

Bob Bigelow

We're losing our late bloomers

Interview by Michael Jones

Since 1992, Bob Bigelow has delivered more than 400 speeches to parents, coaches and administrators about the dangers of the current youth sports system. He has spent years talking with experts and researching such issues as pediatric development, sports psychology, child psychology, and any other subject that has anything remotely do to with how children play sports. He has concluded that the organized youth sports system that has evolved in this country over the past 15 years, including the youth soccer system, needs to be dismantled. He believes it damages children, encourages high dropout rates among developing athletes and high burnout rates among gifted one. As a result, millions of children are permanently turned off sports before they reach their teenage years.

I know you didn't play organized sports until late. Why do kids today start so early?

I never played any basketball at all before 14 years old, yet I was in the NBA at 21. And I know children today in America who have played since second grade. They've played thousands of hours, and not one of them will ever be better than me.

Everything I had done prior to eighth grade was playgrounds, sandlots, backyards, with other kids and no adults. However, in ninth grade I started playing basketball. Up until that time there had been 12 first-round NBA draft picks in the history of the state, and I was one of them. Yet I never played the game until I was in ninth grade. Less than eight years later I was the 13th pick in the country.

Why do you think starting "so late" worked for you? Will it work today?

A child's athletic ability prior to puberty is an absolutely meaningless indicator of a child's athletic ability post puberty. What they are at 8 or 10 is generally not going to mean a thing about what they are at 14, 16 or 18. The whole process of puberty, which in girls and boys in this country can run from age 9 to 17, yields such a different body in so many kids who are even the same age.

Think of this: two 13-year-old boys, same age, same date of birth. One has reached puberty, the other has not. The 13-year-old boy who has reached puberty quite possibly looks 16. Hair on the legs, hair on the chin, might even try shaving once in awhile. The 13-year-old boy who hasn't looks 10. Who is going to be the better athlete of those two boys? The 13-year-old boy who looks 16. Gross motor skills, testosterone, coordination... Ask yourself another question. Who's going to be the better athlete of the two kids in two years, four years, six years, eight years, 10 years?

So we may be in danger of eliminating the "late bloomers" in today's youth sports system?

What ends up happening – and soccer is just as guilty of this as anything else – is the travel select elitism. "Let's carve out our best at younger and younger ages because they can't play in Sandwich anymore. Let's pick out our all-stars and go play Harwich." That's the biggest change in organized youth sports in the last 15 years.

So our better athletes, those late-bloomers, never will be identified. And the worst thing is that kids decide early, or their parents decide. "Oh, you're not going to be a soccer player" because the systems are structures like this in fifth grade. And in all these communities, guess what? That fifth-grade travel basketball team is going to be the future high school basketball team.

What do you see as other problems in the youth sports system today?

To carve up 8- and 10-year-olds into A and B teams, to me is reprehensible. Because what happens is, if you tell an 8-year-old and his or her parents that they're on the A team, all of a sudden the parents buy into this. "My kids an A."

Now ask yourself a question. Once those kids make that initial A team, at whatever age that is, what are the chances of that kid not being an A for the rest of his community soccer life? Once an A, always an A. Once a B, always a B.

Of course, this is completely irrespective of how the kids change in bodies, skills, passions and all the other stuff. And I'll tell you why it doesn't change – because if you're the A coach and next season or next year comes along, are you going to call the parents of last year's A team and tell them that she's no longer an A, she's now on the B team? Who's going to make that political call? And as soon as that phone call ends, do you think the parent is going to be on the phone to the age-group coordinator or the commissioner (saying) "What, you've demoted my child!"

These A parents spend one season standing on the sidelines cheering for their darlings, then when it comes time to break up the team they say, "Oh, our little darlings are playing so well together. They can't break them up. They're just getting good."

So in all these communities around the country – in soccer, basketball and all the sports – the As remain the As. This is varsity high school syndrome. This is what's done at 15, 16, 17 and 18 years old. And now it is done in some places in this country to 7- to 10-year-olds.

How has this evolved in the sports system?

We've let it get into the hands of people who don't know better. The people in these communities aren't dumb. They know that "if little Johnnie or little Jill has got to get on that team, we'll push. I'll sit on the board, I'll spend these hours so the agenda of my little boy or girl becomes paramount." They understand the way the system works. But if you're a kid and don't have an advocate, a parent who might be a normal person, who doesn't want to spend all his time in youth sports, you could be a marginalized kid very quickly in all these communities.

What you have on your board are well-meaning, mostly dads. Butchers, bakers, candlestick makers, truck drivers, lawyers and sales consultants. Where is their background in kids? What do they know about 4-year-olds, 6-year-olds, 8-year-olds and 10-year-olds and how they act and how they react? I ask every board in every town I go to: Do you have an elementary school physical education teacher on your board? No one does. Why not? Do you have a pediatrician on your board? Why not? Do you have a child psychologist on your board? Why not?

You purport to serve kids, yet you have no one on your board that knows kids. Better get one, folks. Get an advocate for the kids on your boards instead of wondering when you can start your third-grade travel team.

So you think the problem goes right to the very top of the U.S. Soccer hierarchy?

You know the little 2010 thing – men are going to win the World Cup and all that fun stuff. They haven't got a snowball's chance in hell. And they think it's because we don't get city kids – black kids and Hispanic kids from the city – playing soccer. You know what they're really missing? Late blooming boys.

USSF wants to know who our best 12-year-olds are now because they think they're going to take those best sixth-graders and turn them into our best 22-year-olds. What all these communities do is try to separate and isolate their young stars early, but it goes against the pediatric common sense of the way these kids grow. Some of these kids won't be able to show soccer talent until they're 17, 18, 19. The rule is that kids, especially boys, grow later. So what the hell are you doing trying to isolate and separate and anoint your future stars when they're too young to know if they'll ever be future stars?

How does "specializing" in a sport and the longer seasons affect young players?

Before 1980 in this country, even before 1985, there was very little

spring soccer. And this is where they went down the tubes. Instead of just spring soccer, it became travel/competitive soccer. It was no longer in town. It was "Let's take our best and go play their best." This was when the travel stuff all started. Well, that was the road to hell paved with good intentions. What happens is, yes, the kids get to play more soccer. But the longer the season, the more games, the more people take it too seriously.

At that time, around the mid-80s, it was U-14 minimum age. And you know what's happened since then. It's what I call soccer creep. U-14 became U-12, which became U-10, which became U-8, which became U-6. As I tell the soccer people all the time, "You will be the first sport with pre-natal travel soccer in this country." They can't stop themselves.

But isn't it important to play the best players and to play often?

Until puberty, it's meaningless, and I don't care how many soccer

people think their game is great. If that kid's playing football, playing hockey or running around the yard playing tag, that kid's getting athletic. Just because they don't have a ball at the end of their foot, or they're not heading it, doesn't mean (they're not developing).

Now will a kid who plays 300 days (a year) of soccer at age 10 be better than a kid who plays 20 days of soccer at age 10? Yes. But ask yourself a very important question. Is the kid who's playing 300 days of soccer at age 10 going to like the freaking game when he's 14?

You know, I feel as bad for those kids who play 300 days of soccer at age 10 as I do for the kids who get cut and will never know how good they could have been. ⚽

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Fabio Capello

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bio has been involved with all his captains in the same way, with accuracy and reliability. I think these are its essential features that he has as a man and as a manager. He treats his captains with respect.

Is he the boss or does he involve senior players a lot in discussions?

Fabio is the manager so, in my opinion, he is "the boss" and has the last word in all decisions. He carries on his shoulders the responsibility of the whole team, but he is too smart not to listen to the advice of more experienced players or his staff members. He trusts a lot in them, beginning with his "deputy" Italo Galbiati, who has followed Capello everywhere.

Moreover, Capello, unlike other coaches – for instance Arrigo Sacchi – also was a great player who played to the highest level, and this leads him to understand that if senior players give any suggestions, this happens only because they want to win. That's all. Coming in second at AC Milan – but also at Juventus or Real Madrid – was seen as deep failure by the man. He wants only to win.

What kind of captains does he like?

I think that, like any manager, he prefers captains who are leaders by example, not by words. They have to have a strong character and personality, have charisma and they have to be able to help their teammates when they need help. But the "true" captain is chosen by the "locker room," not by the manager, although in national teams the captain almost always is the player who has the highest number of caps.

Capello has trained skippers such as Paolo Maldini, Francesco Totti and Alessandro Del Piero, and I am sure that guys like John Terry, Steven Gerrard, Frank Lampard and – why not – David Beckham are all in the same mold and contenders to be his next captain.

What were his training techniques like?

Capello is a very good manager, but today, in professional football, it is unthinkable to do everything alone. He has a staff of the highest level: his assistant, Italo Galbiati, has spent a lifetime career at AC Milan; the athletic trainer Massimo Neri and goalie trainer Franco Tancredi – who has won a championship in AS Roma as a player and one as goalie trainer – are superb. Tancredi was my teammate on the Italian National Team at the Mexico '86 World Cup. They are all professionals who have won trophies both in Italy and abroad.

At AC Milan, they had vanguard structures, like the MilanLab (AC Milan's medical and fitness center in Milanello), and that was exceptional. I do not know anything about The FA's technical center, but I think that Capello will be equal to the task.

He is willing to learn from everyone. For example, when Arrigo (Sacchi) arrived at AC Milan, he made me study old videos of Gianluca Signorini's (Parma's sweeper in the Sacchi era) defensive moves. Many years later, when he was at Juventus, Capello told me that he had done the same thing with Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic: he showed him a DVD collection with a goal compilation of Marco van Basten's career, because he needed Ibra to turn into a more concrete goal scorer in the box. He learned the lesson, didn't he?

Did you practice for penalty shootouts under Capello?

Yes, we practiced penalties. I believe that shootouts are mainly psycho-

logical affairs but if you practice a lot, you can kick them in a better way. But, for instance, in a final after 120 dramatic minutes of a tight game it is another thing altogether. And I, unfortunately, know that because of Pasadena '94, in the USA World Cup final against Brazil. I took a bad penalty after the best performance of my entire career. After my mistake, I cried on worldwide TV, but I have never been ashamed. Believe me: to deal with certain situations, there is no training that can prepare a player.

Was he obsessed with diets?

Capello was not obsessed with diet, but at these highest levels, the small details make the difference. Any detail. And here we are talking about a fundamental component in the professional life of a top professional player. Italy is a Mediterranean country, and our diet – it has been scientifically shown – is among the most varied and nutritious diets in the world. One of the biggest difficulties that foreign players have to face when they change countries is to adjust themselves to local ways and traditions. Persuading British players to change their food habits will be one of the first problems that Capello will face.

What was Fabio Capello like to play for?

There were some difficult cases, of course, but I prefer to keep what happened in the locker room in the locker room. I do remember when Marco Simone, who often was injured, complained to the media that he was not playing enough. Simone got angry publicly and said that "Capello is a bit like God. He does not give equal opportunities to all. Fabio soon sold him to Monaco even though he was a very good striker for the team. Capello is strong.

What kind of players does Capello love and hate?

Capello has always liked skillful players, like Dejan Savicevic, for instance. But Capello is a modern football man and needs his players to help each other and recover from teammates' mistakes. You must be able to defend and have flexibility on the pitch.

That's why Savicevic (the "Genius," as everyone called him), was deployed as an offensive midfielder on the right flank. He was all left-footed and did not agree with Capello, but it worked! In Athens at the 1994 Champions League Cup final against Barcelona, Dejan was extraordinary. Another example was (Zvonimir) Boban, with whom Fabio had some problems on the pitch. "Zorro," as we nicknamed him, was a typical No. 10 in his years at Dinamo Zagreb, but playing in Italian football was a whole different thing. Boban was too smart not to put himself at the service of the team, so under Capello's orders he had to "sacrifice" himself and be our inside or outside midfielder.

Do you have a story that best sums up Capello?

More than any particular anecdote, I remember an episode that perhaps explains the main differences between Capello and his predecessor Sacchi. Arrigo often said "leaders of the team should not be Baresi and Van Basten." Then one day, in training, Marco (van Basten) asked him: "Mister, why do you deal with me as you deal with the others? I am not like the others." And Sacchi said to him: "Because you are too smart for me to deal with you in a different way." With Capello, nothing like that would ever happen. Van Basten never needed to ask him such questions. ⚽