

You can, if you know how to chip the ball.

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“The Best of Ages”

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About six times during an AYSO soccer match, the kids come up to me and ask about the score. They tend to lose track. Me too. My usual answer is: Ask the scorekeeper. That’s what scorekeepers are for. I’m busy coaching. I’ll find out the result after the final whistle. Until the final whistle, every match is 2-2. You focus on playing well, doing what’s right, rather than worrying about the result. That’s why in England they call the score, the ‘result.’

Coaching ten and eleven year old kids is the best age group with which to work. They also can be delightfully infuriating. Yes, please tie your shoelaces. Please don’t pass the ball across the front of your own goal. Please don’t watch the other team diddle with the ball, pressure them like a terrier after a toy. Such fun. Ten and eleven is the best of ages. They are beginning to really think rather than regurgitate or depend on the authority figure to solve their problems for juvenile them. Sadly, a middle school teacher remarked recently how her students keep wanting her to tell them what to do – indicating slower cognitive development due to what we’ve experienced these years. Spoon-fed answers, ‘coloring inside the line’ answers, are as nutritious as being force-fed cans of Ensure.

Let’s loosen up those synapses and percolate critical, creative thinking. We’ll then have a chance of solving life’s riddles. Brain teaser time! 1) Johnny’s mother had three children. The first child was named April. The second child was named May. What was the third child’s name? 2) How can a woman living in New Jersey legally marry three men, without being divorced or widowed? 3) If, having only one match, on a freezing winter day you enter a room which contains a lamp, a kerosene heater, and a wood burning stove, which should you light first? 4) What do you keep when you give it away?

While waiting for our match with Berwick AYSO, we had time for personal drills. We try to teach them basics, such as staying goalside. I asked three kids if they knew what I meant. They didn’t. Bless them for answering honestly. So we demonstrated how to balance on your toes between the goal and the other team’s offensive player. Next, we helped them discover how to drive the offensive players outside. It’s time for them to learn the game, play fair, run off the ball, run to space, set up give-and-goes, send the ball through gaps in the defense. If they learn to hold their position on the pitch rather than chase the ball like kittens after a ball of yarn, it’s a success. In time they’ll learn that to go forward you often have to pass backwards. It’s a game of fluid triangles. Pass with purpose. Consistent self-examination, fixing what they’re doing wrong. It takes the synergy of the team to score. Dribble sparingly, only to make a pass or shoot (got that, Danville?). Sometimes I shout instructions from the side-line. It’s more fun to watch them work it out for themselves. Win, tie, or lose, only immature bad sports won’t congratulate their opponent. Can you pass the ball to your teammate if an opponent is standing between you two? You can, if you know how to chip the ball.

It’s the best of ages because they’re beginning to be able to think abstractly. Concrete thinking focusses on things. Abstract thinking is about ideas. Abstract thinking lets them visualize the play in their minds. They are cognitively evolving from two-dimensional, conformist thinking toward independent three-dimensional thinking. Which is why I fell in love with soccer’s elegance. Soccer

players say: "Pass to expectation." Soccer is a sport where the game requires imagination, possibilities, creativity, like life and life's problems. I also love soccer because it's a poor person's sport. You only need a semblance of a ball and rocks, sticks, or gym bags for goals. Improvisational, like life. Which also requires a mature moral compass to direct this creative thinking. It isn't enough to compete skillfully if the players lack moral principles when learning the game.

This might explain why there were five miles of people queueing to honor the late Queen Elizabeth II. We hunger for what we needed her to exemplify: duty, dignity, civility, chivalry, commitment to principles, an elegant moral decency. It really is how you play the game. Brain teaser answers: 1) Johnny. 2) She's a minister. 3) The match. 4) Your word.