

The myth of leaving home and advancing quickly by Jack Blatherwick

Freddy Adu, at age 14, was the brightest young star in American soccer. Featured on 60 Minutes and David Letterman, Adu was signed by Nike in 2003 for \$1 million -- more than any other Major League Soccer player. *For more details see http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2010/writers/grant_wahl/04/26/adu/index.html*

Today, at age 20, he's bouncing around Europe from one professional team to another -- not good enough to play for Team USA in the World Cup. What happened? Did he lack basic skills? Did he quit working at it? Did injuries slow his progress? No, no, and no.

Actually, there was no progress. There was just a lot of time on the bench, because he wasn't ready for professional soccer. He skipped the normal progression; that is, he never learned the game by trial and error -- and especially, trial and success.

To quote Tim Howard, the veteran U.S. goalkeeper, "Adu has skills with the ball that not many -- if any -- American players possess." But insiders say he "plays too young." He hasn't developed awareness, anticipation, creativity, poise, and mental toughness -- the most important skills in every team sport.

Adu sits on the bench in most games for his team in Greece. They want to win, of course, so there is little playing time for a talented youngster who needs to learn the game. Do **NOT** think the situation is any different in hockey at the professional, college, or junior levels -- or for that matter, at any level of youth hockey.

If a highly talented young player stays with his age group, he will score goals, make creative plays that are exciting and fun, learn to control the puck in traffic instead of passing it too quickly, gain poise, and confidence, and emulate Sidney Crosby, Alex Ovechkin, and Patrick Kane.

If, like Freddy Adu, the same talented young hockey player falls for the misguided advice to move up to the next level as quickly as possible, he is likely to play a diminished role. As a third or fourth line player, he will be required to chip the puck up the boards from his own zone, dump it in from the neutral zone, hustle, forecheck, backcheck, and above all, get off the ice quickly (so the good guys can take over).

Ovechkin scores goals -- not because he has superhuman physical abilities -- but because he expects to score. He is passionate about scoring goals, because he always has. Or, is it the other way around? There was no year in his development when he wasn't expected to score; he always had success; and therefore his expectations grew each year.

Development requires raising the bar of expectations. The worst thing that could happen to a potential goal-scorer is to spend a year in which he plays a diminished role and doesn't score. This happens way too often in our "hurry-up society" -- advancing to the "A" team instead of dominating at the "B" level -- advancing from high school to the USHL or

USDTP or college to play on a fourth line; thereby lowering the expectations to score. If a goal-scorer leaves college too soon, he could end up on a minor league team, learning to be a checking forward. At best, that will be his future. Just watch the progress, or lack of it, by those who are making these premature decisions right now.

Crosby is a brilliant playmaker, because every year of his life, that's the role he played. Hypothetically, if at 16 years of age, he had advanced to professional hockey, where winning was more important than Sid, he might have ended up like Adu. Instead, he went to Shattuck and dominated hockey games the way he does today. No one develops playmaking skills sitting on the bench. You don't increase poise and creativity if you move up too soon to a higher level where the coach makes you dump the puck every time you cross the red line.

Imagine, the most skillful soccer player in the country at age 14, stopped learning the game at age 15. He didn't get the chance to dominate 15 year-old games; he didn't play unstructured pickup soccer with his friends. He lost opportunities to develop confidence, poise, creativity, and playmaking abilities, simply because he didn't stay with his peers and "play" like a 15 year-old.