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Former Silver Lake star J.P. Vercollone

Heads up instruction

World Cup camp stresses more than soccer skills

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The first thing that strikes most observers when they walk around Dean Schneider's camp for any decent spell is that there is a lot more going on here than just soccer instruction. In fact, betterment in the sport does not even appear to be the top item on Schneider's agenda.

The World Cup Soccer Camp, which wrapped up Friday at the Silver Lake Regional Junior High School, presents a very competitive venue for top players from all over the South Shore. Standings are kept for the purpose of playoff seeding, and all of the wins are hard earned.

Then there are the "wins" that Schneider and his counselors award for things such as hustle, execution of a particular skill and displays of good attitude or sportsmanship.

"We're trying to emphasize the need to be good people first and then good soccer players too," said Schneider, a former Pembroke teacher who now lives in Warner, N.H., and coaches his daughter's club team "Seacoast United" out of Portsmouth. "We try to make them the best they can be, period."

"We want these kids to want to get these wins for sportsmanship and other positive actions. Along the way, hopefully, some of it will become second nature."

Schneider has been running his rather unique World Cup Soccer Camp on the South Shore since 1987. He finished up a two-week stint at Silver Lake Friday; the first week was for children in grades 1-5, last week for grades 6-8. He then returned home to Warner for a one-week camp, but will bring the WCSC back to the area next week for the final time this summer for the second of two scheduled one-week camps at Marshfield High School.

"The four pillars of WCSC" are listed right on the application for admission: "1) *Sportsmanship*, which is character in action, is the cornerstone of WCSC... 2) *Fun* is the underlying theme of all drills and games... 3) *Participation*- At WCSC, all of the campers are involved all of the time... 4) *Skills & Tactics*- the key to success in any sport is mastery of the fundamentals."

In addition to these, Schneider says he has three basic principles that he is constantly endeavoring to underscore.

"Be nice, work hard and never give up," asserted Schneider, a former Pembroke teacher. "If you can really follow these guidelines, you should do well in life as well as soccer."

Skeptics should know that Schneider not only lives by what he preaches, he also teaches it. When he was with the Pembroke school system, he taught a class directed specifically to fostering self-esteem. Today, while teaching in New Hampshire, his two most popular classes are "Character 101" and "Character In Action."

"We have a principal who is very supportive of this curriculum and the parents just eat it up," said Schneider. "To be honest, I'm surprised we don't see these kinds of courses in more school systems. We do all we can to educate these kids with facts and information, but it seems sometimes we take their character for granted."

"Kids today need some kind of identity and we've got a society full of kids who get their identity by following the wrong influences. We have to do a better job of showing them that we care about them as people."

He takes this opportunity to dust off one of his favorite catch phrases: "Kids won't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

What should not be lost amid this impressive rhetoric is the fact that the camp is apparently a top-flight sports program. Noble philosophies and credos only go so far, after all, when mom and dad are plopping down their hard-earned dough.

Schneider has created variations on the traditional game of soccer to emphasize the development of particular skills. In one game, which he calls "East-West wall", he lines cones across the center of the field — thus forcing the opposing teams to work the ball down the sideline and then quickly adjust to an offensive or defensive posture based on which side of mid-field they're on. Another called "first touch handball" requires the players to receive but not control all passes with their hands, thus decreasing the reaction time for decisions. There is still another where goals can only be scored at the corners of each end line. All of these games are played by reduced squads on even further reduced fields, which maximizes involvement and the need for quick decision making.

"No one is going to hide out there," noted Schneider. "That's what happens with a lot of less aggressive or less confident players on the big field. These games here are a lot harder than regular games. As a result, it should follow that those regular games will seem like a piece of cake after what they go through here."

If these claims, along with 13 years of strong turnouts, still aren't evidence enough of the soccer worth of the WCSC, how about the wholehearted endorsement of one of Silver Lake's most accomplished soccer talents?

"I've been going to at least a couple of soccer camps a year for as far back as I can remember, and this is by far the best," assessed J.P. Vercollone, Silver Lake High's 1998 soccer captain and now a sophomore at Seton Hall, where he is on a soccer scholarship. John Paul — known exclusively as "J.P." to his friends — has been a World Cup camper since year one, when he was a first grader. He returned each of the following six years as a student and the past six as a paid counselor.

"I've been to real exclusive camps where they only took the best of the best, and none of them compare with Dean's camps, in my opinion," said J.P. "His is the best in every way. It's the best for the development of soccer skills and it's the most fun. The kids have a blast and Dean's a riot with them."

The fun starts with the very premise of the soccer competition. Each team created for the week represents a country that might compete in the real World Cup tournament. This past week, the teams were dubbed Italy, Brazil, Jamaica, Botswana, Holland, France, Afghanistan and U.S.A. After playing the wide array of "games" for four days, all of the parents are invited for the "Cup Finals" on Friday. That begins with an opening ceremony featuring the campers marching on to the field to the strains of selected music and putting on original playful performances.

Eventually, a champion is named, but Schneider does his utmost to make all of his campers feel like winners.

"Anyone can coach to win a game of soccer, but we're trying to make these kids winners in life," offered Schneider. "These kids aren't going to win every time. They could play the U.S. National team today and get wiped out, but that doesn't mean they didn't play their best game. We want them to understand that the important thing is how they play the game and how they act as individuals."

Although these loftier goals are lost on few, it is the testimony of the longtime associates that carry the most weight.

"These camps are extremely competitive, but we never have any problems with things getting out of hand," said counselor Mark Quinlan, of Marshfield, a former B.C. High star and current UMass-Boston sophomore, and also a seven-year veteran of the WCSC. "Dean just has a way of bringing out the best in these kids on and off the field. Obviously, I believe in what he's doing; I keep coming back."

Echoing these sentiments was Vercollone: "Believe me, soccer is not Dean's top priority. He loves the game, but he'd rather have a good kid than a good player."