

How to choose a soccer club

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I am often asked about how parents of players 10 to 13 should choose the right soccer club for their child, so I thought I'd pen a summary of my thoughts on the subject. I don't pretend that this is the comprehensive guide on the matter because, ultimately parents know what is best for their children (at least that's the responsibility we've been given). But hopefully it provides some points of thought when making decisions about increased involvement with the game.

At this age, winning is not everything, in fact it's almost nothing.

I think the biggest error among parents trying to get their kids into the "best" system or program is that they automatically start looking to match play, tournaments won and that kind of thing. Competitive club soccer is full of parents pulling their kids from a team and moving year to year because of on-field results - even as young as U10 and U11. It's a side-effect of the USYSA Cup system that the only way for mom and dad to determine if Johnny is developing is to see if his team is winning matches or not. Parents want their children to play in the "best" tournaments and the only way to get into the "best" tournaments is to win tournaments, with the State and Regional cups being the ultimate determiner of this.

Now clearly you can see young age-group teams who show a lot of talent, but it's also clear that a good number of parents with limited background in the game resort to a knee-jerk of whether Johnny's team won the last game as a gauge of whether they're doing the right thing. I've just seen too many teams who win everything at a young age and then are nowhere to be found when they

are in the years that REALLY affect their future opportunities in the game. Similarly these youngest age groups too often are the scene for the ugliest of incidents, and I saw another one last weekend. I was watching a U17 tournament game and something blew up behind me at a U12 or 13 game. I'm not sure what happened, but by the time I started watching, parents were leading their children away in tears, another parent and a coach were screaming at each other and a lot of children were standing around with very bewildered looks on their faces. I'm going to take a leap of faith here and proclaim that this is NOT development.

So I'm saying that for those ages, don't even think about the winning - instead look to:

Qualifications of coaches

- a. Licensing and other education - what have they learned and are they interested in learning more.
- b. Soccer background - more valuable than licenses is what they have done in the game. They don't have to have been a top player, but you will want someone who has a broad background in the game and who basically eats, sleeps and breathes it (in some cases you will need to check out their stories)
- c. Enthusiasm - there are a lot of jaded youth soccer coaches out there. The system is tough, coaches don't get paid too well and it tends to take a lot out of you. Find out how much the coach enjoys and wants to be out there.

- d. intangibles - as a parent you are perhaps more qualified to judge this last one- does the coach's personality fit with your kid, is he a good communicator, are you comfortable with his character, etc. Be careful not to use this as an excuse to become a meddling parent, and of course you also run the risk of letting overprotective tendencies to take hold there, that'll ultimately be your decision. Any good program/coach is going to expect you to step aside and let them do their job, so you want to be comfortable going in.

Goal of the program

Does the program exist to make money, to win championships or to develop players? They will all say the third but this is not true of very many.

For players at the younger ages, you can best determine this in looking at the team's training setup. Are players being taught fundamental skills and how to play the game, or is all the focus on beating team X.

There are shortcuts to winning at the younger level, usually involving size, speed and strength. There's no crime to having big and fast players of course, and these elements are important to winning at any level, but the question to ask yourself is "would our playing style work if we were matched against a team as physically mature as ourselves?"

What is the club's approach to team vs. player development? Some say if a team would be totally affected by one player moving up to another age level, then it's time to move that player. If you find that hard to accept, you may want to consider your own approach to the youth game, is it about developing players or about winning matches now.

There's no question that there's some relationship between winning and development. I'm sure a coach could use "development" as an excuse for not being competitive. But you don't as a parent want to confuse "competitive" with "winning everything."

Ultimately as competitors we will want to start winning more and more. AT this web site I have made U14 the cutoff date for covering competitions. Some coaches tell me it should be more like U16 and I'm not without sympathy for that approach. Its clear training approaches and emphases for U14 players should be different than those at U17, and there often remains a question for some "just what are we developing these players for?" That may be another question for another article that is actually already in the works, but whatever gray exists for those upper teen years, I feel pretty confident about ages 10 to 13 and what we should be focusing on. Parents can do much worse than follow the above guidelines.

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