

Why They Play, Why They Quit

Players have good reasons but they may not be what you think

By Douglas Barnes and Len Oliver

The soccer revolution among America's youth and local communities, which began with the "Pele era" in the mid-1970s, has now come to every community in the land.

We have witnessed the phenomenal growth of the sport with 8.5 million young players, 3.5 million of them registered with U.S. Youth Soccer through affiliated local leagues. Coupled with the increasing popularity of the U.S. men's and women's national teams; the World Cups; the U.S. Olympic teams; the development of MLS, WUSA and other professional leagues and increased media recognition, youth soccer is today the sport of choice in most young families.

Despite the vast numbers playing soccer, participation rates in the early teen years in almost all leagues across the country experience a significant downturn.

We accept this downturn as natural, yet behind the fall in participation in youth soccer there are some factors that few previous studies have tried to document. The impression from these studies can be summed up by the following: "Soccer is no longer interesting." "Soccer is no longer fun." "I'm not learning anything new." "My coach doesn't teach skills." "I wanted to participate in other non-school activities." Pre-teens' and teenagers' lives also are busier and their interests more diverse and less "parent-driven" than in their younger years. The transition away from participation in soccer may also be in some way due to the way in which our youth soccer programs are structured.

We in soccer usually accept these explanations without question and without considering policies leagues and clubs could adopt to counteract this trend. Few studies are available on why young players stay and quit soccer to guide these policies. A study by the DC Stoddert League is one of the first in the soccer world to systematically examine the reasons for participation in recreational soccer. It is based on extended interviews with a random sample of 7 percent of all present and former players aged 12-15 who participated for at least one season between the years 1998 and 2001 in the DC Stoddert Soccer League in Washington, D.C.

DCSSL registers 5,300 recreational and travel players, drawing most of its participants from Washington, D.C., and adjacent Maryland counties. Participation

patterns in DCSSL follow the national trend. Older divisions have fewer teams, forcing them to collapse age groups. The youngest and oldest groups included in this study ([Figure 1](#)) point to a higher number of male players participating in the earlier seasons compared to females, but their numbers drop much more sharply in the early teen years. Male and female participation is similar in older age groups. Female participation increases within the U-12 group may have been due to the influences of the 1999 Women's World Cup. Given the general decline in participation in the early teens, DCSSL offers an ideal setting to examine reasons for participation decline in recreational soccer.

Competition from other sports

Many soccer officials believe that participation in other sports has a significant negative impact on participation in soccer. The conflict between baseball and soccer among boys aged 9-12 accounts in part for this perception. However, our results appear to contradict this belief.

Of the current and former DCSSL recreational players, approximately one-half engaged in another sport besides soccer ([See Table 1](#)), primarily baseball and basketball, followed by tennis and lacrosse. Basketball does not compete seasonally with soccer. Each of these sports draws some recreational soccer players, but the percentages are fairly low. One-fourth of the current male players are playing baseball, compared to less than one-fifth of former players, indicating that male players in these age groups want to play both sports. The conclusion is that baseball and soccer coaches should seek more cooperation.

Participation of female players in other sports differs from males. Most do not play two sports simultaneously. With the exception of basketball, females participating in another sport dropped recreational soccer. Most participated in swimming, tennis, and lacrosse, but again the number of players is fairly small. Lacrosse seems to be the one sport that provides the most competition for recreational soccer players, both male and female, probably attributed to the similarities to soccer's dynamics and positioning.

In a key finding, the study shows that close to 68 percent of the former recreational players (63% male and 74% female) still play some form of soccer for their school teams, for travel teams, or in pickup games ([Table 2](#)). They didn't drop out of soccer, as most participation studies suggest; they simply continued soccer in another form. In fact, mainly responsible for drawing players from the recreational league is the combination of school and to a lesser extent travel soccer.

On the female side, one out of every two current female DCSSL recreational players also plays on her school team, an extremely high ratio. Boys are somewhat less likely than girls to play for their school teams. DCSSL and other youth soccer leagues seem important in the development of players, and especially female players, for school soccer teams. We can safely conclude that more schools have teams, due in great part to the success of club soccer.

Recreational soccer is not so much in competition with other sports and activities in the early teens, it contends against other forms of soccer participation. Players learn to play soccer in the recreational divisions from 4 years old up, and then move on to play school and in some cases travel soccer in their teens. Time spent in school practices naturally leads to a decline in participation in the recreational program for both male and female participants, although some players continue to play both DCSSL and school soccer.

The relationship between youth soccer leagues and local school teams has created many conflicts between practice times. With a little accommodation between school and recreational league soccer, there may be ways to address some of the time conflicts between the two groups, especially over practice times.

Why do early teen players continue to participate in recreational soccer? Primarily, they communicate a strong feeling of "having fun" playing soccer and wanting to play with friends and teammates. Other reasons include team composition, quality of coaching, fields, referees, and parity of teams.

1. Soccer is fun to play

The most obvious reason for playing recreational soccer is that it is "fun to play." Current existing players indicated that they have fun playing soccer, but surprisingly, 90 percent of former players also had fun ([Table 3](#)), with many still playing on their school teams and playing pickup soccer. "Having fun" is related to good teammate relations, looking forward to playing in games and practices, playing time, and continuing to learn new soccer skills. Their parents also encouraged them to continue to play soccer. We found only a minority of former players who did not have fun playing soccer, disputing the myths promulgated by the coaching schools for the past decade.

2. Team composition

Team breakup ([Table 4](#)) is the major factor in players not continuing to play in recreational soccer, with 43 percent of former players indicating that their team

broke up last year compared to just 4 percent of current players. Factors that are associated with the failure of teams to stay together include losing a coach or losing a critical number of players to a school team. Often team problems do not surface until the beginning of a new season. The coach is informed that the team is losing a number of players. After determining the team is not viable, remaining players are assigned to another team. Many of these players feel uncomfortable or unwelcome joining an existing group of players who have been together for a long period of time. Thus, team dissolution is a key problem for retaining players in the recreational league.

3. Quality of coaching

For recreational soccer, the quality of coaching is important to the players, but it is less important than other factors for continued participation in recreational soccer. Teams that have "a very good coach" are more likely to retain players. Only about 10 percent of players feel that their coach yells too much during the game. But they stated strong feelings for attending a practice with a professional coach of more than one team. Some did not like the position that they were playing, a further indication of dissatisfaction with the coaching. Leagues should encourage both mandatory licensing of coaches and paid coaches and trainers for recreational teams.

4. Fields and referees

Players also expressed perceptions of their teams and game conditions. Close to 90 percent of the games were covered by official referees, although 20 percent of players indicated that only 75 percent of their games were covered.

At the older age levels, the number of teams with a paid coaches is fairly high, approximately one-third of all teams. Nevertheless, having a paid coach does not appear to be related to whether or not a player participates in recreational soccer. To summarize, the major team characteristics leading to the decision not to participate in recreational soccer is the dissolution of a team, and to a much lesser extent the quality of the coaching.

5. Team parity

Team parity is also important. Teams losing by substantial margins are more vulnerable to breaking up in subsequent seasons. Leagues should pay attention to teams losing games by large margins, strengthening weaker teams during the off-season. DCSSL, for instance, has long-standing policies against the development of "super" teams while striving for team parity. Such policies are hard to enforce in

practice, but the evidence from this study indicates that increased team parity will enhance participation of players in the teenage divisions. Further, laissez faire league arrangements tend to discourage players from joining another team after their team disappears. Leagues should consider developing more explicit policies on parity and the process of team dissolution, while smoothing the transition of players to other teams.

Reasons for not playing

Players no longer playing recreational soccer offered many insights about their teams and their league. As indicated above, many play on their school or travel teams, and many play pickup soccer. Few indicate that "soccer is no longer fun to play" (Table 6), contradicting previous national studies and perceptions.

The top four reasons for not continuing to participate in recreational soccer involved time constraints. About one-half of the players not in recreational soccer became involved in non-league activities, including soccer. Players also got more involved in school activities; they also felt that the Saturday time was not convenient, or they played another sport that took their time. The loss of players and teams increased significantly with each age group, moving from about 21 percent among 11-12-year-olds to about 58 percent among 14-15-year-old players. The recreational division's coed teams were more at risk than those in the female divisions.

Only 5 percent of former players cited coaching or playing time as a problem. Time constraints tended to increase with age, but problems with coaching remained steady across the age groups. This finding, combined with other survey questions, showed only a few players having had poor relations with their coaches, but these players had strong views on the issue. We believe leagues and clubs should pay greater attention to "problem coaches."

A small minority of players were stuck with poor coaches and wanted to have better coaching. Leagues and clubs should continue to emphasize improving their existing levels of coaching.

The dissolution problem

As players are drawn from existing teams, this sets in motion a process in which teams that have existed for many years lose players and become unviable unless they obtain players from other teams. Long-serving parent-coaches sometimes decide not to continue to coach the team, and this leads to team dissolution. The timing of a team's dissolution causes problems for league planning, as in many

cases the coaches do not know until the last minute whether they can field a team for the next season.

Sometimes this dissolution occurs even after the season begins, with teams "playing numbers down" for the first few games. After a team fails, the players are reassigned to a new team or they are merged with another team in a similar situation. Often their former coaches do not contact their players concerning the team status, and it is left to the coach of the newly assigned team to inform them about the dissolution of their previous team, creating an awkward situation.

Conclusion

DCSSL has done an extremely good job in offering young players from age 4 up an opportunity to play soccer, "the world's sport" and Pele's "beautiful game." Thousands of young people have enjoyed the game, receiving intensive training and development. Both current and former players expressed a high degree of respect for the league, with many making comments that they enjoyed their experiences in playing recreational soccer in DCSSL.

The league has been so successful in developing players in a positive soccer environment that a high percentage of them leave the recreational league to play for their school teams, travel soccer, and pickup games. There is still room for improvement in the league, however, especially with regard to fields, referees, coaching, and the handling of team composition and continuity problems. But the high level of continued participation of recreational players in school, travel, and pickup soccer reflects extremely well on the accomplishments of the league and all of those committed volunteers who make it possible. We believe this finding would also be reflected in the 3,500 clubs making up community youth soccer in our country.

Editor's note: Douglas Barnes has been coaching in the DC Stoddert Soccer League the last 10 years. He currently coaches a U-18 recreational team that has Five original members of a team formed at the beginning of elementary school. Barnes holds the USSF D License and is active with the DCSSL Board of Directors. He works as a Survey and Evaluation Specialist at the World Bank in Washington, D. C. and holds a Ph.D. in Sociology. Len Oliver is Director of Coaching for DCSSL A former professional and U.S. Olympian, he holds the USSF A License and was inducted into the USSF National Soccer Hall of Fame in 1996. He holds a Ph.D. in adult education and is a frequent writer on soccer history and culture.

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