

STREET SOCCER'S SIMPLE SECRET

Imagine a basketball player who can rain three-pointers on an empty court, but does not know how to get in position to do so in a game. Imagine a hockey player with great puck skills, but who never figures out how to slip past a defender and find the puck off a deflection in front of the net. Similarly, to be excellent, a soccer player needs to have both the technical skills to execute – dribble, pass, and shoot – and tactical skills to understand which of these to use and how to position themselves on the field to even have the opportunity to exercise their technical prowess.

For tactical excellence, players need game situations. It is not enough to juggle a ball or pass off a wall for hours on end. Renowned sports scientist, Mark Williams from University of Utah says, “In order to develop high-performing elite players, game intelligence, awareness and decision-making should be developed simultaneously

to technical skills.” It is that spacial awareness and what players decide to do with the ball that is so important (and lacking in most Americans’ games) in tactical learning. Americans need to change the way they learn how to play soccer. And they need to play more.

Evanston-III.-based Mettle Sports seeks to change the face of soccer in the United States with its “2,000 pitches U.S.” campaign to place at least 2,000 street soccer pitches across the United States in the next three years.

Modeling the South American and European street soccer formula, Mettle Sports Founder Neal Levin, says pitches — small-sided fields with walls and built-in goals — will dramatically improve soccer development and participation rates by fostering creativity, quickness of thought and improved skills. If the superpowers of world soccer have one thing in common, it’s that soccer is a part of their upbringing where youth are handed soccer balls before they start on solid food and that they play daily in small spaces like alleys and streets, giving them game-like situations to also practice their technical skills.

“Routinely the best players in the world begin with street soccer and are not coached until much later in life,” says Levin.

Mettle Sports is bringing the discipline of street soccer to the United States. When youth play street soccer the ball stays inbounds so that kids can get exponentially “more touches” and “more decisions” on the ball. When playing on big fields and constantly watching the ball go out of bounds, youth spend time chasing the ball, standing around, and restarting.

Pitches are perfect in their simplicity; anyone can play anywhere. They can be placed on any surface – grass, asphalt, sand or concrete – to encourage unstructured play, according to Levin. It’s “GAME ON!” when you set foot inside a street soccer pitch. Furthermore,

WHO IS BUYING METTLE SPORT'S PITCHES?

- Park districts & municipalities
- Soccer clubs, MLS, NASL & USL teams
- Secondary schools & universities
- Benefactors for donation
- Corporations: Office parks, parking garage owners, shopping mall owners, real estate





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KEY INFO: METTLESPORTS.COM

- Pitches can be placed on any surface: Grass, concrete, asphalt, dirt, turf or sand. Grass can handle 3 to 5 weeks of foot-traffic and needs to be mowed. It can be set up with a crew of four and a foreman in 90 minutes. The breakdown is even quicker.
- Portables start at just under \$35,000. Permanent pitches start at \$47,000. Other amenities such as turf, lights and bleachers can be added.
- Typical pitch size is 60'x90' though it can be configured at any size.
- Boards can be sold as advertising. Depending on the location and the amount of foot traffic, portable pitches could be paid for solely by sponsorships in one year.
- Mettle Sports is finalizing their capital raise, seeking a couple more investors

says Neal Levin, "We have a lot of parks and park districts that have space, but no kids playing in it. As Americans, we need more structure. We found that these pitches create a destination. When we build them, kids come. Parks fill up with kids playing soccer games in the pitches. Club players are elevating their game, but equally as fun is watching kids who have never played discover a new sport. If you want to be a benefactor of your community's youth soccer program, park districts and their soccer clubs need help buying pitches."

Ian Barker, British director of Coach Education for the National Soccer Coach Association of America (NSCAA), has endorsed the concept of Mettle Sports. Barker is having Mettle Sports bring a pitch to his Olympic Development Program camp this summer in Michigan.

"People step inside for a chance to feel the positive spirit of what the small-sided pitch brings to the game and brings to building community among strangers," says Elliot Hurtig, a high school boys head coach in a suburb outside of Chicago.

Brazil's superstars come up playing in the favelas. Could America's next superstar be a kid from the inner city who grew up playing street soccer? Time will tell, but as the movement takes hold in Chicago and branches out, you are likely to hear and see more about it.

"We are already in talks with multiple pro teams and multiple professional leagues about bringing street soccer to game day, to their development academy, and to community outreach events as a way to spark interest in the game and recruit new talent," says Levin. ▲