

The difference between Competitive and Recreational Soccer

Playing within a recreational/in-house program is how most players are first exposed to soccer. It is also the program where most of the players will remain for their whole playing career. Therefore, it is fitting that the primary objective of the recreational program is to instill a love of the game within each player so that every player enjoys him/herself and, hopefully, returns the following season. This positive experience can have far-reaching effects on young children and has immeasurable value for players.

Frequently, parents struggle with the decision of whether or not to move their child from a recreational program into a competitive/travel one. Often, they will ask themselves and even their child's coaches, *How do I know if they are ready? Am I? What do I need to know? What should I be prepared for?*

It is important to keep in mind that competitive soccer is geared toward players who are looking for a more challenging soccer environment. If recreational soccer is a good fit for your child, there is no need to feel any pressure to move or transition your child — such a change might not be necessary, or in his/her best interest.

There are several reasons that players do not play competitive/travel soccer. Some do not want to make the time or financial commitment. Others play another sport and do not have time for two travel sports. These are completely justified reasons, and if a player does not want to make the commitment to competitive soccer, then s/he should not be pressured to do so. On the other hand, players who are enthusiastic, have developed a higher level of soccer skill, are committed to soccer and show interest in moving to the next level should be encouraged to try out for a competitive team. However, it is important to keep in mind that this jump requires a family to make a sizable commitment in terms of time, travel and financial resources.

There are notable differences between recreational and competitive soccer, and it is important that players and parents understand these differences to ensure the smoothest transition possible for all. For instance, unlike recreational players, competitive players participate in tryouts and are selected and rostered based on their performance. Those players who are selected are placed on teams based on date of birth, not grade. With competitive soccer, you will put more miles on the car traveling to different communities to play a game. At the competitive level, the 50-percent playing time that you were used to in recreational soccer may no longer apply. Furthermore, studies have shown that negative sideline behavior increases as the competitive level increases. The reason is simple: scores are kept, results matter and the need to outperform others increases. While some of these differences may initially seem off-putting, keep in mind that for the right player, these are significant opportunities for personal growth and gain.

Players who play at the competitive/travel level usually have personal goals, such as playing for the high school varsity team, playing at the college level, becoming a professional player or playing for the National Team. Hence, the main objective of the competitive program should be to help each player reach his/her potential and achieve his/her goals. This should be done in a fulfilling and supportive way that continues to nurture their love of the game. As the player's closest support network, both the coach and the parents bear a great responsibility in helping the player attain his/her goal.

As parents, it is important to consider the pros and cons of competitive soccer and how it will impact your family, so that if the commitment to competitive soccer is made, there is an ability to support your son or daughter. How you handle the commitment will inevitably impact how your child will also handle it. If you are prepared and educate yourself on what to expect, everyone's experience will be better for it.

If there is anything we can do to assist you with this, please ask. Please contact John Clare, the Executive Director of Houston Dynamo, Tampa, with any questions you may have.