

What is Recreational Soccer?

It's the Player's Game

From the US Youth Soccer Director of Coach and Player Development Manual

The major concern is that we don't all talk about the same thing when we discuss recreational soccer. Let's first look at the problem.

DEFINITIONS:

What do the words "recreation" and "recreational" mean in the English language?

rec-re-a-tion, noun

- 1: an activity that diverts, amuses or stimulates; "scuba diving is provided as a diversion for tourists"; "for recreation he wrote poetry and solved crossword puzzles"; "drug abuse is often regarded as a form of recreation" [syn: diversion]
- 2: activity that refreshes and recreates; activity that renews your health and spirits by enjoyment and relaxation; "time for rest and refreshment by the pool"; "days of joyous recreation with his friends" [syn: refreshment]
- 3: refreshment of one's mind or body after work through activity that amuses or stimulates; play
- 4: the act of recreating, or the state of being recreated; refreshment of the strength and spirits after toil; amusement; diversion; sport; pastime.

rec-re-a-tion-al, adj.

- 1: of or relating to recreation; "a recreational area with a pool and ball fields"
- 2: engaged in as a pastime; "an amateur painter"; "gained valuable experience in amateur theatricals"; "recreational golfers"; "reading matter that is both recreational and mentally stimulating"; "unpaid extras in the documentary" [syn: amateur, unpaid]

Now what does "recreational soccer" mean?

So you have heard the term before, but do you really know what "recreational soccer" is? There are no legal definitions, no US Youth Soccer rules, policies or regulations. One of the most often-used terms is one of the least defined. Soccer has created a new meaning for both the words "recreation" and "recreational".

US Youth Soccer does offer a partial definition in its "Policy on Players and Playing Rules" in the definitions section when it states that,

"Recreational league" means an intraclub league in which:

- (A) The use of tryouts, invitations, recruiting or any similar process to roster players to any team on the basis of talent or ability is prohibited;
- (B) The club administering the league accepts as participants in the league any eligible youths (subject to reasonable terms on registration);
- (C) A system or rostering players is used to establish a fair or balanced distribution of playing talent among all teams participating; and
- (D) League rules require that each player must play at least one-half of each game except for reasons of injury, illness, or discipline.

"Recreational team" means a team that participates in a recreational league.

However, the section head note states that the "definitions are suggested for use by State A associations to facilitate communication and understanding among them."

Thus, each state association has its own definition and implementation –



however, there are common perceptions of what people mean when they refer to recreational soccer.

Let us look at those perceptions. Some common perceptions of recreational soccer are:

- Made up of players assigned to team in a random manner without regard to the ability of the players – as opposed to "select" soccer, in which the players are selected to be on a team through some sort of tryout or selection process.
- Less competitive than "select" soccer.
- Lower intensity for training and practices.
- Less travel, fewer games
- Less skilled players
- Less experienced coaches
- Annual or biannual shuffling of players to new teams

Other perceptions are less gentle.

- "He's a rec player," can be an observation or a put down.
- "They ought to be a rec team," is definitely a put down.

Such other perceptions must be stamped out, as recreational soccer is the foundation of the sport in the United States.

Recreational soccer is defined in the common mind by what it is not, and not by what it is. A similar situation exists in the definition of amateur versus professional athletes. The word is borrowed from the common definitions in the English language quoted above, but vastly stretched in each application.

For the purposes of this manual, let's use the following basic definitions:

Recreational soccer: Is that soccer program that is primarily devoted to the enjoyment and development of soccer players without the emphasis on travel or high-level competition. The purpose of recreational soccer is to provide an opportunity for the participants to have fun, learn the sport and develop life skills, including a life-long love of the game.

Recreational Player: A player who is randomly assigned to a team without regard to his/her abilities and skills.

Recreational Team: Teams formed randomly to play soccer

Recreational League: Leagues composed of teams formed in a random manner.

US Youth Soccer Player Participation Objectives

- **FUN!** It is critical that players involved in youth soccer enjoy the game in which they are playing. If the organization is able to instill a passion and enjoyment in the game then half the battle is already won. This also relates very closely to how players perceive their coach(es) and their interaction with them. One of the main reasons players under 12 decide not to continue is that they no longer are enjoying the game; it has become work.
- **DEVELOPMENT:** A necessary element to support fun. Without it, training and games become stale because there is no improvement.
- **LIFE SKILLS:** In our case, through the sport of soccer

Note: For a complete copy of this manual, go to nyswysa.org and click on: US Youth Soccer Director of Coach and Player Development Manual

Best Practices

By **Mike Voitalla**

Executive Director of Soccer America

What's really important about the U.S. Soccer Federation's ambitious move into youth soccer isn't just the U16 and U18 boys leagues of its new US Soccer Development Academy.

For sure, taming the wild west of youth soccer that overburdens elite teen-age players is a crucial part of steering player development in a better direction. In addition, expanding the player identification process by incorporating the nation's elite clubs into the national team program should decrease the chances of missing young talent.

However, what will make the most profound impact is whether US Soccer succeeds in its stated goal to change the approach to how the nation's youngest players are coached. The Academy launch, stress its architects, is only the first step in their quest to change the youth soccer culture in the USA.

Specifically, US Soccer aims to have youth coaches adopt the "Best Practices Player Development Guidelines: Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States," published by the Federation under the guidance of Director of Coaching Education Bob Jenkins.

The booklet was created by the Federation's coaching education staff and men's and women's U.S. National Team coaches. Unlike so much of the pseudo-scientific coaching literature that has turned youth soccer into an adult-dominated environment, "Best Practices" is plain common sense. It is a welcome response to the overemphasis on the coach's role as a "teacher" and "instructor."

The inclination to constantly "correct" young players as they explore the sport may be driven by good intentions, but it neglects the important difference between learning and being taught.

"Young players should be allowed the opportunity to experiment and with that, succeed and fail," says US Soccer. "A coach's long-term goal is to prepare a player to successfully recognize and solve the challenges of a game on his or her own."

"Best Practices" helps youth coaches understand the different developmental stages of young soccer players. The youth coach's role at the younger ages is simply to create an environment that gives children the opportunity to discover the joys of the game. Some children will decide the sport is so much fun, they'll start dedicating themselves to it so fervently that they will become exceptional players.

Unlike so many coaching guides that preceded it, "Best Practices" does not make youth coaching seem like a daunting task. Too often, coaching instruction has encouraged coaches to expect too much, too soon from young players.

The guide explains convincingly why an adult-dominated environment is not conducive to developing great players.

Here are a few excerpts from the "Best Practices" Guidelines on coaching younger players:



- A primary focus for the coach at the youth level, through the U12 age group, is to provide an environment that comes close to simulating the "pickup" games of our youth.
- Coaches should think of themselves more as facilitators, monitors, guides or even participants.
- Coaches can often be more helpful to a young player's development by organizing less, saying less and allowing players to do more.
- Set up a game and let the kids play.
- Encourage the dribbler at the younger ages.
- At the younger ages (6 to about 10), soccer is not a team sport. On the contrary, it is a time for children to develop their individual relationships with the ball.
- Do not demand that the more confident players share the ball. Encourage them to be creative and go to goal.
- Coaches should avoid the impulse to "coach" their players from play to play in order to help them win the match. Coaches should not be telling their young players to "pass rather than dribble," to "hold their positions" or to "never" do something (like pass or dribble in front of the goal).
- The game is the best teacher for young players.

To download a copy of "Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States" for free, go to nyswysa.org and click on "Best Practices".

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Timely Reminder: Purpose of Youth Sport

Jacob Daniel

Director of Coaching, Georgia Youth Soccer Association

The competitive trends are not only adversely affecting the essence of player development, but also causing the line between ethical and unethical behavior to become blurry. Youth club leaders need a timely reminder of the purpose of youth sports.

The mission of any youth organization is to develop character, instill values, teach respect for authority and society, develop confidence and a positive self-image and help youth reach their potential in life. We just happen to use soccer as the vehicle to achieve this mission.

The mission of a youth club should not revolve around winning championships. Winning is a byproduct of a quality program, but it should not be the driving force. Many well-meaning club leaders verbalize and articulate the need to de-emphasize results, but fail to notice that their actions, or the actions of their staff, contradict their stated philosophy. Some simply don't see the difference between 'teaching life lessons through sport' and 'collecting trophies in sport'. The ambivalence in what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' dims the moral clarity and leads to a collision between mission and ambition. Some examples:

WE WANT OUR CLUB TO BE THE BEST IN THE STATE / REGION / NATION

When club leaders make such claims, on the face of it, it sounds reasonable and a plausible sporting goal. However, the question begs: Is it really about the players, or is it about adult personal ambitions? Just how far are they willing to go to achieve this ambition? Will judgment be clouded by ambition and push the ethical envelope too far? Who benefits, exactly? Will these leaders look after the best interest of the individual players?

IT'S A BUSINESS! IT'S SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST!

As youth clubs grow in size and budgets, comparisons with business are inevitable. Although a business model can and should be used to structure and professionalize youth soccer, it should not be used to condone the more distasteful 'cutthroat' aspects of business as acceptable practice in youth soccer.

Corporate business mantra allows market forces to determine winners and losers. The goal of each entrepreneur company is to maximize profits, annihilate the competition and monopolize the market share. If soccer followed the same mantra, the end result will be only one club left standing in, say, Atlanta. Youth soccer should not allow itself to be governed by market forces alone.

Youth soccer has more in common with organizations such as Boy Scouts of America, or a School District Board. Such organizations strive to operate in a businesslike manner, with fiscal responsibility, and a child welfare-oriented philosophy. They have board of directors who set the vision and mission and who hire experts to run the day-to-day operation. A Club Director of Coaching's role is more akin to a School Principal's than that of a corporate CEO — and school principals don't waste their time and energy trying to lure children from other schools.

WE ARE AN 'ELITE CLUB'

Club leaders who position their organization as an elite club aimed at the elite player must remember that they are still dealing with fragile, impressionable children who are easily bruised, psychologically. The term 'elite' is overused and often misused in sport. Unfortunately, the school of thought among some coaches is that "if the player wants to be part of our elite club, he/she must be able to handle the pressure." An 'elite' tag is not a license to abuse players and it doesn't absolve us of responsibility for the unpleasant consequences our players might suffer in the name of competition.

A club that claims elite status has a responsibility to provide the players elite-level facilities, expert coaching, administrative support and, above all, a high standard of behavior and role modeling. Elite status should reflect a measurement of what the club can do for the player in terms of character and skill development, not what the player can do for the club.

As was noted earlier, the undeniably disturbing trend in youth soccer is that the line between 'right' and 'wrong' is no longer clear. Most club leaders are well-meaning and passionate about the game, but some inadvertently take the wrong turn somewhere along the way, while others turn a blind eye to questionable behavior within their club, in their quest for success.

Is it ethical for a coach to try and convince a player to join his team after the player has already given his word to another team? In the strict terms of the local governing rules, this scenario might be legal, but it's not ethical. Is it ethical for a coach to make false promises to a young player, or to disparage a fellow coach in order to convince a player to sign? When a coach tells a player that his current coach cannot help him reach the next level, ethical boundaries have definitely been exceeded.

When the main reason for traveling to an expensive prestige tournament is to give the team a recruiting advantage, is it fair to impose such expenses and time away from home on all the players just to attract better players, some of whom will replace existing ones upon their return?

What would you do as a parent, if you found out that your child's teacher shouted at and criticized him/her in front of the whole class because your child gave the wrong answer. You would undoubtedly be upset at the teacher and probably have a word with him. Yet, many parents allow the coach to shout and berate their child when he/she makes a mistake on the soccer field. How is this different from the classroom example? Any way one looks at it, it is child abuse. Parents should not tolerate this type of behavior by coaches. However, many do, because they think this coach will help their child reach the 'next level'.

Some club leaders tolerate coaches who are poor role models because of their winning track record — coaches who are constantly shouting at players, or criticizing referees with sarcastic remarks, or are often confrontational with opposing coaches and parents; who punish their players for losing a game by making them do laps or sit ups; who flaunt the rules and teach their players that 'acceptable deceit' overrules sportsmanship and fair play, and that nice guys finish last. Such poor role models should not be tolerated. It flies in the face of the main goal of youth sports.

Another widely accepted reality is the perpetual bench warmer. If club leaders and coaches were to personally experience the indignity of sitting on the bench for a whole game, or for most of the game, they might view this humiliating practice in a different light. The argument that the bench warmer still gets to play in games of lesser importance or against easier opponents misses the whole point. If the purpose of youth sport is to help children develop self-esteem, how is the implied lack of confidence in a player going to accomplish that? Is it ethical for a coach to ask a family to fork out hundreds of dollars for an out-of-town tournament but keep the player on the bench because it's a 'must-win' tournament? Has anyone bothered to look at the faces of the players sitting on the bench, those who know they won't get to play? Or the painful expression on their parents' faces as they share in their embarrassment?

Americans love to cheer for the underdogs. Sport folklore is awash with stories of a team of underdogs overcoming adversity, rising to the challenge under the inspiration of a caring coach and beating a team of cocky favorites. In youth soccer, the real life (but sadly ignored) underdog is the bench warmer. It's time Hollywood made a movie about a bench warmer who overcame the ignominy of his tag, under the tutelage of a caring adult, and scored the winning goal in a 'must-win' tournament.

Why Small-Sided Games?

US Youth Soccer has thought long and hard about the answer to the question, "Why Small-Sided Games?"

What does "Small-Sided Games" mean? These are soccer games with fewer players competing on a smaller sized field. These are fun games that involve the players more because fewer players are sharing one ball. All ages can play "Small-Sided Games," but it has a definite developmental impact on our younger soccer players. US Youth Soccer recommendations for "number of players" at the various age groups are as follows:

• U6	3v3	no goalkeepers
• U8	4v4	no goalkeepers
• U10	6v6	with goalkeepers
• U12	8v8	with goalkeepers
• U13+	11v11	with goalkeepers

Here are some of the reasons why we believe, as soccer coaches, that administrators and parents must guarantee that our young soccer players play small-sided games:

1. Because we want our young soccer players to touch the soccer ball more often and become more skillful with it! (Individual technical development)
2. Because we want our young soccer players to make more, less-complicated decisions during the game! (Tactical development)
3. Because we want our young soccer players to be more physically efficient in the field space they are playing in! (Reduced field size)
4. Because we want our young soccer players to have more individual teaching time with the coach! Less players on the field and less players on the team will guarantee this! (Need to feel worthy and need to feel important)
5. Because we want our young soccer players to have more involved playing time in the game! (More opportunity to solve problems that only the game presents)
6. Because we want our young soccer players to have more opportunity to play on both sides of the ball! (More exposure to attacking and defending situations)
7. Because we want our young soccer players to have more opportunities to score goals! (Pure excitement)

These are the reasons why we adults must foster "Small-Sided Games" in our youth soccer programs. The "Small-Sided" environment is a developmentally appropriate environment for our young soccer players. It's a FUN environment that focuses on the young soccer player.

It just makes sense doesn't it?

We Have To Do More For Our Referees

By Tony Waiters

Without referees the game of soccer many a time would be a complete shambles.

Can you imagine the recent Euro 2008 without referees? It is beyond comprehension.

I was proud of my record as a pro player. I was never booked. Of course, I was a goalkeeper. That, in itself, was enough to keep me disciplined. If the keeper loses his or her cool — or worse, gets thrown out of the game — what does that do for the team?

I wasn't as proud of my record as a coach. Twice I was thrown out for "protecting my players" when remonstrating to the referee. But was I really, "protecting my players"? As a coach of a professional team, you could make a case that sticking up for your players is an expectation — but it would be a weak case.

What must happen in the game at every level is that there has to be zero tolerance for players, fans, coaches and parents verbally abusing the referee — or worse.

In some of the tougher sports such as American Football and Rugby, there is no abuse of the officials because it is just not tolerated. It's the only way to go.

It comes of no surprise to read an article out of Ontario where a mother of a child playing in a U8 tournament was charged after berating a 14-year old girl referee and then punching the referee's D ad when he came to her defense.

If it was just an isolated incident, we could brush it under the carpet, but we all know behaving badly and abusively to young and not-so-young referees happens far too often. We have to take a position.

When our own son, at 14 years of age, passed his referee exam and started officiating U7 and U8 games, I would always drive him to his games and then stay in the background. Scott thought I was doing him a favor by giving him a ride. Actually I was his "minder" in case a parent became carried away — and it did happen. Usually, a little word with a parent would bring him/her back to earth.

Solution? There is no watertight answer. Though, what if — when players are registered for a soccer (or whatever) program — the parents had to register, too, and sign a Parents Code of Conduct contract? That would be a start, and it would give the soccer organization executive the ammunition and incentive to act when and if, it became necessary.

