

Recreational Soccer Opportunities and Challenges

What are the Challenges?

Here are some broad thoughts to consider, both challenges and attributes, for a state office and DOC/TD dealing with recreational soccer.

Many young children start out in soccer. (It has been said that, "Soccer is the best beginning sport for children.") Soccer is a game, especially at the very young level, where all skill-levels of children can participate and have fun.

Many young children try many sports at a young age. Many young players (12 and younger) are in many activities and may jump from one to another during the year or may be involved in multiple activities at the same time. (To a degree, this is a good thing.) Playing team sports helps to instill the importance of teamwork and working together that is vital in adult life.

Almost every player and parent will start out in recreational soccer. Every year/season recreational soccer experiences an influx of first-time players, parents experiencing youth sports for the first time, and first-time, untrained, volunteer coaches. (What a challenge and opportunity!) Virtually every recreational coach will be an unpaid parent volunteer. Most of your youngest age-group coaches will be first-time coaches, and many may have little or no soccer experience and no coaching experience.

Each year there are new administrators with little or no experience or training taking charge of recreational soccer programs. Volunteers run recreational clubs, if not YMCA or Parks and Recreation programs. Most of these volunteers may have no background in youth sports, education, or child development.

What are the Risks?

Many young kids drop out of all team sports because of an "initial bad experience."

Our youngest age-group players are many times taught by untrained, first-time coaches which is a contributing factor to that "initial bad experience." Many times, the people taking care of the youngest age groups are the least experienced. According to a study by Martens, about half of youth sport coaches will drop out of coaching within a year.

Many volunteer coaches are coaching their own children. Many times these children are "would-be stars" in the eyes of their parents. Equal treatment may not happen as a result. Pressure to meet expectations may be intense. Many of the volunteer coaches and their child will move to competitive if the opportunity is there. Losses of recreational coaches tend to occur when kids move to U10 and U12. As volunteers move with their kids to competitive soccer clubs, the recreational clubs lose many of their earlier energetic volunteer administrators and support.

As a player progresses in age, the game becomes more complex. Many volunteer recreational coaches drop out and potential coaches who may not have coached in the past are hesitant to step forward because of this increased complexity.

Few recreational programs have a director of coaching. Those programs that do many times have a director of coaching who is not well-trained and grounded in training young players or new coaches.

Many of the volunteer coaches and administrators in recreational soccer are based in and use the professional model (The Power and Performance Model). The Power and Performance Model or the Professional Model is prevalent in youth sports. One prime example is the Little League World Series.

What Are the Opportunities?

The first level of professionals in youth sports and coaching may be found in the state youth soccer office. The state office and State DOC/TD must be proactive in providing the assistance and guidance recreational soccer needs.

The new volunteer coaches at the youngest age group are eager for guidance and training.

Most of the new soccer parents in the youngest age group are very protective of their young children and are receptive to the concepts of the pleasure and participation model for this age group. (Unfortunately, this may be a brief window-of-opportunity until the power and performance model begins to kick in!)