

# Youth Sports: Why Focusing on Process Beats Obsessing Over Results

In youth sports, it's easy for parents, coaches, and even young athletes themselves to get caught up in scores, rankings, and trophies. Wins and losses are clear, measurable outcomes — and in the heat of competition, they can feel like the ultimate goal. But research and real-world evidence from elite soccer development programs around the world show something very different: focusing on results too early can actually stunt long-term growth, while focusing on process and effort builds stronger, more resilient athletes.

## The Problem with a “Results-Only” Mindset

*When young athletes are judged primarily on outcomes — goals scored, games won, or medals earned — several negative patterns often emerge:*

- Increased anxiety and fear of failure
- Fixed mindset: believing talent is fixed, rather than developed through effort
- Short-term thinking: focusing on quick wins rather than skill mastery
- Burnout and dropout: young athletes who feel their value depends on winning are more likely to quit under pressure

A 2015 study published in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* found that youth athletes who perceived high “ego-oriented” climates (where winning and outperforming others were emphasized) experienced more performance anxiety and less intrinsic motivation than those in task-oriented environments that emphasized effort and improvement.

# Purdy Performance Training: Building Players Through Process, Not Pressure

At *Purdy Performance Training*, we fully embrace the philosophy of process orientation over results, especially at the youth development stage. Our focus isn't on chasing early wins or short-term success — it's on building the habits, skills, and mindset that last a lifetime.

*We believe that youth athletes develop best when they are encouraged to:*

- Focus on effort, learning, and daily growth
- Embrace mistakes as opportunities to improve, rather than something to fear
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- Work with patience and consistency, knowing that real progress takes time

Much like the world's top **professional academies**, we understand that results are the byproduct of a strong process — not the other way around. By emphasizing technical development, decision-making, game intelligence, and emotional resilience, we prepare players for long-term success, not just weekend scoreboards.

# The Power of Doing New Things

A big part of our philosophy at Purdy Performance Training is pushing players to step outside their comfort zones.

*We regularly design sessions that challenge athletes to:*

- Try new movements and techniques
- Explore different positions and styles of play
- Develop creativity and adaptability under pressure
- Build confidence by solving problems on the field in real time

This approach mirrors what elite programs do around the world — they prioritize exploration, decision-making, and skill repetition over rigid outcomes. When players are given the space to experiment and grow, they not only become better athletes but also learn to love the process.



# What Professional Soccer Academies Do Differently

**Elite soccer academies** — like those of FC Barcelona, Ajax, and Bayern Munich — are widely recognized for producing world-class players. Interestingly, their developmental systems do not prioritize match results in the early years. Instead, they focus on technical, tactical, and psychological growth.

## **Example: FC Barcelona's La Masia**

- At **La Masia**, the focus for players under 14 is not on winning matches, but on learning to play the Barcelona way — emphasizing positional play, decision-making, and teamwork.
- Scores in youth games are considered far less important than whether players made the right choices in game situations and demonstrated the club's core playing principles.
- Coaches are evaluated on how well players are developing, not their win-loss records.

## **Example: Ajax Academy (Netherlands)**

- Ajax measures player development through "game intelligence" and technical growth, not match results.
- They use structured evaluation sessions to give players feedback on their decision-making, movement, and execution, encouraging a growth mindset.
- Former academy director **Ruben Jongkind** has said: "Winning at 12 means nothing if you haven't developed the habits that make you a good player at 18."

## Supporting Studies on Process Focus

*Several studies back up this philosophy:*

- Ford et al. (2009) compared youth soccer training environments in England, Germany, and Spain. They found that elite academies emphasized play, skill repetition, and decision-making, rather than formal competition, in early stages.
- MacNamara et al. (2010) highlighted that psychological characteristics of developing excellence (PCDEs) — like self-regulation, goal-setting, and persistence — were stronger predictors of elite performance than early success in competition.
- Research on “deliberate practice” (Ericsson, 1993) consistently shows that long-term skill mastery comes from structured, effortful practice, not from early competitive wins.

## What This Means for Parents & Coaches

The takeaway is clear: results matter, but they shouldn't be the main focus — especially in youth sports.

*Here are better things to emphasize:*

- **Effort over outcome** — Praise hard work, persistence, and smart decision-making.
- **Process goals** — e.g., instead of “Let's win this game.” “Let's focus on first touch and passing combinations today.”
- **Long-term development** — Winning at age 12 doesn't predict success at age 20; growth habits do.
- **Feedback style** — Replace “Great goal!” with “I loved how you made that run and stayed composed — that's great decision-making.”

## Final Thought

Pro soccer players aren't made by chasing short-term wins. They're developed through years of deliberate practice, learning from mistakes, and refining their game through process-focused environments. For youth athletes, shifting attention from results to effort, learning, and improvement doesn't just make them better players — it also makes them mentally tougher, more confident, and more likely to stay in the game they love.

### ***Professional Soccer Players Quotes:***

#### **Andres Iniesta (FC Barcelona & Spain legend)**

*“The result is the consequence of the work you do every day.”*  
— *Andres Iniesta*

👉 Iniesta captures the essence of process-orientation: focusing on the work, not the scoreboard.

#### **Johan Cruyff (Ajax & Barcelona icon)**

*“Quality without results is pointless, but results without quality are boring.”*  
— *Johan Cruyff*

👉 Cruyff believed that process (developing quality play and intelligence) should come first — results would follow naturally.

