

An open letter to U9/U10 parents

SYSO has a number of priorities to satisfy when it comes to making team determinations but the overriding priority has to be interests of the children who participate in the program set within the context of their ongoing soccer development and SYSO program goals.

Win/loss doesn't necessarily equate to success.

The US Youth Soccer Association, Connecticut Junior Soccer Association and South Central District coaching priorities for the younger age groups are all concerned with the development of the 'game within the child' and not the building of a 'power-house' team. For example all U9/U10 tournaments offer only participation awards to young players and not championship trophies, in fact, many tournaments do not even record scores on their websites for these age brackets. The district leagues actually punish our U9/U10 teams for 'running up the score' by reducing their home games the following season. At this age winning/losing is not as important to your child as the 'ice-cream' after the game. A better measure of success, over the season, is by what percentage did each player improve and how many positions on the field did he/she get to try. Developing each player individually will naturally make the team, or any team they go on to play for, better.

Why break up a successful team?

Remember the development of the individual player is seen to be more important to us, at SYSO and elsewhere, for these younger age groups. It is actually better for the moral of the kids (and also the parents), as a whole, at this age for us (SYSO) to have two '.500' teams rather than one who mostly wins and another who mostly loses. A team winning all of their games is, in reality, playing opponents who are not going to force them to 'raise their game', which will in turn stifle player development and reduce the number of 'coach-able moments'. What motivates a child to listen and learn if they win all of their games, and by empirical reasoning, know enough already?

Past experience has also shown us that a player who looked relatively good at age 9 or 10 can be very average at 12 or 13 (and vice-versa of course). So even if this team was kept together this year it would likely be broken up later on by other external factors. The fact that the kids are used to this because it happens to them at the end of every school year as they get their new class room assignments, is something we should remember.

Ongoing development - splitting teams by school grade.

This has proved fundamentally important as the children get near to middle/high school age (U13/U14). Due to Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference (CIAC) rules, players are not allowed to play for their SYSO Travel team and High School team during the Fall (High School) soccer season. If SYSO persisted with a mixed grade travel team

at the U14 level the 7th/8th graders who relied on 9th graders for half of their travel team would not have sufficient numbers to field a travel team in the Fall.

However, this is obviously not the reason this is done at the U10 level. In this case, the grade split simply provides an external (none ability related classification) for separating out two groups of children removing the 'A' team/'B' team inference from everyone's minds. Because once again, as experience has shown, this years 'A' team player might be next years 'B' team player (and vice versa).

Ongoing development – team balancing.

Experience has shown over the years that balancing ability across two younger developmental teams (and all of our U9/U10 teams are considered to be in this developmental category) leads to a measured improvement in more players over time. For instance, if you pepper a team with a group of players who are more accomplished than some of the others, those who may be less gifted seem to imitate them remarkably quickly. Also this approach does not appear to negatively impact the better players (unless they become too win focused).

Why take everybody who signs up?

While SYSO conducts tryouts for the reasons everyone imagines i.e. to select players who have the potential to develop in to the travel players of the future, it should be understood that the key words here are 'potential' and 'develop' and this encompasses children of many levels of ability. There are no finished products taken at the U9/U10 age group. Set against this backdrop it follows that we would take many more kids than we would reject. In fact we at SYSO have a policy of ensuring the U9/U10 age groups are as INCLUSIVE as possible, preferring to take a chance on someone developing to their full potential rather than denying them any chance to do so.

We will often try to balance the player numbers between multiple teams in an attempt to give everyone a good chance of maximum playing time and to make sure each team is sufficiently staffed.

Over the last few years this has resulted in Shelton U9/U10 teams having between 10 and 14 players. However in years where there are limited numbers of signups we have chosen to recruit additional recreation players for, say, a second team, rather than cut a large number of players.

When does 10 plus 10 equal 11?

This occurs when two U10 teams are combined to form a U11 team. If we have two typical U10 roster sizes of between 10 and 14 players we will likely have between 20 and 28 players to form a U11 team the following year. Given that we may have some dropping out and others signing up for the first time, experience has shown that this approach results in a good chance of a competitive and somewhat experienced U11 team.

What are we really striving for ?

We must always try to balance our goals for our children with their desires, happiness and, to a large degree, reality. We have a duty as parents to keep an overriding sense of perspective on our children's involvement in youth sports. Many of our younger travel players may not reach the standard required even to play soccer in High School for instance, however most of our older players do. There are many ex-SYSO travel players currently playing soccer at the college level and many in our system at the moment that will do if they stick with it.

A soccer player is not made in a year, but over many years of controlled development usually playing on many teams for many coaches.

In conclusion, please try to keep that overriding sense of balance and perspective that will enable your child to enjoy their soccer experience whatever team they are playing on in the future.

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