

Making the Correct Decisions about Your Child's Soccer Experience

As a parent you are constantly faced with decisions that have a profound impact on your child's future. I believe it is important to examine some of these issues as they relate to youth soccer.

The Formative Years

As not only a coach but an educator for close to 30 years, I believe the coaches your child has at the younger ages are critical. Some clubs in Eastern Pennsylvania have begun to take the focus from the older travel ages to the young ages. Much as successful elementary school teachers provide the building blocks and love for learning, coaches in the ages of six to twelve can and should provide the same.

Questions for your club and their coaches during the Formative Years

Does your club have pre-requisites for coaches who are involved with coaching players under the age of ten and coaches who are involved with early age travel teams?

Do they place development above winning?

Are they aware of the physical, social and cognitive stages of development for those ages?

Does your child's club have a curriculum with exercises and activities based on age and development?

Is my child's practices fun and is every child involved?

Are the practices organized, and have a progression and theme?

Does the practice facilitate learning?

Does the coach recognize coachable moments to instruct?

If there are travel teams for ages nine through twelve, is travel distance limited and are tournaments they participate, played locally?

If your child is involved with a travel team is there a fair balance of practice time and matches (two or three practices to one match)?

Does the coach of the travel team have a philosophy regarding the team that is shared with parents and players?

Does the coach allow a player to miss practice due to homework, school functions, family outings or priorities in other sports?

If playing travel, is there considerable down time from the sport at certain times of the year?

I believe the answer should be yes to all of these pertinent questions. Many of the quality coaches and administrators within EPYSA are making the effort to follow guidelines that are in the best interest of each child.

U13 to U17 Travel Teams, examining the costs, quality of coaching, and the reality of soccer scholarships

There is a U13 team, within a premier club recognized for its past successes, which is taking things to the extreme in regard to cost, matches, and the player's total involvement in the sport. This team is currently playing over 80 games per year and practices at least two times per week. Remember, these are children 12 years old who will be turning thirteen. Examine the costs to parents of each player in order for them to participate per year:

Uniforms and equipment	\$200 to \$750
Coaching salaries, coaches' travel expenses	\$1000 to \$1800
Indoor field rental	\$200 to \$300
Outdoor field rental	\$300 to \$500
Referee fees	\$200 to \$300
Tournament fees	\$100 to \$200
Banquet	\$30 to \$60
Dallas Cup	\$900 to \$1300
Training and playing in Europe	\$1100 to \$1600
Gas and meals for matches and practices	\$750 to \$1400

These costs do not include the extra costs to parents who decide to go with their children to tournaments or matches. The estimated total costs are probably on the low end, according to an article from The New York Times

entitled; *The Scholarship Divide- Expectations Lose to Reality of Sports Scholarships*. The article was published on March 10, 2008.

With a robust economy these costs seem ridiculous but in light of our country's plight, I can't see how anyone can justify the financial sacrifice needed to support a child's involvement in soccer or any sport to this extent, especially at this age.

Burnout

Ellena Delle Donne, from Ursuline Academy in Wilmington Delaware, was the 2008 Naismith High School Basketball Player of the Year. She was recruited by every Division One College in the United States but lasted only forty eight hours at Connecticut that fall. She admitted to being burned out at thirteen and all the success and accolades she received did not make a difference. She transferred to the University of Delaware and is now playing volleyball. I am seeing the same thing in soccer at early years and later. Elite players come home from four years of college and stop playing the sport and have no involvement in coaching. They are tired and finally have a chance to relax, enjoy life and get on with their careers. Many never pick up a soccer ball again.

The Myth

"Switch to our club or play with my team. Eighty per cent of the players on our U17 team received scholarships. Our club gets exposed to the collegiate coaches. We have the coaches who can get you to the next level."

This is the sales pitch made to players and parents alike but what are the true experiences of players who play at the top level of club soccer in regard to college soccer or professional soccer?

First and foremost, the average athletic scholarship, excluding football and basketball, for all athletes is only between eight and seven thousand dollars per year. Tuition and room and board runs anywhere from twenty to fifty two thousand dollars per year. In eleven of the fourteen sports with men and women's teams, women receive a higher average amount. The truth is almost no soccer players ever receive a full athletic scholarship. Take into consideration a player who receives a scholarship of twenty five per cent from a college that runs forty thousand dollars per year. This scholarship over four years is worth forty thousand dollars but the total cost to parents and student is still one hundred and twenty thousand dollars. Coaches in some Division One Programs have nine scholarships over a four year period and are forced to divide them up in order to maintain continuity. If you know of a student who is on a full ride, it is because he most likely received money academically or through a financial aid package. Though some Women's Soccer Division One Programs have up to twelve scholarships, their coaches must also use a full ride sparingly.

My good friend Lew Atkinson, the Director of Coaching in Delaware, likes to explain to parents. "If you are looking for your son or daughter to receive a scholarship to college, I suggest you spend the money directed to soccer toward an academic tutor. The cost is less expensive and the financial awards are greater."

In the article I mentioned from the New York Times, you can read of one Eastern Pennsylvania family and their sons' collegiate soccer experiences.

Professional Soccer

"Our club coach told us our son or daughter has the talent to play professionally."

The odds are huge and the financial rewards are minimal when it comes to making a professional soccer team in our country and living the high lifestyle of other professional athletes. If we examine the salaries of six former Eastern Pennsylvania soccer players currently playing in the MLS you may be surprised at their pay in the beginning of their careers. As their careers blossom or they play for a number of years, a MLS professional can make a decent living but until that time. Their salary is less than a first year teacher coming out of college for the first few years of professional soccer.

Ben Olsen and Chris Albright are two of the most successful players from EPYSA now playing in the MLS. Both have ten years experience in the league and have played for the National Team on numerous occasions. Ben's salary

from DC United is \$215,000 and Chris' salary from New England is \$160,000. Jon Conway has been playing in the MLS for eight years and makes a salary of \$81,250. Jeff Parke of Seattle who has been a strong back in the league for five years earns \$58,737. Jeff Larentowicz a young, strong central midfielder for New England entering his fifth season earned \$33,000 last year. Julian Valentin from Wake Forest and currently on the LA galaxy roster earned \$12,900 last year.

You can expect the Women's Professional League to have lower salaries than the men but the top name players will be receiving the larger salaries.

Conclusion

Parents, take the time to think about your child and their future. Provide them with opportunities to explore other opportunities in sports and in the arts when they are young. There is always a possibility that they may find a job or a wonderful hobby that will last a lifetime because you exposed them to new ventures.

Should your child remain passionate about soccer choose the proper path. Ask questions, expose them to different coaches and ask yourself, "Am I doing what is in the best interest of my child." Trust me you will be pulled in many directions as he or she goes through youth soccer. Make the right decisions.

Mike Barr

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