be present among the players, there are two foundational skills that support the framework for the others to develop: **Discipline** and **Commitment**.

- **Discipline** : This type of discipline does not refer to an authoritarian way of treating students and athletes. It refers to the personal ability of the student-athletes to recognize on their own the need to conduct their activities in an organized way. Discipline means that students do not need a teacher or coach present to develop good studying habits or to practice a little extra on their own. Being disciplined means that student/athletes understand and exhibit other important skills such as honesty, dedication and responsibility that form the cornerstones for teamwork.
- **Commitment**: This is the rare ability to recognize and honor an agreement to do something. It is not uncommon for youth to forget or ignore an arrangement to study or to practice if something more interesting comes along. The decision a child makes when faced with the dilemma of choosing new opportunities honoring prior arrangements indicates a child's degree of commitment. A high degree of commitment demonstrates that the youth in question understands and possesses other abilities important for teamwork.

While discipline and commitment are fundamental, there are a number of other important skills that the individual needs to possess in order to fully operate with a group of other individuals to form an effective team. The following list represents a few of the most important ones:

- **Honesty**: avoidance of all forms of deception; possessing a high degree of personal integrity
- **Responsibility**: being reliable in a moral, legal or mental way
- **Dedication**: willingness to sacrifice oneself or personal interests in the accomplishment of specific goals
- **Patience**: focus and ability to deal with adversity or be willing to tolerate frustration without protests or complaints
- **Perseverance**: the ability to continue in an activity, state or enterprise, even against serious opposition or discouragement
- **Respect**: the ability to recognize and appreciate value in others
- **Determination**: the ability to consciously set goals and achieve them
- **Unselfishness**: showing concern for others; deriving pleasure from the success of others
- **Efficiency**: ability to effectively operate with a minimum of wasted energy, time or money
- **Modesty**: the ability of individuals to refrain from self-conceit and to generally speak and conduct themselves appropriately
- **Sense for quality**: the attribute of recognizing what differentiates good from average skills and activities

## IV- LIFE SKILLS AND THEIR APPLICATION

Two examples serve to illustrate how soccer practices and games provide opportunities to teach life skills. They provide coaches with chances to not only improve their players' ability to play the sport, but also to enrich their players' lives by using every opportunity to relate experiences on the field with everyday life circumstances.

The following examples primarily relate to soccer tactics, the principles of “Life Skills” can also shed some light on the players’ way of judging their performance in practices and games. In this way, the player cultivates the ability to make better decisions.

### Ex. 1 “John”: a forward’s story

<b>STAGE OF GAME SITUATION</b>	<b>STAGE OF TACTICAL ACTION</b>	<b>INDIVIDUAL REQUIREMENTS</b>
<p><b><u>STAGE 1</u></b> John the forward stands at the mouth of the penalty area with his back to the opposition’s goal, with one opponent loosely marking him. A midfielder kicks a ground pass to his foot.</p>	<p><b><u>PERCEPTIONS</u></b> John observes the incoming pass and notes the actions of the opponent covering him, as well as the actions and intended path of his teammates.</p>	<p><b><u>SENSORY ABILITIES</u></b> -Central and peripheral vision, -Timing for calculating running paths and passing lanes, -Tactile/muscle sense, to feel the opponent, -Sense of space, position and balance.</p>
<p><b><u>STAGE 2</u></b> At this point John has a number of options. He can: -Turn while receiving the ball and start a solo run at the goal, -Turn while receiving the ball and pass it to a teammate, -Turn while receiving the ball and shoot from his current position, -Play a wall pass with the passer in order to get behind his opponent.</p>	<p><b><u>ANALYSIS</u></b> John compares the situation with others he’s experienced in the past, considers the alternatives and anticipates how teammates and opponents will act.  <b><u>PLANNING (THE SOCCER BRAIN)</u></b> John weighs the advantages and disadvantages of possible actions and chooses one.</p>	<p><b><u>COGNITIVE SKILLS</u></b> -Memory of past games; tactical knowledge; ability to adapt and learn; ability to think ahead (anticipate). <b><u>AFFECTIVE SKILLS</u></b> -Self confidence; courage; composure; optimal combination of aggressiveness and calm; willingness to take risks, but also a sense of responsibility (for the success of the team); strength of will.</p>
<p><b><u>STAGE 3</u></b> John chooses the following action: He turns while controlling the ball, dribbles toward the goal and shoots.</p>	<p><b><u>EXECUTION</u></b> Using the skill and abilities listed on the right, John executes the action described on the left.</p>	<p><b><u>MOTOR SKILLS</u></b> -Ball control techniques, dribbling (including faking and shooting), speed with and without the ball, agility.</p>
<p><b><u>STAGE 4</u></b> Because the shot was rushed and poorly aimed, the ball goes wide off the goal and out. A promising situation has been wasted.</p>	<p><b><u>EVALUATION</u></b> John observes the (negative) results of his actions, examines the causes, and notes them for similar situations in the future.</p>	<p><b><u>CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS</u></b> -Capacity for self-criticism and rational (instead of emotional) inquiry into causes, ability to store the sequence of events in memory.</p>

### John's coach's analysis:

John has been criticized lately by his teammates for being selfish and wasting opportunities to improve the performance of the team. Most of the criticism derives from John’s errors in judgment when weighing his opportunities to share the ball with his teammates, thereby creating better opportunities for scoring, versus keeping the ball and losing it without setting up a chance to score.

From a tactical point of view, John’s coach is happy to know that John is willing to take risks. He’s also been helping John to become a better observer of the game, to collect enough information off the ball and to improve his decision-making in the game. But at this point, John’s

coach is becoming convinced that John's problem is not what he knows of the game. Rather, John is just trying to show off a little too much when he is in possession of the ball.

The time to deliver speeches to the team has come. Some alternatives may be:

- To give a talk about unselfishness and how this important skill relates to teamwork,
- To explain how important it is for the participants in a soccer match to understand playing the game as a team,
- To relate how "bad habits" can undermine the opportunities of the team to be successful,
- To explain why, from a tactical point of view, players need to be disciplined, and honor their understanding of how to operate as a unit as the game progresses,
- To draw the analogy of how, when people decide not to cooperate with the team in the achievement of a common goal, this can actually become a habit used in other actions in life.

For the coach, the real key for "Life Skills" development doesn't rest on his discovery of the problem and its possible solution. **Rather, the coach's effectiveness is determined by how he presents the situation to the team. It is based on the way he directs his comments (personally to John or to the team), the selection of words, and the technique (addressing the problem directly or finding a metaphor or vignette to illustrate the suggested problem and solution), chosen to have the result he desires.** This is really what will make John's coach excel at helping his team, (and his players) improve their chances for better performance. John's coach is interested in soccer development but also in how the team's experience in soccer can help them understand their contribution to other common life situations.

The developmental coach considers the age of his pupils and decides that the best way to address the problem is by having an open discussion about teamwork. First he selects a story from a well-recognized sports psychology book that emphasizes the importance of teamwork. Second, he makes enough copies of the material and lets each player read the information. Third, in a friendly manner, he opens the discussion by asking each child their opinion of the story and the possible applications to the soccer game and finally, to the way their team has been playing lately.

John's coach understands that players at this age like stories, and to participate in discussions. He finds the right moment to let the team know his opinion of how he thinks a real team operates. By doing it this way, it is possible that some players will bring more personal matters to the discussion and John will understand that it is not just the coach's desire to have everybody making unselfish decisions, but that the entire team also values that attitude highly.

This is the material that John's coach selected for his discussion:

#### **THE GOOSE STORY**

*In the fall, when you see geese heading  
south for the winter... flying  
along in "V" formation... You  
might consider what science has  
discovered as to why they fly that  
way:*

*As each bird flaps its wings, it creates*

*an uplift for the bird immediately following.*

*By flying in "V" formation the whole flock adds at least 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.*

*People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going more quickly and easily because they are traveling on the trust of one another.*

*When a goose falls out of formation it suddenly feels the drag and resistance on trying to it alone... and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front.*

*If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those who are headed the same way we are.*

*When the head goose gets tired it rotates back in the wing... and another goose flies point.*

*It is sensible to take turns doing demanding jobs... with people or with geese flying south.*

*Geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.*

*What do you say when you honk from behind?*

*Finally... and this is important... when a goose gets sick, or is wounded by gunshots, and falls out of formation, two other geese fall out with that goose and follow it down to lend help and protection. They stay with the fallen goose until it is able to fly, or until it dies; and only then do they launch out on their own, or with another formation to catch up with their group.*

*If we have the sense of a goose we will stand by each other like that.*

Example number two is a true story that happened in a game played by one of the teams who had already experienced the life skills through soccer training method. Chris was 10 years of age, playing for a U11 boys group.

Ex. 2 “Chris ”: the team player

<b>STAGE OF GAME SITUATION</b>	<b>STAGE OF TACTICAL ACTION</b>	<b>INDIVIDUAL REQUIREMENTS</b>
<p><b>STAGE 1</b> Chris is playing as a right outside midfielder. After a combination of actions, he ends up with the ball on his feet just five yards from the opposition’s goal toward the left side of the goalkeeper. The goalkeeper is standing in front of him covering most of the space to the net.</p>	<p><b>PERCEPTIONS</b> Chris observes the goalkeeper standing in front of him and closing him up, he sees the opposite defenders coming back to crucial spots and the actions of the two forward teammates.</p>	<p><b>SENSORY ABILITIES</b> -Central and peripheral vision, -Timing for calculating other players’ runs, movements of the goalkeeper and spaces to the direction of the goal and passing lanes.</p>
<p><b>STAGE 2</b> At this point Chris has three viable options: -Take a shot at the goal from his narrow angle, -Take the goalkeeper one-on-one and walk the ball into the net, -Pass the ball to a teammate running from a frontal position to the net.</p>	<p><b>ANALYSIS</b> Chris compares his situation with many others he has experienced in practices and other games in the past, considers the alternatives and anticipates how teammates and opponents will react. <b>PLANNING “THE SOCCER BRAIN”</b> Chris weighs his chances to succeed with his intentions to score a goal and the possible options he has and chooses one.</p>	<p><b>COGNITIVE SKILLS</b> -Memory of past experiences; tactical knowledge; ability to think reflectively; ability to mentally anticipate; ability to size teamwork behavior. <b>AFFECTIVE SKILLS</b> -Confidence and determination, composure, patience, total self-control; willingness to take a risk and succeed but also sense of responsibility and discipline; high concern for the success of the team.</p>
<p><b>STAGE 3</b> Chris chooses the following action: He faces the goalkeeper, holds on to the ball just long enough to attract him to commit and releases the ball to a fellow teammate running directly to the mouth of the goal.</p>	<p><b>EXECUTION</b> Using the skills and abilities listed on the right, Chris executes the action described on the left.</p>	<p><b>MOTOR SKILLS</b> -Ball control techniques, good possession of the ball and body signals (to make the goalkeeper commit out of the net), speed and proper technique of passing.</p>
<p><b>STAGE 4</b> Because Chris executed the actions with excellent timing and good technique, his teammate scores a goal without any opposition.</p>	<p><b>EVALUATION</b> Chris observes the positive results of his actions, examines the reasons, and notes them for similar situations in the future.</p>	<p><b>CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS</b> -Capacity for self mental satisfaction and rational (instead of emotional) overview of causes and effects; ability to store the sequence of events in memory.</p>

**Analysis of actions:**

The real lesson behind Chris’s actions was the conversation with his parents when questioned why he decided to pass the ball to a teammate when he was facing the chance to score the goal himself. **Chris answered that due to the angle required for his shot, his chances to score the goal were smaller compared to the chances of his fellow teammate whose angle offered him an open net opportunity.**

In Chris’s story, the learning experience doesn’t come from the reinforcement of the coach’s speech after the match. It comes from the previous experiences the coach provided the group in practices, regarding decision-making and tactical execution in games. Chris’s behavior also reflects the maturity of a player who understands how to sacrifice his personal success in favor of the team’s performance. Isn’t this the type of unselfish thinking and behavior we wish all the kids could have? How could this type of behavior be reinforced to make it operational in other matters not sports-related?

“Life Skills Through Soccer” is a philosophy dedicated to playing the game in its highest form, while recognizing youth as whole beings composed of motor, cognitive and intellectual skills.

## **V- LIFE SKILLS AND ITS STRATEGIES**

“Life Skills Through Soccer” has already been implemented with a handful of teams in New Jersey over the last few years. Parents, coaches and administrators of those teams can speak on behalf of the success of the teaching method, the level of soccer executed by the children involved in the program and the moral standards achieved through it. They can also speak about how the principles were applied to concrete lessons, practices and games and how they helped the kids improve their athletic performances and other daily non-soccer related activities such as schoolwork, home behavior, personal effectiveness, and self-confidence. Unfortunately, the program was never documented, hence the objective of this paper.

The strategic application of teaching “Life Skills Through Soccer” involves a highly structured soccer program. The utilization of methodologies implemented by the National Soccer Coaches Association of America, the US Soccer Federation and the expertise of highly qualified soccer trainers, helps customize the soccer program to match the needs of any soccer organization.

In addition to those demanding requirements from the soccer side of the program, the curriculum also includes:

- Social activities that will strengthen the cohesiveness of the group (ex. hikes, bike rides, other sports activities, etc.)
- Reading material that will highlight the experiences of successful athletes and individuals who achieved their prominence through hard work and persistence (i.e. Pele’s success in soccer, Ronaldo, etc.)
- Reading material and discussions on topics that will relate important moral principles applied to sports and life such as: leadership, dealing with defeat, sportsmanship, etc.
- Participation of guest coaches and athletes at practices and pick-up games, including after-game discussions where they can relate their experiences as motivational tools.
- An established, standard planned program with logical structure: objectives, selection of contents, application, evaluation, reinforcement and documentation.
- Clear behavioral expectations regarding tolerance, effort and a variety of teamwork values.
- An educational program designed for trainers, coaches, administrators and parents to help them understand youth sports as a “process”.
- Overall adherence to a training philosophy and soccer progression that is a long-term process, one that doesn’t take shortcuts for the sake of winning. This involves training that slowly adds a degree of difficulty as the player matures and develops physically, as well as emotionally.

## **VI- LIFE SKILLS THROUGH SOCCER: THE METHODOLOGY**

“Life Skills Through Soccer” uses those methodologies developed by the two governing soccer organizations in the United States: the US Soccer Federation and the National Soccer Coaches Association of America.

Together, both organizations created a structure for the ideal training session. Their concept relies on creating a real learning experience for players that will match the demands of the international soccer scene. Also their ideas are modeled on the examples of leading soccer schools, famous worldwide for their success in developing young soccer athletes. Schools such as Ajax in Amsterdam and Vittoria in Brazil, have been developing programs intended for highly competitive young soccer athletes, where "whole life" training principles have been practiced.

Based on these model concepts, the nature of soccer in the US, and the demands of our programs to work in the American culture, the following stages are recognized:

**Beginning stage:** from any age to U8

**Formative stage:** from U8 to U10

**Developmental stage:** from U10 to U14

**Competitive Developmental stage:** from U14 to U17

**Competitive stage:** from U17 and up.

“Life Skills Through Soccer” trains children in the Beginning, Formative, Developmental and Competitive Developmental stages, where good habits and character can best be nurtured.

There is also a differentiation between the Amateur and the Professional status of players, with the first intended for the Beginning, Formative, Developmental and Competitive Developmental stages. Professional aspirations, if applicable, are more appropriate to players entering the Competitive stage.

Irrespective of players’ developmental stage, the training sessions are organized using the following methodology:

### **Components of soccer:**

- Technique
- Tactics
- Fitness
- Psychology (mental part of the game)

Each of the first two components has a unique emphasis, with the Technique concentrating on the execution of skill or exercise mechanics and the Tactics concentrating on the why, when and where of the technical execution of skills.

A standard technical training session will include the following components:

- Fundamental (where concepts and mechanics are reviewed)
- Match-related (application of the technical skills without the game context)

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- Match conditions (where players participate in exercises under game-like conditions)
- Cool-down

A standard tactical training session will include the following components:

- Individual
- Group
- Team
- To one goal
- To two goals

Both soccer components, Technical and Tactical, can be combined to create training sessions that become “**functional**”, where the amount of area of the field used and the position of the players, are targeted to create a more efficient application of the components in games.

The standard methodology of soccer training is slightly revised in the "Life Skills" approach. The training concepts transform the training session into a more mobile and participative experience for the players. The application of a variety of small-sided games, where the players' interaction with the ball gets increased, and where each player is given the opportunity to participate in all parts of the field, is just a small part of that philosophy. Also, special variations are utilized to make the exercises more realistic such as: different dimensions and shapes of playing areas, number of players in the exercise, number of times each player can touch the ball before passing it, and the number of goals utilized at the same time, etc. But the core difference and what makes the program special is the philosophy of teaching applied by the trainers. It is the desire of the teacher to teach not just the pure skill, but also the life lesson.

## **VII- APPLYING LIFE SKILLS THROUGH SOCCER**

No matter the kind of activity in which “Life Skills through Soccer” is applied, there is a golden rule that needs to be respected. The amount of time spent with the players and its quality, will make the difference between influencing their futures with “life skills” or purely training them in soccer.

“Life Skills through Soccer” is not the type of activity that can be sold as a one-time type of training. The program works only when the trainer has the time to learn how to understand and recognize each child as an individual and influence those individuals with lessons that will let them find their roles in the team concept.

A coach can best influence the players’ lives and development when he sees them often, several times a week.

The program is best applied when there is an existing club with the different age groups formed and where the age groups can freely interact with each other. Ideally each group should work with their own age, an older age group and a younger age group at least once a week. Pooled training sessions for players of different age groups with the same degree of talent should also be promoted.

The idea behind the pooled age sessions is for the older kids to teach the young ones the progression, which they have learned already. Training sessions become more demanding and life skills are easier to apply. These sessions also give the players a sense of how a real soccer club/community operates.

Coaches can learn the concept of “Life Skills” through a number of short sessions (clinics), where the methodology of running training sessions can be quickly explained, demonstrated and discussed.

Training camps are a way of bringing players from different soccer environments to learn the game through the concept of “Life Skills”. The intensity of the training compensates for the limited time available.

**VIII- SUMMARY**

“Life Skills Through Soccer” can be summarized as follows when compared with conventional soccer programs:

CONVENTIONAL PROGRAMS	LIFE SKILLS THROUGH SOCCER
<p>-A large number of the top, competitive programs choose their players from an elite group of athletes. Strength, speed and size are the primary criteria during the selection process for soccer talent. This type of selection denies chances for development to possible candidates who, at an early age, may not look like potential soccer players.</p>	<p>-Contrary to the methods of recruiting used by most conventional top competitive programs, “Life Skills Through Soccer” selects its participants not just from elite athletes but from a broad variety of athletes with fairly well developed basic motor-skills, a great desire to learn the game and a high level of commitment. “Life Skills Through Soccer” recognizes and respects the fact that talent for soccer can come in different sizes and shapes. Our main objective is to help students-athletes to improve their ability to play the game. We take them in, nurture them, and transform their ability into real soccer skill. The program doesn’t rely only on players’ athletic abilities, but instead helps them to develop into more, well rounded players, those who dominate the game by skill and not because of their size or strength.</p>
	<p>There are also a number of important requirements that participants and their families must understand before committing to the training program:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- “Life Skills Through Soccer” is a commitment to. To maximize the chances to achieve the highest standards of technical-tactical execution and quality of play and style, the program demands from its participants a high level of commitment. This type of commitment is extremely time consuming for the players and their families. The participation of players in training sessions and games or activities related to the training process and the time spent in those activities is <b>not negotiable</b>.</li> <li>2- The process of training and development at “Life Skills Through Soccer” is also demanding in self-discipline and quality of effort. Players who apply to become participants in the program must understand their commitment to the high demands of work they will be asked to perform.</li> <li>3- “Life Skills Through Soccer” makes a commitment to work only with those <b>individuals</b> who meet the standards required by the program in regards: to attendance, commitment, discipline, quality of effort, competitiveness, improvement, coachable attitude, etc. Failure to meet those standards is one of the rare reasons why the Life Skills organization will ask a participant not to continue in the program.</li> </ol>

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	<p>-Understanding, honoring, and living a life based on moral and ethical values and principles is one of the cornerstones on which “Life Skills Through Soccer” bases the process of learning the game of soccer, and teaching broader lessons about life.</p>
<p>There is little or no enforcement of respectable behavior for players, coaches and parents at the games and competitions, because there is no standard code of conduct based on criteria such as respect and self-control.</p>	<p>-The process of educating through the “Life Skills” program is a broad concept that involves players, coaches, administrators, parents and media. One of the main objectives of “Life Skills Through Soccer” is to create an environment of cooperation that maximizes every player’s soccer experience.</p>
<p>-Most of the existing competitive programs allow parents or sponsors to give their opinion when deciding the future of their curriculums or competitive activities.</p>	<p>-The “Life Skills Through Soccer” organization will be solely responsible for determining the curricula for teaching and training all of their players (student-athletes). They will also determine the readiness and timing of competition for each group of players as well as the appropriate level of competition, based on each group’s progressive stage of development and maturity level. <b>No parents, players, sponsors or individuals other than “Life Skills Through Soccer” instructors, administrators and board of trustees will be consulted in matters related to teaching topics in the program, evaluation of activities or scheduling competitions.</b></p>
<p>-Due to the lack of long-term objectives for development, a large number of competitive programs center their attention on the execution of short-term goals. It is not uncommon for most of these programs to evaluate their success on the day-to-day wins, performance at tournaments or the final standings of the league played.</p>	<p>-Because of its educational nature and commitment to the long term development of both soccer and life skills, the “Life Skills Through Soccer” program will sacrifice the winning (final score) of a given game, tournament or league result if is considered by training-coaching staff that the participants of the program will benefit and acquire a more important lesson to improve the quality and understanding of the game in exchange for that win. It is the long-term life process of how the kids learn to overcome the hurdles of the game (without sacrificing its quality or skipping important steps of the process), on which the program centers its attention, instead of the final score of any game or competition.</p>
<p>-If the center of attention of the learning process is based on the importance of a game or a competition result, then most of the training experiences will be designed for getting immediate results- next game, instead of giving the players enough room and time to experiment with creativity and spontaneity, and finding ways to develop each player’s ability to the fullest.</p>	<p>-The emphasis of “Life Skills Through Soccer” is directed to the quality and speed of play, style, technical execution, tactical awareness and decision-making (brain of the game), creativity, improvisation, appropriate-competitive-mentality, mental toughness and fun (defined as the kind of fun derived from the joy of accomplishing a job with quality and responsibility, not the “goof around” kind of fun.</p>
<p>-Most of the existing programs follow established models for participation in tournaments, or scrimmages, most of the time without considering players’</p>	<p>-The “Life Skills Through Soccer” training staff will decide when to have a competition, with whom to have a competition, why to have one and what type of competition is best to have. The decisions made by the training-coaching staff have the players’ development as the primary</p>

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<p>individual needs for improvement. The criteria in most cases are based on the reputation of the event.</p>	<p>focus when making this type of decision. The appropriateness of the concept of competition (meant to satisfy the coaches' and parents' egos or rather meant to develop the players' knowledge of the game) and appropriateness of competitive level of the opposition are strongly considered to optimize a real learning experience.</p>
	<p>- There will be established objectives for the participation of college students in a program to document the ways in which the children learn through the "Life Skills Through Soccer" program. As part of their academic work and research, college and graduate students will study how the "Life Skills" program affects, and presumably improves children's behavior on the playing field but also at home, at school and in every day life situations. They will also document any related subject that educational organizations would consider important to investigate and document.</p>
	<p>- Finally, the program applies a combination of the methodologies created by the USSF, NSCAA, leading youth soccer programs around the world and the experiences collected by a board of trustees that includes some of the leading educators and soccer instructors in the United States of America.</p>