

Introducing Fitness to a Youth Soccer Practice
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A lot of people in the United States still look upon soccer as a relatively new sport but considering the first organized soccer league out of the United Kingdom was set up in Newark, NJ, back in 1884, it probably could not be further from the truth. With over 18 million registered players in the US covering all ages and all levels it is still seen as a Non-American pastime nor can it compete against the likes of baseball, football or basketball for television rights and much more.

All of us involved with the game hope that the current 18 million registered players involved will grow. More players are becoming involved at the youth level and those that have played are giving back to the game by coaching the younger generations. This is good news for the growth of the game, but the line has to be drawn in the sand in making sure that we keep increasing these numbers and keeping the young players in the game involved by helping them fall in love with it instead of physically and mentally running them into the ground.

Soccer is a great sport for children to be involved in helping with their personal fitness. It's physical demands can be separated from other sports because it not only requires speed, but agility, strength power and endurance. During the short time you are allocated to work with these young players it is your responsibility to try and improve their fitness level as a soccer player, not as a marathon runner or an athlete whom is competing in a triathlon.

As a coach you will occasionally imitate the coach whom taught you in which ever sport you played as a youth. I recall back to my weekly practice session's as a youth player and being made to run laps for a warm-up and do sprints to prepare for the game. Looking back these intense training session were not fun, and although may have helped with my endurance and speed work, training would have been more fun if it involved the regular use of the ball. This will not have only helped with the development of specific muscles involved in match play, but also focused on the technical and tactical skills necessary for improvement.

All of your practice sessions and activities should include a ball and merge the four pillars of the game together (technical, tactical, fitness & psychological). Having a ball involved will pick up the players interest and work-rate. The coach can also add more demands to make a practice more intense. Intensity can be simply defined by how hard a player trains. Too much fitness work can lead to injury and fatigue whereas too little will not have enough of an effect on match conditioning. Elite players can train longer and harder than players at a lower level. Intensity is often based on the number of repetitions and how many exercises/sets done.

I witness youth soccer coach's doing fitness work as a tool to measure a players ability, because they went through testing themselves at college or high school. It should not be a shock to many people that majority of children and adolescents playing soccer throughout the world are probably not as technically gifted as what they should be because they don't touch the ball enough during their own time.

Technique is the first building block in player development and usually the first aspect of a players game to deteriorate when they become fatigued in a game. So put the stop watch away for timing sprints and just have the players go for a one minute period and tell the players that they have to get a certain number of touches

in within that one minute period. The measuring stick can be moved up as they become more fit and technical efficient.

It continuously frustrates me that we treat the youth soccer player as adults and run them into the ground because we want to make sure that we are the fittest, fastest, strongest team playing in fear of losing. Although this may work for a season or two because we are creating athletes we are not creating technically gifted players which have built their fitness from playing the game.

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By over coaching and not making activities realistic to game conditions you will find that 90 percent of your practice time is wasted. All players need to be actively involved in the activities at the same time and activities need to replicate some aspect of game-like conditions. Running laps and timing sprints does not create soccer players. Let the players play and develop their technical, tactical and fitness levels by using a soccer ball in soccer related activities as a result you will see a much greater improvement in their overall development as a soccer player.