

Opinion: How Soccer Parents Can Avoid the Trap of “The Next Big Thing”

I have spent 27 years in the game of soccer playing at all levels – youth, high school, college and professional – and am now a head coach at the youth and college levels. Recently, I have observed some serious issues in the landscape of American youth soccer that need to be addressed. I have three children and they will most likely all play soccer. I know there is an epidemic growing that coincides with our American “give me options at every turn” lifestyle, and with the constant quest for “the next best thing,” but we can do something about it.

I grew up in Pensacola, Florida and played soccer there until I graduated high school in 1995. This was back when your age group was your club, and we were the West Florida Hurricanes. Our rivals were Gulf Breeze -- which was just across the bridge over the Pensacola Bay from us -- Mobile, Panama City and Tallahassee. I stayed with the Hurricanes until I was a U-17 player, when I joined a team out of Tallahassee, North F.C. North F.C. was a TEAM (not a club) formed by PLAYERS from Pensacola, Tallahassee, Panama City, and Jacksonville who played together on the State ODP team. The team formed to counter the trend of South Florida teams pulling players from all over South Florida while players from the North all played with their teams from their hometown. We won the Florida State Cup in 1995 and played through to the regional finals before getting knocked out.

I fondly remember intense games and tournaments against all those rivals when I was a kid. The main reason I remember that was because most of the players stayed on the same teams because that is what you did: You played for your local team. We had the same group of players from U-10-through U-17. We all went to the same birthday parties and soccer camps. Eventually, we were in the same Cotillion classes and went to the same high school parties. All of the players knew what was going on in each other’s lives in addition to the on-field drama associated with preseason and postseason workouts and winning and losing tournaments. We learned how to live as a group and play as a group.

Well, those days are gone, and along with them our old-school soccer culture. I can speak specifically of metropolitan Atlanta in that respect. Our children will not have the opportunity to remember matchups and rivalries developed over years because everyone’s roster changes drastically from year to year.

Let me tell you why: It is because there is an epidemic of parents and youth players looking for “the next best thing.” You see it day in and day out at the club level during tryout time. Parents and players frantically try to line up what they think is a better situation for the coming season – the one that might give them a chance to make R3PL or get more looks from college scouts or just bragging rights with the other parents waiting in the school carpool lane. And many people’s moral compasses, and their ability to see the big picture, go right out the window.

Overzealous parents and coaches sell the opportunities that their club can offer over other clubs. They offer enticements like the big-name tournaments they will attend and their high-powered coaching staff (which you may or may not get because the coaching turnover is almost as high as the roster turnover). So every year during tryout time, players and parents are looking for “the next best thing.” It resembles a zoo: players go to three different tryouts on three different nights while parents set up different tryout times so they can showcase their kids. The kids are stressed, the parents are stressed and people often do some unethical things under the guise of “doing what is best for their children”.

For parents who play these games, allow me to make an observation: you are doing your children a disservice.

First, you are putting an undue amount of stress on your child. The game of soccer should be fun. It should be about working together and overcoming obstacles as a team.

Second, you are creating an environment where your children are always looking for that “next best thing.” Instead of being happy where they are, facing the challenges and learning from that environment, you are swapping your kids around before they get a chance to learn anything.

In my opinion, children in this prolonged environment could, later in life, learn to look for new jobs once a year in lieu of mastering one. They might change careers four and five times because one company offers an extra weekend of vacation or another doesn't offer immediate advancement. Worse still, they may soon start to look for different boyfriends and girlfriends or, perhaps, wives or husbands, because one is better looking or has more money. These outcomes may seem extreme but they should also come with a measure of credence: if the child is taught the grass is always greener on the other side through their youth soccer experiences, what prevents them from taking the same tract in more impactful life decisions?

Also, what about the time-tested, all important quality of *loyalty* that gets thrown out the window as we SHOP for a better deal for our children's soccer playing experience. Teaching children loyalty will ultimately far outweigh the extra showcase that the new club is offering.

Finally, when you drag your kid from team to team, you are depriving them of fond long-lasting memories of tight friendships – and intense rivalries -- that are some big reasons why they will love the sport for a lifetime.

I recommend you do a few things. Play with your local club. The time you save by not having to make a crazy, 90-minute commute to be on the team that's "the next big thing" is valuable time that you can spend as a family. Or it will give your child an opportunity to eat at home instead of forcing down fast food and focusing on doing homework at home instead of distractedly doing it in the car.

Don't believe that you're missing out by sticking with your current club. There are a lot of good coaches out there. The things that you should be concerned about when it comes where to play are simple: Is the coach knowledgeable about the sport? Is your child learning? Is your child being treated with respect?

If a child is not being challenged, that is a good time to leave. But don't leave just because your child is not getting enough playing time. Let your child deal with the situation. They will be a better person for learning how to deal with that adversity. And don't buy into that old line that "If our U-14 team doesn't get into the Upper Saskatchewan Mid-Winter Snow Frolic College Showcase, he/she won't get the looks from scouts and will never play in college." At the U-17 and U-18 divisions, it might be helpful for teams in the top divisions to attend some showcases, but having your child work the Internet and take a proactive approach in contacting college coaches about his interest in their school – and letting them get to know him -- will get your kid just as far.

Your son or daughter will most likely end up at the level of soccer that they deserve based on how much time *they* put into the game, which is a strong contrast to the belief that a coach or an environment will get you where you need to go.

I'm not denying the fact that there are times to change clubs, but one should strongly consider the impact that making that change will have on your child before taking that step. As often as not, the "next best thing" is where your child is now.

So think twice the next time the team manager has a plot to take half the team to the cross-city rival because he's confident they'll end up as the best team in the state. I honestly would rather that my three kids be on an average team with integrity than a state championship team without it! And, as a college coach, I look for that kind of character in prospective recruits.

Let us all in the soccer community grow a garden of young players that are loyal and play with integrity and have fond memories of rivalries, not ones with a lot of trophies and blurry images of teammates.

Jon Akin is the Head Men's Coach at Oglethorpe University and a coach at the Roswell Soccer Club.