



YOUTH FOOTBALL

**FORMING
BY COMPETING,
COMPETING TO
FORM.**



FORMING BY COMPETING, COMPETING TO FORM.

There is a comfortable idea, often repeated in the discourse around youth football, that separates "forming" from "competing", as if they were two opposing worlds: **on one side the athlete's healthy development, on the other the harmful pressure of results.** This separation is, in practice, a pedagogical illusion .

Forming and competing are not enemies. They are the same thing seen from two angles.

We must form to compete. And use competition to form.

**AN ATHLETE IS NOT FORMED
DESPITE COMPETITION.**

AN ATHLETE IS FORMED THROUGH IT.

FORMING AND COMPETING ARE NOT ENEMIES.



One idea needs to be questioned: **the idea that forming and competing are two different or even contradictory things. This separation is artificial.**

On one side would be development, associated with learning and well-being. On the other, competition, associated with pressure, results and demands.

Competition, when properly framed, is **one of the most powerful tools for an athlete's development.**

A greater responsibility

Youth football has a far greater responsibility than teaching a child or teenager to play football: it also develops **people, behaviours, habits, discipline, the ability to work as a team, resilience, autonomy, responsibility and the ability to deal with victory, defeat, pressure and frustration.**

FORMING DOES NOT MEAN REMOVING THE DEMANDS.

One of the mistakes we can make in youth football is **confusing protection with an absence of demands**. A child should have fun. Should enjoy training. Should want to return to the pitch the next day. But that does not mean **they should not learn to compete**.

Competing means **learning to try to do better**. Sport is also an extraordinary **school of preparation for adversity**.

01

An athlete who has never felt pressure will struggle to **learn to handle pressure**.

02

An athlete who has never lost **does not learn to react to defeat**.

03

An athlete who has never had to earn anything will hardly understand the **value of achievement**.

A YOUNG ATHLETE NEEDS TO PROGRESSIVELY LEARN TO:

01 Train with commitment

02 Respect schedules and rules

03 Listen to and interpret instructions

04 Deal with frustration

05 Take on responsibility

06 Cooperate with teammates

07 Fight for their place

08 Accept decisions

09 Win with respect

10 Lose with dignity

11 Acknowledge mistakes

12 Seek to improve

ALL OF THIS IS PART OF DEVELOPMENT.



Completely removing competition from youth development can be as harmful as turning every children's match into a championship final.

The balance lies in the middle.

THE RESULT MATTERS, AND THAT IS **NOT A PROBLEM.**

Saying the result does not matter in youth football is, deep down, **stripping the game itself of meaning.**

Football is, by nature, a contest with the objective of winning. Teaching a young player to play without teaching them to want to win is **forming them only halfway.**

The result matters because **it is what gives meaning to effort:**

01 It is what is at stake when you train a whole week for 90 minutes

02 It is what turns sacrifice into something with purpose



THE PROBLEM IS WHEN THE RESULT BECOMES THE ONLY CRITERION FOR DECISIONS.

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- 01** When one child is picked ahead of another simply because they win more games
 - 02** When an athlete's technical development is sacrificed to secure an age-group title
 - 03** When demands are professionalised too early without providing the tools to withstand them
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That is placing the result above everything. It is not the same as placing the result within the developmental process, as a **natural consequence of work well done.**

VICTORY AS THE REWARD FOR EFFORT.



One of the most common mistakes in modern youth development is **rewarding participation and ignoring merit.** When everyone wins equally, regardless of effort, sacrifice or the quality of the work done, young people are taught that **the result is irrelevant.** And that is precisely the wrong lesson for adult life and for high-level sport.

The young athlete should step onto the pitch wanting to win. They should learn to defend a lead, chase a goal when drawing, react when losing and fight until the last minute. **They should understand that effort has consequences.**

Doing everything right does not always mean winning and winning does not always mean everything was done right.

That is one of sport's greatest lessons. Victory should be valued as a desirable consequence of the work, but never as justification for crossing the ethical limits of the developmental process.

Victory should be presented and experienced as a **natural consequence of the work:** you train well, you sacrifice time and comfort, you accept the frustration of mistakes and defeats. And, in the end, victory arrives as a **legitimate reward for that journey.**

This teaches a fundamental equation every high-performance athlete needs to internalise:



**EFFORT
WITH DIRECTION
PRODUCES RESULTS.**

Without this equation, a young person does not develop real competitive ambition, only **conformism disguised as well-being.**

**WE WANT TO TEACH YOUNG PEOPLE TO WIN.
BUT ABOVE ALL, WE WANT **TO TEACH THEM
HOW TO WIN.****



FORMING WITH PRESSURE, FRUSTRATION AND SACRIFICE.

An athlete who's never felt pressure

doesn't know how to handle pressure.

An athlete who's never lost doesn't know what losing is. And, even worse,

doesn't know what it costs to win again.

The frustration of defeat, the discomfort of physical effort taken to the limit and the demands of a coach who does not accept complacency are **formative tools**, not deviations from the process.

Removing these elements from development, in the name of a misunderstood well-being, produces the opposite effect: young players who are technically competent but **psychologically fragile**, unable to respond to the first serious adversity they meet in senior football or in life.



**The capacity to
suffer, persist and try
again is **not born of
motivational speeches.****

**It is born of having
lived it, repeatedly, in
a controlled context
and with proper
support.**

THERE IS A HUGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DEMANDING AND MISTREATING.

This requires, however, one clear condition: pressure must be applied with **pedagogical intent**, not as punishment, humiliation or contempt. A coach can be tough in technical and tactical demands without ever resorting to **insults**, **public ridicule** or the **abuse of power over a minor**.

A COACH CAN:

01 DEMAND EFFORT

02 DEMAND COMMITMENT

03 DEMAND ACCOUNTABILITY

The ethical line is not in "not pressuring". **It is in pressuring fairly, proportionally and with a clear developmental objective.**

SO WHERE IS THE ETHICAL LIMIT?

Developing with demands, pressure and competitive focus **is not incompatible with ethical development.**

The ethical limit is not in competing seriously. It is in:

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- 01** Winning through fraud, cheating or disrespect for the rules

 - 02** Sacrificing the athlete's physical or mental health in the name of results (overtraining, ignored injuries, excessive psychological pressure);

 - 03** Using humiliation, insults or social exclusion as a motivational method

 - 04** Deciding a child's sporting future definitively and prematurely, closing doors that should still be open to their natural development

Outside these red lines, there's a **legitimate and necessary space to compete seriously,** to demand a lot, and to make victory a real and desired objective, not a taboo hidden behind the discourse of "the result doesn't matter".

DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, SAME PHILOSOPHY.

Even recognising different phases of development - more playful in the youngest age groups, more technical in the intermediate ones, more competitive in the final ones the underlying philosophy should not change: **to form is to prepare to compete, and to compete is a way of forming.** What changes is the dose and the language, not the principle.

Even a seven-year-old can and should learn that you strive to win, that losing hurts and that you train so it happens less often. What changes with age is the **intensity of the demands and the sophistication of the pressure applied**, not its existence.



NOT ALL DEVELOPMENT HAS THE SAME OBJECTIVE.

It is also important to understand that **there is not just one model of youth football**. There are different contexts, different objectives and different levels of commitment. We can think, in simplified terms, of **four broad models**:

01 Recreational development

02 Developmental training

03 Competitive development

04 Performance development

1.

RECREATIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

The main objective is to provide **contact with football, physical activity, socialisation and enjoyment**. It is especially relevant at the youngest ages and in recreational contexts.

Here, football is above all **an experience**. The priority is to:

HAVE FUN

→ **TAKE PART**

→ → **DISCOVER**

→ → → **LOVE THE GAME**

The competitive result is of **limited importance**.

2. DEVELOPMENTAL TRAINING.

There is now **a clear intention to teach football**. Training begins to develop **individual technique, decision-making, basic principles of the game, coordination, tactical understanding and collective behaviours**.

The objective becomes:

LEARN

→ **TRAIN**

→ → **EXPERIMENT**

→ → → **EVOLVE**

Competition exists, but works above all as a **laboratory for learning**. The game shows what the athlete can already do and what they still need to develop.

3. COMPETITIVE DEVELOPMENT.

At this level, forming and competing clearly begin to walk together. The athlete is still developing, but begins to understand that **competitive football involves demands**. We move to a logic of:

TRAIN

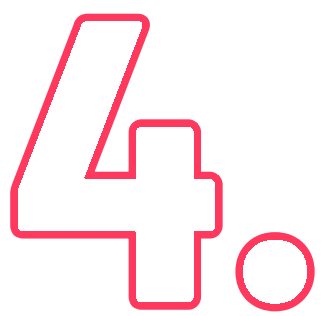
→ **EVOLVE**

→ → **COMPETE**

→ → → **ASSESS**

→ → → → **IMPROVE**

Competition starts to work as an **accelerator of development**. Not because winning is everything, but because **wanting to win forces the athlete to mobilise what they have learned**.



PERFORMANCE DEVELOPMENT.

This is the context of academies, clubs and structures geared towards **preparing athletes for high levels of competition**. Here there is necessarily **greater selectivity**: training is more demanding; assessment is continuous; internal competition increases; individual objectives become more specific. The logic becomes:

DEVELOP

→ **COMPETE**

→ → **PERFORM**

→ → → **DIFFERENTIATE**

→ → → → **PROGRESS**

Not all athletes will follow this path – and that is perfectly normal. **The problem arises when we treat all these models as if they were the same.** A recreational school should not behave like a professional academy. But a performance-oriented academy cannot function merely as a space for entertainment.

AGE CHANGES THE WAY WE COMPETE.

Another fundamental principle is that competing at 7 cannot mean the same as competing at 17. At the earliest ages, we should prioritise **contact with the ball, coordination, creativity, discovery, enjoyment, the courage to experiment and a progressive understanding of the game.** As the athlete grows, we can introduce greater demands, specialisation, individual responsibility, tactical principles, collective objectives, performance analysis and competition.

WE CAN REPRESENT THIS EVOLUTION LIKE THIS:

PLAY

DISCOVER

LEARN

TRAIN

COMPETE

PERFORM



THE MISTAKE IS IN SKIPPING STAGES.

A child is not a small adult. But nor can we permanently treat a young athlete as a child who needs protecting from any difficulty.

DEVELOPMENT PROGRESSIVELY
INVOLVES **AUTONOMY,**
RESPONSIBILITY AND DEMANDS.

THERE ARE, AT LEAST, **THREE RESULTS** THAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED:

01 THE MATCH RESULT

"Did we win or lose?"

02 THE PERFORMANCE RESULT

"Did we play well? Did we apply what we trained? Did we make good decisions?"

03 THE DEVELOPMENT RESULT

"Are the players better today than they were six months ago?"

A good development project looks at all three. It wants to win. It wants to play well. And, above all, it wants to develop better players.



THE ROLE OF THE COACH.

The coach should **develop every athlete and prepare the team to compete.** Above all, they need to balance these two apparently contradictory responsibilities. That is probably one of the most difficult skills in youth football.

They should not limit themselves to organising drills or picking the weekend team. They need to know the athletes, understand their different development rhythms, set individual and collective objectives, assess progress and communicate clearly.

In youth football, the coach is simultaneously a coach, educator and development manager.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS.

Parents are also part of the **development ecosystem.**

When they turn every match into an assessment, every mistake into criticism and every coaching decision into an argument, **they increase the child's anxiety and reduce their autonomy.**

But the opposite extreme does not help either. Teaching that "what matters is just taking part" can strip sport of one of its greatest lessons: understanding that **effort, preparation, discipline and progress have consequences.**

We are thus shifting attention away from the result alone and towards development.



THE ROLE OF PARENTS.

Parents should help the child ask different questions.

INSTEAD OF JUST:

~~"Did you win?"~~

WE CAN ASK:

"Did you have fun?"

"Did you play well?"

"What did you learn?"

"What did you do better today?"

"What can you improve in the next training session?"



EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT NEEDS A **PATHWAY.**

**EVERY CLUB SHOULD KNOW
WHAT IT INTENDS TO BE:**

A recreational structure

may have the mission of providing football to as many children as possible.

01

A football school

may prioritise initiation and technical development.

02

A competitive club

may seek to develop players while also contesting competitions.

03

A performance academy

may explicitly take on the objective of preparing players for higher levels.

04

All of these models are legitimate. What is not healthy is promising development and delivering only results , or promising performance and working without demands. Clarity of project is a pedagogical, sporting and ethical matter.

FORMING ATHLETES AND FORMING PEOPLE.

In the end, youth football should prepare the young person for **two possibilities**:

- The first is to keep progressing in football and eventually **reach high levels of performance**.
- The second, statistically far more frequent, **is not becoming a professional player**.

In both cases, **development should leave something behind**.

01 Discipline

02 Resilience

03 Commitment

04 Cooperation

05 Autonomy

06 Responsibility

07 Ability to handle pressure

08 Respect for the opponent

09 Desire to improve



That is why **forming people and forming athletes are not competing objectives**. A good development project does both.

Football can be fun without ceasing to be demanding.

It can be competitive without being toxic.

It can select without humiliating.

It can pursue results without sacrificing development.

It can teach winning without creating the idea that anything goes in order to win.

The best development does not choose between forming and competing. **It teaches competing in order to form better.**

Because competing is not just wanting to win.



A BETTER VERSION OF THEMSELVES.

Competing is learning to prepare, overcome difficulties, respect the game, face opponents, work with others and seek every day a **better version of themselves.**

And perhaps that is youth football's main mission: **creating environments where young people love to play, learn to play and, progressively, learn to compete.**

WITH COMPETENCE, CHARACTER AND RESPECT.

CONCLUSION.

Forming athletes ethically does not mean protecting young people from competition, pressure or frustration. It means exposing them to these demands in a **structured, fair and purposeful way**, so they become **capable competitors and capable people**.

The result matters, effort has to hurt and victory has to be **earned, not handed out**.

That is the path to forming athletes who not only know how to play football, but who know how to compete, **in the sport and in life**.



Thank you.