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Tab Ramos: Keep the parents at bay

Interview by Mike Voitalla

Tab Ramos, considered one of the USA's most skillful players ever, played for the USA at three World Cups, two Copa Americas, and in the Olympic Games. Two years after retiring in 2002 from a playing career in Spain, Mexico and MLS, he founded the New Jersey youth club NJSA 04. In 2008, he coached the NJSA 04 Gunners to the U-14 U.S. Youth Soccer national title, marking the first national championship for a New Jersey club in two decades.

SOCCER AMERICA: If you had a magic wand, how would you use it to improve youth soccer in America?

TAB RAMOS: Wow. I'd have to think about that ...

One of the things that's been most important for our club is, from the first moment, eliminating parents' opinions from what we do.

The opinion of the parents of the players here is completely irrelevant to us. And that's been a good formula for making this club a real soccer club.

SA: What would be an example of detrimental parent interference?

TAB RAMOS: There are a thousand things. But I'll start with an example of a parent who had the right attitude.

On our U-16 [U.S. Soccer Development] Academy team we have a great player who starts all the games. He's been at our club for four or five years and just about every year previously he's been a substitute. He did not start. He happened to be on the team that won the national championship, but he didn't start.

It's the perfect case of a parent who figured it out the right way. This boy's father is a soccer guy. He kept his son at the club even though he wasn't starting. He could have moved him somewhere else and started for another team. He stayed here while he was a substitute -- trying hard all these years. Now he's 16 -- in the year that it really matters for him -- and starts every game.

I think that's the right formula.

SA: And the wrong parental approach ...

TAB RAMOS: For most other cases, parents will be looking only at two things.

No. 1. Whether your team is winning the games. So if they're not winning the games, then obviously it's time for Johnny to move somewhere else -- to the team that just beat us.

No. 2. The huge effect that the parents have on the kids when they drive home. When the parents get in the two front seats of the van and little Johnny's is in the back. And he hears the parents say, "Well, the coach this ... the coach that ... He only gave him five minutes. ... And I was timing the first half, and he only put him in this position. ..."

All that negative talk instead of saying, "You know, that's great, you only played five minutes but you tried as hard as you can. Maybe if you keep trying hard, the next time you're going to play more and impress the coach."

I think parents are very protective of their kids and obviously everyone should be, but when it comes to sports, I have yet to meet a coach who doesn't want to play a good player a lot of the time. So chances are if your son is not playing a lot, he doesn't deserve to play at this point.

SA: Since you started the club eight years ago, what have you discovered is a good strategy to providing the children with optimal coaching?

TAB RAMOS: At our club now, we believe the best thing is have people who are experts at certain age groups.

We keep our staff at the same age groups year-to-year, so the kids go through coaches like they go to school. First grade you have Mrs. Whatever, second grade you have Mr. Something Else.

We've been able in less than eight years to identify coaches that we have fit into certain age groups better than others. They teach the game better, and we've kept them in those age groups.

SOCCER AMERICA: You were perhaps the first big teenage star in American soccer, playing in the U-20 World Cup in 1983 at age 15. Looking back, how different is youth soccer now in the USA?

TAB RAMOS: It's so much different and so much better. It's more organized. There are more people involved in soccer who know what they're doing and leading the way in many good clubs.

Before, you rarely had someone who knew about soccer unless it was a parent of someone.

Not to say there aren't a lot of things wrong with youth soccer, but we've come a long way since when I grew up playing.

Soccer has become a huge sport and kids have great choices and opportunities to play for some great clubs who are going to give them an opportunity to advance.

SA: So you've seen significant improvements in youth coaching?

TAB RAMOS: I think it's improved tremendously. There are so many people who have played the game. So many people who have taken their coaching licenses, learning the game, studying the game.

There's so much soccer available on TV now, which is huge for the development of the kids as well. Watching the Premier League or La Liga, whatever, there's always soccer on TV. There's exciting soccer with good players.

All those things have had a huge effect.

SA: For sure a very positive of recent years is that Barcelona, which plays entertaining and successful soccer, is being watched by American coaches ...

TAB RAMOS: The effect that Barcelona has had on world soccer and will have over the next decade is huge. We were just getting to the point of where it's almost like to step on the field you needed to be 6-foot-2, and that was all that mattered.

SA: And Barcelona's Lionel Messi, Andres Iniesta and Xavi all stand barely 5-foot-7 tall and finished top three in the 2010 world player of the year award ...

TAB RAMOS: Being a 5-foot-7 guy, I can tell you that if I have a 5-foot-7 guy and a 6-foot-2 guy who play exactly the same, I'll take the 6-foot-2 guy. But now I know that it's OK for me to take the 5-foot-7 guy who can play better than the 6-foot-2 guy.

Not only do I know that, but everybody knows that. That you'd rather have the guys who can play first, and size is second. And I think Barcelona has had that effect on world soccer.

SA: So do you think this has an effect on American youth soccer where an emphasis on results so often leads to a playing style based on a big, strong kid in the back booting the ball up to the big, strong kid upfront?

TAB RAMOS: At the youth game it continues to happen. I can tell you at the Development Academy level you rarely find teams who don't want to play. They all want to play. They want to go forward. Some teams obviously have better players than others, but for the most part it's really been a good experience.

We had a webinar the other day that [U.S. Soccer Youth Technical Director] **Claudio Reyna** ran and it was basically more about playing offensive soccer and getting the outside backs coming out of the back and becoming part of the offense, and that kind of thing.

I think it's the beginning of a lot of changes and a lot of exciting stuff that's going to be

happening down the road and I think we're going to be developing a lot better players.

SA: One of the side effects of youth soccer's incredible growth is the emergence of competing organizations. What are the pros and cons of that?

TAB RAMOS: It's difficult because now we're talking about business, companies trying to make money from it.

I think personally there's too many competitions, but the fact that U.S. Soccer has its own league [Development Academy] makes it simpler at least at the older age groups.

Players are starting to figure out the Academy is the place to be.

The rest are always going to have as many leagues as possible. Businesses are always going to be out there trying to make money, create competition and trying to sign up teams.

SA: It seems that the USA is producing more "good" players than ever. That our role players are better than a couple of decades ago, but the country doesn't produce truly exceptional players at the increased rate we would expect ...

TAV RAMOS: I think exceptional players are not developed. I think they're born.

An example: At my club, players who've been training the same way for six or seven years, who've been taught the same things for six or seven years. Who have had every single aspect of their game put in front of them the exact way -- and they're completely different players.

Some can make perfect passes, an excellent through ball. Some can't complete three passes in a row to a teammate 10 yards away.

How do you explain that? I think some people just have god-given talent and some don't.

(Tab Ramos, the President and Executive Director of [New Jersey club NJSA 04](#), was inducted into the National Soccer Hall of Fame in 2005.)

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