

The Value of Participation

By Dave O'Brien

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I have been coaching youth soccer for about 17 years. Many of those years have been spent in the club, or competitive ranks. I've watched players and their parents reach for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. They work hard and scrounge and scratch for every opportunity that might lead them to that pot of gold. When an obstacle gets put in their way, a few work to get over the obstacle. Most players work to find ways around it. Other players just give up playing. Sometimes that is the player's own decision. Sadly, many times it is the decision of the parent saying, "If you're not good enough to play at that level, we're just not going to do it."

For the last 2 years my wife and I have also been responsible for the soccer programs at our local indoor sports arena. It is with this involvement that I have become reconnected with many of my former players. Many of these players are now in college or members of the working community. They are playing with friends, friends-of-friends, co-workers, old teammates, and/or other acquaintances. They are wearing old shoes, old shin guards, and their teams have uniforms that are usually a blend of different T-shirts that somewhat resemble the same color. When the opposing team shows up in similarly colored shirts, they come to the front desk begging for a set of our old, half torn, different size scrimmage vests to wear during the game. They don't have alternate jerseys, warm-ups, or matching bags.

At the Arena we also maintain a "Player Classified" page on the website. We allow people who are looking for teams to enter information online. Then we display their information with the hope of joining players seeking teams, with teams seeking players. The page is always full. Many of these are players that once played very competitively, but now just want an opportunity to play. They'll take any team, in any league. They just want to play.

I find it interesting to observe the cyclical nature of the life of soccer players. The players start out at a young age, just playing for fun. Somewhere along the way they get caught up in which team has the best status, which has the best uniforms or equipment, and which goes to the best tournaments. If players or parents don't get what they want, many will give up playing. They give up the sport they love because their pride or their parents' pride is somehow hurt. The irony is that in a few more years, they too will likely be looking for a team on which to play. They might end up on our Players Classifieds, looking for a team that will allow them to participate again. They won't be concerned about uniforms or the division in which a team plays. They'll just want to play, for fun and for fitness.

Excluding professional players and college players, the reality is that soccer is most suited for youth players. They have friends that want to play. They have clubs and associations willing to organize their participation, provide fields and buy their uniforms.

They have parents willing to pay bills and drive them around. Most importantly, they have time. They don't have jobs or families to support. Soccer couldn't be more accessible and available. The table is laid out before them, and yet many choose to give it up because someone's pride won't allow them to continue.

In my 17 years of coaching I've only coached one player that has gone on to play professional soccer. Ironically, at the moment he probably has the lowest salary and least job security of any of his previous youth teammates that are working. I have coached many players that have gone to college to play soccer, but many of them decided not to play a full four years. At some point they decided that other commitments and obligations were more important. Maybe their classes were getting harder, or they needed to take an internship. Maybe they weren't playing very much and decided their time was better spent elsewhere.

After all is said and done, players return to the game, not to earn a living or to get their college tuition paid. They return to the game to don an old T-shirt and just play, to have fun, be with friends, and to stay fit. Ironically, those are probably the same reasons their parents signed them up for soccer when they were 4, or 6, or 8. When the dust settles, and the "fluff" of the game is burned away, the fact remains that soccer is a fun game to play.

So, why did I write this article?

If you have a son (or daughter) that plays competitive soccer, he will almost certainly have a rocky road. Maybe he won't get selected for the top team in their club or maybe he makes the top team, but doesn't get selected to the state ODP team. If he makes the ODP team, maybe he comes up short at the regional level. Maybe he won't get to play the position he likes, or that you like to see him play. Maybe he won't get the playing time you think he deserves. As a parent, don't let disappointments rob your child of his or her participation or jade the enjoyment of the game. Find the right level of play for your child. Encourage and support your child while still in the prime of their soccer career, when the opportunities are abundant and *real* obstacles are few. Remember, in the end the pot of gold is really just the opportunity to keep playing.