



just 4 soccer parents

**THE TEN THINGS OTHER PARENTS WANT
YOU TO KNOW ABOUT CLUB SOCCER**



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About This Report

I was actively involved in youth soccer at both the recreational and competitive level for 15 years. I started as a dad coach when my oldest son, at the age of four, began to play recreational soccer. As I became more involved in the sport I returned to playing, attained a State D level coaching license and began to work for my local soccer club as a paid coach. During this time I created and managed a program for players who were interested in playing competitive soccer but were too young to join a club team. I ran the program first as an independent and then as part of several local soccer clubs until I retired as a soccer coach.

When I thought about creating this report I considered basing it on my experience, but I came to realize that the parents I worked with had a very wide range of experience with competitive soccer. Instead of depending on one person's story, I went back to the parents I had met over the years and asked them to share their experiences. Specifically I asked them 'what would you want other parents to know?' Their responses became the basis for this report.

About the Terms Used

The terms competitive, select, and club soccer are used interchangeably throughout this report. They refer to soccer teams that are formed by a player selection process in which the players try out for the team. Anyone is welcome to tryout, but only a team's worth of players are ultimately selected. This is in contrast to recreational soccer where players sign up to play with a league and are assigned to a team. Anyone is welcome to sign up and everyone gets on a team as long as the league has the space to accommodate them.



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Things to Know Before You Start

First a little background on competitive youth soccer. Competitive youth soccer has undergone dramatic growth in the United States since the early 1980s. Players usually begin playing soccer in recreational leagues for all the reasons that kids try anything new. Over time some players become more adept and more skilled in the sport and more passionate about soccer. Players seeking a more challenging environment can then move on to competitive soccer. The age at which youth soccer associations permit competitive play varies somewhat around the United States but is typically at age ten or eleven. The primary characteristic of competitive teams is that players are selected to join. Generally this is done through a tryout process where players are assessed at organized sessions and invited to join a team. Competitive youth soccer teams play in their own leagues. Although any group of players can form a team and play competitive soccer, maintaining an independent team is difficult as players move in and out of the sport. As a consequence most competitive teams are formed by clubs. A club is simply a collection of soccer teams of various ages and genders that share a common name. The club structure is very much free market based. The restrictions around belonging to a club beyond the ability of a player are only limited by the time and money that parents are willing to spend. This free market approach is largely unique to the United States. In most areas of the world competitive soccer is organized more geographically around professional clubs or government entities.

In the beginning clubs promoted themselves and invited players to tryouts only a few weeks before the actual event. As interest in soccer grew so did the player pool and club soccer became a more competitive business. In order for clubs to promote themselves and to develop a pool of future players, clubs began to hold organized activities for players who were not yet old enough to play on a club team. These organized activities take the form of skills sessions and soccer camps. Clubs may also have more continuous programs which are referred to as pre-select programs, development programs, or soccer academies. These continuous programs typically combine training session and team play into a package plan. If you and your child are seriously considering competitive soccer, then it is



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important to participate in these activities prior to tryouts. This time can be used to assess the various club and coach options and to gauge your child's interest and fit with a team.

If you are determined to find a team, plan to try out for several at different competitive levels and be prepared to be very busy during tryout time. The tryout process may be spread over a week or more and you may need to attend several sessions for each team before you are finished. This can involve a lot of time and driving.



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1 - Know the Clubs

The reality of competitive youth soccer is that it has become a business. It is common for larger clubs to have a paid staff, to own or lease practice fields and facilities, and to run large, profitable tournaments. Even the smaller clubs will have paid coaches. It is important to learn about the clubs in your area. Clubs promote themselves so often they will find you either by handing out or posing flyers at local soccer facilities. If you want to search for options can contact your local soccer association. Competitive teams, just like recreational teams, are registered with the local association and the registrar or staff can provide information.

The larger clubs will often have more than one team in each age group. These teams can be formed on a geographical basis so that the players are all from the same area. These teams can also be formed by competitive level along the lines of a varsity and junior varsity model. If the teams are formed by competitive level, it is important to understand the relationship between the teams. The two can be closely coordinated with players moving up or down between the teams based on where the player is in their development process. In other cases the club's philosophy may be to look primarily at players from outside the club when an opening occurs on the first team. Other parents urge caution in this area. It is important to understand if you will be treated as part of the extended family or if you will be considered primarily as a revenue source.

Turnover can be high on competitive teams. Some players will decide this is not for them, coaches will decide that players are not a good fit and release them from the team, families move away, and players will move on looking for a better team or a better situation. A change of 4 – 6 players a year is not unusual for a team of 16. The club landscape also changes from year to year. Clubs can fold up and clubs can merge with other clubs. Be aware of this before you buy a lot of spirit wear or club specific items.

There are many levels of competitive league play. Ask about the various league options in your area and understand the relative level of play for each of these. You will want to do the best you can to match your child's current level of skill and ability with the league where his or her team will play. From a development standpoint, the ideal spot is around the middle of



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the pack. If a team is dominant in their league, then they will not be regularly challenged to improve. On the other side, if a team is consistently overmatched, the players can become discouraged and lose confidence. Find out where other teams from a club you are considering typically play and how they generally perform against the competition in their league.

The best advice is to be aware that club soccer is a business and you are best off to develop a relationship with a club with the same expectations you have for any business relationship i.e. the relationship should be mutually beneficial, the business can fail or be bought, the employees you deal with may leave, etc.

Key Questions:

- Does the club form multiple teams in each age group?
- If there are multiple teams, what is the club's reason for having multiple teams?
- How many players return to their team each year?

What Other Parents Have to Say:

'The Clubs are designed for Club profitability and positive exposure.'

'...well, as I said in the beginning, there's a lot of politicking going on in club soccer. We have experienced some dishonesty from people we thought we could trust, but overall, we have been thrilled to be part of club soccer. For the most part, it's good kids playing a wholesome sport, and nice parents cheering on the sidelines.'

2 - Know the Coach

Almost all the parents identified this as a very critical part of the experience. Parents who found the coach to be open and candid and who modeled the behaviors they valued were generally pleased with the experience regardless of their child's role on the team. Those parents who



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found the coach to be deceptive, unavailable, unwilling to talk, or immature in their management of players and parents had a lot to say about their disappointment with the competitive soccer experience. Take the time to speak with the coach either before or during tryouts. Some coaches are more accessible than others. The coach may be willing to speak with parents at anytime. The coach may establish specific times to talk or specific times when they are not available, such as before games and practices. Find out how accessible your child's coach will be to you throughout the year. Understand their views on playing time, discipline, positions. Understand their expectations around practices, tournaments, and off season activities. Academic demands can create conflicts with soccer practices on school nights. Special school events and projects can create conflicts on weekends. With older players, there may be weekend conflicts with College SATs and ACTs. Discuss these with the coach beforehand so that he understands your priorities and you understand how he views time that is missed for academic activities.

Share your goals for competitive soccer. Make sure the coach understands what you consider a successful experience. Carefully evaluate the coach's response. Listen with your heart to hear what is really being communicated and avoid the trap of listening for what you want to hear. Watch how the coach runs practice sessions. Are you satisfied with the level of organization, do the players seem to be having fun, are they active and moving and not standing in line waiting a turn, when the coach gives instructions are they clear and specific? Ask other parents about the coach. Try to locate parents whose child has played for the coach in the past. If you are in tryouts and the coach seems to be delaying on making a decision about your child, this probably means that he or she considers your child an OK player, but is hoping to find better. This is a good sign that it is time to look elsewhere.

Key Questions:

- How well does the coach communicate with the players?
- How accessible is the coach to the parents?
- What have you learned about the coach from other parents whose child has played for him or her on other teams?



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What Other Parents Have to Say:

'Never be afraid to ask the coach about your kid.'

'Avoid coaches who claim to develop but past experience shows they play only their biggest and best players.'

'What you are looking for is a coach that has a balanced perspective, so that while you're trying to win he/she still works on developing the individual players and the team, doesn't sacrifice integrity, and remembers the players are children that are in this primarily for fun. It is very important to check out the coach in action and to ask around as much as possible. You also want to make sure the coach is qualified - there are a lot of hacks out there. A coach that does not have a balanced perspective, will be abusive to kids, not play all his players, and generally not be someone you'd want your kid around. So do your homework and choose wisely, so that soccer can be a positive experience for your child.'

3 - Know the Expectations and Commitments

The range of expectations varies widely from club to club and team to team. At the upper end of the range, teams will practice 3 times or more a week in addition to scrimmages and games. Players may be expected to participate in indoor play or other activities between seasons. Be sure to find out what the 'norm' will be for the team you are considering. A second point to be clear on is tournaments. How many does the team intend to attend and where are the tournaments played? The variability on this is high. Some teams will play in only a few local tournaments while others will plan to play in more, some of which may require significant travel. The top tournaments in the country are played in locations such as Albuquerque NM, Dallas TX, Orlando FL, San Diego CA, Raleigh NC, and Washington DC. Some teams will even travel overseas. Travel tournaments can be a significant financial and time commitment, so understand what the team expects and how this relates to what you are willing to do.

It is also important to ask about how the team uses guest players at tournaments. Most tournaments will permit teams to bring a number, usually



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three, players as guests. These are players from other teams. From a practical standpoint it is desirable to bring a full roster when attending as tournaments involve a lot of games in a short time period. Fatigue and minor injuries can be significant factors. Allowing players who are overtired or have minor strains and pulls is a set up for a serious injury. If the coach is taking guest players in place of regular players who are not participating in the tournament, it may have little impact on your child's playing time. If your coach uses guest players to strengthen the team to do well in the tournament or to look at potential new players for the team, this may significantly cut into our child's playing time at the tournament.

The level of commitment in competitive youth soccer is significant. Many parents state that at times it can be almost overwhelming. Members of competitive teams tend to be more geographically dispersed than recreation teams. Practices are more frequent than recreational soccer and drive times are longer. In addition to the regular seasons there may be pre and post tournaments. In some cases there may be skills or conditioning sessions in addition to practice. Games can be geographically dispersed as well. In the large metropolitan areas you may be playing at different fields at different times or at more remote fields for the entire season. Competitive teams from areas without the participation levels to support a local league may find themselves driving considerable distance for every game. With the driving time, you can expect to spend 15 -20 hours a week on soccer. Practices and games can overlap with normal work hours so be prepared to flex your schedule.

Teams will do fundraisers to help offset the dollar costs of the program. The downside is that this will increase the time investment on your part. Find out what the expectations are around fundraising, specifically how often and what requirements are there for your participation.

Key Questions:

- How often does the team practice?
- Are players expected to participate in training or playing activities between seasons?
- How many tournaments does the team plan to attend?



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- How will you manage the time requirements?
- What are your carpool options?

What Other Parents Have to Say:

'Soccer parents must be prepared to drop anything and everything at a moment's notice to be somewhere five to fifty or more miles away, especially during try-out seasons. You live in your car. Your other, non-athletic children tell your relatives, "You have no idea what it's like around here." Sit-down dinners are rare, and special.'

'Holidays are not always yours because of tournaments'

'Without select soccer, we would have about 50% more free time.'

4 - Know the Cost

The cost of competitive soccer varies. With large clubs and paid coaches the team fees can run in the \$1000 - \$2500 per year range. It is very important to know what is, and what is not, included in your team fee. For example, are there additional uniform costs? Does the team buy new uniforms every year or can you expect to use the same uniform for several years? Teams may include a certain number of tournaments in their basic fee. Additional tournaments can be incremental expenses. If the team travels, find out if there are additional costs that you may have to cover. For example, is the team expected to cover the cost of the coach's travel? If so, what guidelines are in place for this expense? Are there additional skills or conditioning sessions that your player is expected to attend and for which you have to pay? Several parents in the survey mentioned the cost of shoes. Your player will go thru shoes at the rate of two to four pairs a year at a cost of \$60 a pair and up.

Fundraising opportunities may be available. Some teams will pool the money earned against general team expenses, others will manage sub accounts so that you get the direct benefit of your fundraising efforts. Be sure to understand how your team will manage fundraising.



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Clubs or teams may have scholarship money available on a need basis so this can be an option to explore. Payment plans can be important if you want to manage the timing of your expenses. Some clubs offer a discount for families with more than one child playing with the club. If you anticipate other siblings will also pursue competitive soccer then find out if this is an option for you.

Key Questions:

- What is included in the club fees?
- What are the travel expenses?

What Other Parents Have to Say:

'If Money is an issue then do not play Select.'

5 - Know the Other Parents

Competitive soccer is a significant time commitment. Between practices, games, and tournaments you will spend a lot of time with the other parents. Try to get to know the other parents before you join a team. At the very least, get to know them soon after you join. If you all stay with the team for an extended time they are going to become a large part of your social life. It is worthwhile to understand their goals and expectations for competitive soccer. Carpooling, dinner co-ops, and other forms of parental collaboration can make a big difference to the amount of your personal time that will be required so developing relationships with the other parents is important. There will likely be opportunities to volunteer for fund raisers, special events, tournament arrangements, etc. This can be a good opportunity to become more involved with the other parents as well as the coach and club.

Key Questions:

- How comfortable are you with the other parents?
- Are their expectations and goals similar to yours?



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What Other Parents Have to Say:

'she (the daughter) and my family have made wonderful relationships and friendships through select soccer.....'

'The impact has been positive overall. Soccer is a family pastime for us. Our three kids all play and I coach my daughter's recreation team. There is a real family atmosphere among the parents on the sidelines, and many of our past and current fellow soccer parents have become our friends.'

'I would let new parents know just to stay "neutral" by not getting involved in all the gossip and political elements.'

'I would want a new parent to know that there are a lot of politics, a lot of gossip, a lot of rumors, and a lot of trash talk floating around the club soccer world, and most of it is among the parents.'

'Avoid teams with parents that will move their kids every year in search of a better team.'

6 - Know Your Child

This is critically important. It is important to understand your child and to have a realistic view of them. Think about their motivation. Do they live and breathe soccer? Are they mostly interested because their best friend wants to join a team? Players develop at different rates. In fact they don't develop at a uniform pace. Progress often occurs in bursts that are separated by extended periods of steady performance. From a development standpoint, players will do best when they are at a skill and motivation level that matches that of the team. Leading the team too much will reduce the challenge and fun of playing. Lagging the team too much can result in minimal playing time and erosion of confidence. Where are they in their development as a soccer player? How well does your child fit with the team? They will be spending a lot of time with the other players over a year and it is important to consider the match. Think about skill and playing ability. Is your child on the high end or the low end of the team? It is very difficult to



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maintain perspective when dealing with our own children. Ask others that you trust for their candid opinions. Take a very realistic look at where your child is as a player and pick a team or league that will be a good match for them today.

Key Questions:

- What makes soccer fun for your child?
- What will they have to give up if they play club soccer?

What Other Parents Have to Say:

'To choose a team that fits their child. Make sure there are friends on the team, or when they tryout they like the teammates, especially early on.'

'Some kids are fully developed by twelve or thirteen. Your child just may not hit his stride until much later.'

'It is what makes our son tick. He loves competition. He likes the environment of select soccer. It is very challenging for him, and that is what drives our son.'

'Our daughter loves soccer more than anything.... She never complains about going to practice, and her heart is broken if she has to miss a game'.

'My son has developed into a confident member of a team who understands the commitment that each member brings to the total team package. He has a strong bond with his teammates on and off the field, and the experience has brought a certain discipline, sensitivity, drive, focus and sense of accomplishment to his everyday life'.

7 - Know About Playing Time

The philosophy on playing time will vary from club to club and even from coach to coach within a club. In some cases the general rule will be to give every player 50% playing time. While this is a league rule in most recreational leagues, it is rarely a rule for competitive leagues. Teams with more focus on player development are more likely to balance playing time.



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Teams with more emphasis on winning are more likely to provide playing time in whatever fashion best fits the current situation. Among younger teams with a focus on winning games, there is a bias for big and fast players. This is because speed and size will offset weakness in skills and tactics. You will want to consider how this factors into playing time and what the coach considers the ideal player. This issue, more than any other, becomes difficult when expectations are not met. Therefore playing time is an important discussion to have with a coach before you commit to the team. Understand how playing time is viewed and where the coach anticipates your child fits. Players develop at different rates over the course of a season and the needs of the team evolve as well. As a consequence, where your player stands can change over the course of a season. Decide if both you and your child will enjoy the experience even if your player gets minimal playing time.

Key Questions:

- What is the coach's approach to playing time?
- What role on the team does the coach see for your child?

What Other Parents Have to Say:

'Make certain your child is truly good enough for the team he's trying out for. If he will be sitting the bench, find another team perhaps at his skill level.'

8 - Know the Impact on Your Family

All the time and money committed to competitive soccer is all about one child. What if you have several? What about the impact on time as a couple? If you have more than one child playing, the commitment will increase proportionally. The parents who were most satisfied with the experience reported that soccer was a family activity that they all enjoyed participating in together. Having other children with different interests can become a real challenge to manage. Some parents reported that siblings resented the amount of time and attention spent on the soccer player.



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Soccer practices can be any night of the week and games can be at any time both during the week and on weekends. This may be in conflict with your religious beliefs and practices so consider how you will handle the conflicts. If you have some times that you will not be able to participate in soccer, be sure to discuss these with the coach before you commit.

With practices and games going on during the week, maintaining a regular meal schedule and having time to prepare meals can be difficult. Consider what strategies you can develop and what compromises you are willing to make.

Key Questions:

- What adjustments will you have to make?
- What impact will this have on other children in the family?

What Other Parents Have to Say:

'It requires a tremendous commitment be made by the entire family, including siblings. Many other activities including family vacations and holidays such as Thanksgiving with the family must be postponed or cancelled due to soccer commitments. I can't stress enough how important it is that the entire family enjoy all of the activities that surround soccer i.e., away tournaments, games, practices, because otherwise it will be a very big negative on the entire family.'

'I never was the type to go through drive throughs to eat but we are king of the drive through now because soccer practice conflicts with dinner time'.

'I feel soccer has had a great impact on our family. We have grown closer as a family and enjoy watching and participating with other families within our team'.

'We do not have any children in a select program. We were given all the information allowed prior to open try-outs and interviewed our network of soccer friends and co-workers. For us it boiled down to this: select soccer looked to be a really wonderful experience for my daughter if we were happy to center their lives around it. If both parents work, if there are other



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siblings not in soccer or if either the parents or siblings have other interests that require time or schedule commitments then a commitment to a select program starts out as a chore and not fun.'

9 - Know Yourself

This section may well be the most important. Consider where you are as you make this commitment. Think about how closely you are tied to the outcomes. If your sense of success as a parent is going to go up and down with your child's success on the soccer field, then you are likely to be in for a long and bumpy ride. If you are doing this in support of your child or as part of a family commitment, consider how you will respond to the ups and downs of your child's experience. Reflect on the commitment of time and money that is involved and consider if this is something you are prepared to do without resentment. Are you going to be looking forward to that next weekend tournament or will you be hoping it gets rained out? If it is important to you that your child plays on a highly competitive and winning team, recognize this and be very straight forward about the value you place on finding a team that fits this model. If it is important to you that your child plays a particular position, recognize this and be very straight forward with the coach when looking for a team.

Key Questions:

- Will I resent the time commitment?
- Is my self image tied to how well my child does?
- Am I doing this for myself or my child?

What Other Parents Have to Say:

'I would tell other parents to chill out and not worry about things that may or may never happen. The kids that usually play select love soccer and they aren't worried about what happens next and you shouldn't either.'

'We have hired a babysitter to look after our son on some weekends, as we take a break ourselves'.



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10 - Know Your Goals

Most parents report that they were drawn into competitive soccer by their child's interest and that is a good starting point. However, raising a child involves a lot of important things so it is vital to consider not just your goals for soccer, but the overall goals and values that you have for being a parent. Take the time to consider how the time spent with soccer fits with other opportunities. Think about what balance you want to maintain for your child and how you will achieve this while handling the demands of competitive soccer.

Be very cautious if you are looking at competitive soccer as an investment that will pay off with a college scholarship. The ratio of college scholarships to competitive soccer players is pretty low. It is better for girls since the number of scholarships is higher than for boys where college football takes a large slice of the scholarship pie. Most players join competitive soccer between 10 and 12 years old. At this point, it is way too early to predict their future abilities. The actual physical abilities of a player will not become clear until after puberty. Even if your child appears to be a truly gifted athlete, it is too soon to know if soccer will remain his or her sport of choice.

Key Questions:

- What would be the perfect arrangement?
- How does competitive soccer fit with the other goals I have for my child?

What Other Parents Have to Say:

'We wanted our son to be able to play other sports. So it was important to us not to be part of a "hard core" soccer only team, at an early age. We wanted to be part of a team that developed the players, demanded sportsmanship, wanted to win & learned from 'losing.



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'The negative aspects are the fact that homework is very hard to get done. He has no time for friends, and it is very hard to have him integrate with our family on weekends, as he is always competing.'