

What is Recreational Soccer?

It's the Player's Game

The major concern is that we don't all talk about the same thing when we discuss recreational soccer. Let's first look at the problem.

DEFINITIONS: What do the words "recreation" and "recreational" mean in the English language?

rec·re·a·tion *noun*

1: an activity that diverts or amuses or stimulates; "scuba diving is provided as a diversion for tourists"; "for recreation he wrote poetry and solved crossword puzzles"; "drug abuse is often regarded as a form of recreation" [syn: [diversion](#)]

2: activity that refreshes and recreates; activity that renews your health and spirits by enjoyment and relaxation; "time for rest and refreshment by the pool"; "days of joyous recreation with his friends" [syn: [refreshment](#)]

3: refreshment of one's mind or body after work through activity that amuses or stimulates; play.

4: the act of recreating, or the state of being recreated; refreshment of the strength and spirits after toil; amusement; diversion; sport; pastime.

rec·re·a·tion·al *adj.*

1: of or relating to recreation; "a recreational area with a pool and ball fields"

2: engaged in as a pastime; "an amateur painter"; "gained valuable experience in amateur theatricals"; "recreational golfers"; "reading matter that is both recreational and mentally stimulating"; "unpaid extras in the documentary" [syn: [amateur](#), [unpaid](#)]

Now what does "recreational soccer" mean?

So you have heard the term before, but do you really know what "recreational soccer" is? There are no legal definitions, no US Youth Soccer rules, policies or regulations. One of the most often used terms is one of the least defined. Soccer has created a new meaning for the word recreation and the word recreational.

US Youth Soccer does offer a partial definition in its "[Policy on Players and Playing Rules](#)" in the definitions section when it states:

"**recreational league**" means an intraclub league in which—

- (A) The use of tryouts, invitations, recruiting, or any similar process to roster players to any team on the basis of talent or ability is prohibited;
- (B) The club administering the league accepts as participants in the league any eligible youths (subject to reasonable terms on registration);
- (C) A system or rostering players is used to establish a fair or balanced distribution of playing talent among all teams participating; and

(D) League rules require that each player must play at least one-half of each game except for reasons of injury, illness, or discipline.

“**recreational team**” means a team that participates in a recreational league.

However the section head note states that “... the ... definitions are suggested for use by State Associations to facilitate communication and understanding among them...”

Each state association has its own definition and implementation but there are common perceptions of what people mean when they refer to recreational soccer.

Let us look at those perceptions.

Some common perceptions of recreational soccer are:

- Made up of players assigned to team in a random manner without regard to the ability of the players – as opposed to “select” soccer where the players are selected to be on a team through some sort of tryout or selection process.
- “Less competitive” than “select” soccer.
- “Lower intensity” for training and practices.
- “Less travel”, fewer games
- “Less skilled” players.
- “Less experienced” coaches.
- Beginning players,
- Annual or biannual shuffling of players to new teams,
- And there are a lot more perceptions.

Other perceptions are less gentle.

- “He’s a rec player” can be an observation or a put down.
- “They ought to be a rec team” is definitely a put down.

Such other perceptions must be stamped out as recreational soccer is the foundation of the sport in the United States.

Recreational soccer is defined in the common mind by what it is not and not what it is. A similar situation exists in the definition of amateur versus professional athletes. The word is borrowed from the common definitions in the English language quoted above but vastly stretched in each application.

For the purposes of this manual, let’s use the following basic definitions:

Recreational soccer: Is that soccer program that is primarily devoted to the enjoyment and development of soccer players without the emphasis on travel or high level competition. The purpose of recreational soccer is to provide an opportunity for the participants to have fun, learn the sport and develop life skills including a life long love of the game.

- Recreational Player – a player who is randomly assigned to a team without regard to his/her abilities and skills.
- Recreational Team – teams formed randomly to play soccer.
- Recreational League – leagues composed of teams formed in a random manner.

US Youth Soccer Player Participation Objectives

- Fun! It is critical that players involved in youth soccer enjoy the game in which they are playing. If the organization is able to instill a passion and enjoyment in the game then half the battle is already one. This also relates very closely to how players perceive their coach (es) and their interaction with them. One of the main reasons players under 12 decide not to continue is that they no longer are enjoying the game, it has become work.
- Development: A necessary element to support fun, without it training and games get stale because there is no improvement.
- Life skills: In our case through the sport of soccer (Mission)

Jim Cosgrove, US Youth Soccer Executive Director, USSF National “A” Licensed Coach, Feb. 2002

Let's Look at Developmental Models for Youth Sports

(J. J. Coakley 2001 & Steven Aicinena 2002)

The Power and Performance Model

- Strength, speed and power are emphasized
- Excellence is demonstrated through success
- Success is indicated by winning
- Winning is valued more highly if hard work, dedication, sacrifice, risk, and pain are evidenced
- The body is viewed as a machine
- Training and performance should be technologically enhanced and scientific
- Participants should not be concerned with injury
- A clear hierarchy of authority structures exists
- Players should be subordinate to coaches
- Coaches are in control
- It should be clear to observers that coaches are in control
- Opponents are viewed as enemies
- Only the best on a team should play
- If you are unskilled, you will cost the team a game and this is unacceptable

The Pleasure and Participation Model

- Active participation is emphasized
- Participation is the reason for involvement for sport
 - The participant and opponent are important
 - The opponent is seen as valued and needed
 - An opponent is viewed as someone whom participants compete with in order for a test to take place
- The participant's control of his or her body and objects in the environment provide satisfaction
 - Skilled movement and performance yield satisfaction
 - Demonstrating skill and cunning provides satisfaction
 - Domination and victory are not requisites of satisfaction
- Decisions are shared
 - Cooperation is desired and expected
 - Power is shared
 - There is give and take between coaches and athletes

Which Model "Fits" Recreational Soccer

If Recreational Soccer is to be "The Players Game"; we need to identify which of the two models fit.

Using the two different models to evaluate what is commonly called "recreational soccer", recreational soccer is designed to follow the "Pleasure and Participation" Model.

- Access is open to all who desire to participate, (The Game for ALL Kids)
- Emphasis is on active participation (half game playing time)
- Success is developing each player to their potential
- Objective is for the players to enjoy the experience
- Players are to learn the game through learning to make decisions (The Game Within Each Child)
- Focus is on the CHILD, team is deemphasized with frequent shuffling (redraws annually or semi-annually)

“Select soccer” balances between the “Pleasure and Participation” model in the early years and lower levels and moved into the “Power and Performance” model in the older years and elite levels.

Model	Emphasis	Excellence	Body	Decisions	Opponents
Pleasure and Participation	Active participation	Perform to capabilities	Source of enjoyment	Shared	Needed
Power and Performance	Strength, speed, and power	Winning	Machine	Coach-made	Enemies

Use of the “Pleasure and Participation” model is most appropriate for recreational players because the model directly addresses the reasons why players play or quit by maximizing the reasons they play and minimizing the reasons they quit. Success and Excellence in Recreational Soccer is measured in players attacked and players retained. Teams win games, players do not. Recreational Soccer is all about fun, recreation, love of the game – winning is **not** a measure of success.

Why Children Play

- To have fun
- To be with their friends
- To make new friends
- To improve and learn
- To feel good
- To wear the stuff

Why Children Quit

- Criticism and yelling
- No playing time
- Emphasis on winning
- Poor communication
- Fear of making mistakes
- Boredom/not learning

Characteristics of Recreational Play

- Two year age groups are typical of recreational teams so there is a wide range between the most skilled player and the least skilled player.
 - Wider age gaps create greater differences in physical, mental and social development
 - Players new to the sport are constantly being introduced into the mix
- Enthusiasm and dedication also varies widely from the highly motivated to the socially involved.
 - Soccer for some is an outlet for energy and enthusiasm, the child wants to play
 - For others it is an imposed activity, something selected for the child for parental perceived needs – socialization, fitness, or just for something for the child to do.
- Physical and athletic skills span the range for each age group.
 - Random selection process means, player skills are all across the spectrum
 - Fit and unfit players play together
 - Children with advanced motor skills mixed with others with physical challenges
- Social maturity levels vary from highly advanced to the somewhat socially challenged. Players may be as much as three grades apart in school creating educational differences as well.
- Lack of “select” process produces very non-homogenized groupings that increase difficulty of coordinating group activities.
- Participation stretches from the always there to when it is convenient. Parents often sign a player up for the next season without the child being involved in the process.
- Many play because economic constraints preclude them from the “competitive game.”
- Beginning of development.

“My 7-year old son had a youth league game that was to start in an hour, so I went to get him from his friend’s house. He pleaded with me to let him stay and play with his friend. Of course, I insisted he go to the game.”

Casey Hurley, “Organized activities for kids many times are mostly for parents”, Asheville Citizen-Times

Characteristics of Recreational Players

- Recreation players have a stronger bond to teammates with whom they have played than with the team they are currently on. After a season or two, they know they will be moving on to another team through the move up and draw process. A different team and a different coach, but hopefully some “buddies” they have played with before.
- Recreation players generally do not develop strong feelings against the opposing team because they often have “buddies” on them or know today’s opposing player may well be next year’s team mate.
- Recreational teams are ephemeral, they change each season through player and coach movement. No “team traditions” develop; the team is just a current state that will change. This is quite different from the select team which certainly evolves from year to year but which retains a core of players and a definite team memory.
- The key characteristic is that the game is played for enjoyment and not necessarily future playing on college or elite teams, but at the younger age groups, this is where the elite first begin to develop.

Why is the Success of Recreational Soccer Critical to the Association and the DOC?

What is the need?

- Making this truly a “game for all kids”
- Simple economics – recreational players greatly outnumber select players and provide a strong revenue stream for all associations.
- Creates a love of the game, and not just playing the game, the eventual adult involvement in the game will not grow. Without this growth, there is not a



- sufficient fan base for national teams and professional teams
- A starting place for all young players
- Initial development of the future elite players
- Young people you have constructive and useful activities are less likely to have social problems.
- Young women who participate in sports and much less likely to have to

face teenage pregnancy or abuse.

- Building the player through soccer has always been a component of this organization.

Clearly, with approximately ¾ of the U. S. Youth Soccer membership playing "recreational soccer", the organization and its state associations need to address the needs of these players.

For the Director Coaching, recreational player fees are a major source for funding for the association -- a revenue source that is worth enhancing.

A DOC must first recognize that recreational programs are important and every player is important. A positive, supportive attitude toward the non-elite player must be shown by the DOC. As a role model for all other coaches, his/her example should lead other coaches to viewing this as a vital part of youth development and our sport.

Recreational Soccer Opportunities and Challenges for the DOC

Here are some broad thoughts to consider. Many are included above but together lay out the environment---both the positive and the challenges --- for recreational soccer especially for a state office (if they deal with recreational soccer) and the DOC.

- Almost every player and parent will start out in recreational soccer.
- Every year/season recreational soccer experiences an influx of first-time players, parents experiencing youth sports for the first time, and first-time, untrained, volunteer coaches. (What a challenge and opportunity!!)
- Each year there are new administrators with little or no experience or training taking charge of recreational soccer programs
- Virtually every recreational coach will be an unpaid parent volunteer.
- Most of your youngest age-group coaches will be first-time coaches, and many may have little or no soccer experience and no coaching experience (except from their experiences in sports- mostly the power and performance model).
- Recreational clubs, if not YMCA or Parks and Recreation programs, are run by volunteers. Most of these volunteers may have no background in youth sports, education, or child development.
- Many young children start out in soccer. (It has been said that, "Soccer is the best beginning sport for children.") Soccer is a game, especially at the very young level, where all skill-levels of children can participate and have fun.
- Many young children tryout many sports at a young age. Many young players (12 and younger) are in many activities and may jump from one to another during the year or may be involved in multiple activities at the same time. (To a degree, this is a good thing.)
- Playing team sports helps to instill the importance of teamwork and working together that is vital in adult life.

There are a couple unfortunate circumstances to consider.

- Many young kids drop out of all team sports because of an “initial bad experience.”
- Our youngest age-group players are many times taught by untrained, first-time coaches which is a contributing factor to that “initial bad experience.”
- Many of the volunteer coaches and administrators in recreational soccer are based in and use the professional model (The Power and Performance Model).
- Many of the volunteer coaches are coaching their own children. Many times these children are “would-be stars” in the eyes of their parents. Equal treatment many not happen as a result. Pressure to meet expectations may be intense.
- According to a possibly dated study by Martens, about half of youth sport coaches will drop out of coaching within a year.
- Many of the volunteer coaches and their child will move to competitive/select soccer if the opportunity is there. Losses of recreational coaches tend to occur when kids move to U10 and U12.
- As a player progresses in age, the game becomes more complex. Many volunteer recreational coaches drop out and potential coaches who may not have coached in the past are hesitant to step forward because of this increased complexity.
- As a result of parent coaches, the high drop out rate and the movement to select, many of the U12 and U-14 recreational coaches are particularly weak. This may also be a contributing factor in “dropouts” at this age.
- As volunteers move with their kids to competitive soccer clubs, the recreational clubs lose many of their earlier energetic volunteer administrators and support.
- Many times, the people taking care of the youngest age groups are the least experienced.
- Few recreational programs have a director of coaching. Those programs that do many times have a director of coaching who is not well-trained and grounded in training young players or new coaches.
- The Power and Performance Model or the Professional Model is prevalent in youth sports. One prime example is the Little League World Series.

As a result of all of the above, the first level of professionals in youth sports and coaching may be found in the State Youth Soccer Office. Also, because of the above, the state office and state DOC must be pro-active in providing the assistance and guidance recreational soccer needs.

Some positives

- The new volunteer coaches at the youngest age group are eager for guidance and training.
- Most of the new soccer parents in the youngest age group are very protective of their young children and are receptive to the concepts of the pleasure and participation model for this age group. (Unfortunately, this

may be a brief window-of-opportunity until the power and performance model begins to kick in!)

The DOC Role in Education of Recreational Coaches, Players, Parents and Administrators

Encouragement of the Small sided Games

As most recreational players are in the younger to youngest age groups, the first initiative to convert as many as possible to the suggested small sided games format to allow for them to develop in a size appropriate environment.

The “Participation and Pleasure” model works exceptionally well in the small sided games environment.

Model	Emphasis	Excellence	Body	Decisions	Opponents
Pleasure and Participation	Active participation	Perform to capabilities	Source of enjoyment	Shared	Needed

- Participation is maximized as small sided produces active participation and constant opportunities to play with the ball
- Excellence is achieved as each player has repeated opportunities to perform, perfect skills and to increase capabilities
- With the increased number of touches, the player is active, gets constant exercise and has opportunities for enjoyment
- Small sided games forces shared decision making, players have to think, learn to anticipate and to react.
- Opponents are valued as they increase the opportunities for exploring the game, learning to use the body with skill and enhance participation.

Small sided is truly the player’s game. Coaching needs are minimized and player involvement is maximized.

Selling recreational parents and coaches is easier when they are shown the game with explanations of why it works – more touches, more participation and more fun. Asking kids to explain what they like after playing small sided will often sell the most ardent opponent of less than the “real games.”

A DOC can use small sided games as a tool to grow the older ages as well. With the drop off of players at U14 and U16 due to high school and select play, small sided provides a way for smaller programs to still offer recreational play for the older players who want to stay involved. The new rules adopted with small sided no longer require any age group to play 11 a side. Smaller fields and few players have the same benefits in recreational for high school players as it does for the young players for players who just want to play to have fun. *(See the section in this manual on Small Sided Games for further information.)*

Youth Modules and USSF Courses

Use of the Youth Modules and the "E" and "D" courses improve coach education at all levels. As described above, lack of effective coaching is one of the major causes of player attrition. Encouraging recreational coaches to attend course may not be all that easy as many do not have a deep commitment to coaching but it is rewarding. Encourage attendance by stressing that training makes coaching more fun for both the player and the COACH.

For recreational coaches in modules and courses, stress the characteristics of the "Pleasure and Participation" model for increasing player enjoyment and success. Warn of the dangers of the "Power and Performance" model in discouraging players continued participation. Older players in recreational, play recreational for the same reason they skate board, bicycle, or play computer games --- they just want to have fun. Coaches must understand that and seek to meet the player's needs, not their own (which are often from the Power and Performance model).

Parent Education

Parents of new players and parents of young players may often know little if anything about the game or expected sideline behavior. Use of effective parent education programs works hand in glove with Coach Education and Small Sided Games to increase player enjoyment and retention. Parent education with stress on recreational players need to have fun strengthens recreational programs.

Communications

Creating dynamic programming by a Director of Coaching requires effective communication no matter what the program. Unless people are aware of the program, know the benefits and understand how to participate, a program is doomed to low turnout and marginal success. In preparing any recreational program, the challenges are great.

Communications with recreational parents and players are difficult for several reasons:

- Lack of identification with the larger organization – recreational parents and players tend to identify only with the team the player is on and perhaps to a small degree with the division they play in. Often they do not have the sense of belonging to a bigger organization i.e. the local state affiliate or the state association.
- Lack of commitment to programming out side team activities – the parents sign their player up to practice and play some games. It's a recreational activity at a local park or play space. They do not automatically connect to additional playing opportunities such as camps, clinics and festivals promoted by their local organization or the state association.
- Lacks of information due to the registration process – recreational programs have a reduced emphasis on internal communications. Sorting the players out on to teams and preparing/distributing rosters is generally seen as the cycle. Information such as player and coaches names and addresses are

generally submitted toward the end of the season making it difficult to contact them during the playing period.

- Lack of structure due to use of all volunteers to manage the process. Just as the play is more relaxed, so is the administration at the base level of recreational programs. The end is to form teams and play. Once the games begin, there is little emphasis on administrative activities within the playing groups. The only main focus may be on keeping track of games, assigning officials and getting the players to reregister for the next season. The volunteers are parent of the players and they are more involved in getting their player to games and practices than in league administration.

What can a Director of Coaching do to compensate for the difficulty in communications?

- Develop and maintain structure and consistency in programming. For example, plan and execute coaching education on a regular and consistent basis. Courses should be scheduled well in advance and announced before the coach recruitment process is initiated. The goal should be to create an environment where the volunteers know instinctively those courses will always be offered in their area on the X week of August and the X week of March. This removed uncertainty and assists in growing participation. Sure the dates will differ from club to club and community to community but for the local groups they will remain the same.
- Create comprehensive but brief communications regarding programs. A one page program description with concise enumeration of the program features, benefits, costs, mechanics and how to participate can be created as a shell where the details can be updated as needed. Prepared well in advance and distributed to the volunteers in the field improved the potential of copies being made and distributed to coaches when they get their rosters or other information each season.
- Put the information on line all the time on the association's website and make sure it is constantly updated. Create an environment where volunteers know instinctively to look on line for details and current information.
- Use email to connect with contacts and provide update information and reminders. While it is difficult to get local email addresses, it is possible to create an email tree structure where information can be sent to local volunteers who can forward on to others.

Workshops/Seminars

If the state association or local association has member workshops, be a part of them. Use the meeting to disseminate information on programs and activities. Doing a field session reaches a limited audience – those who chose to attend. Having a wealth of information available and being ready to explain in an exhibit hall allows for a much broader sharing of information. Recreational volunteers often do not know what resources are available. While training the coaches is critical, training the volunteer administrators on what resources are available for coach and player development is even more critical. When doing so don't forget "paper",

verbal communication gets across ideas, written materials enforce memory and allow the verbal information to be used after the event.

In the Field and On the Field

To be most effective, the Director of Coaching needs to be in the field more than on the field or in the office. The importance of visiting each member organization and working with their administrator and coaches can not be over emphasized. Making local contacts ensures statewide success.

DOCs travel extensively for programs, setting up a sort meeting with volunteers while at events with members close to the event can be an inexpensive and productive way to build rapport and make contacts. The most successful DOCs are those who are most creative in finding ways to connect with the members as a part of their travel and support of other programs such as ODP and Coaching Education.

Offering model field sessions during free time while in a community is a valuable tool to get the administrator to come and learn. Remember, most of the volunteers are parents – parents of players. Do something on the field for their player and they will be there to watch and learn.

A final tip on recreational programs, you have to go to them. They most often will not come to you. You know instinctively that recreational teams do not travel, unfortunately that is largely true of their coaches and volunteer administrators.

The Role of the DOC in Enhancing and Growing Recreational Soccer

What are the Benefits?

One of the most interesting comments on the benefits of enhancing and growing recreational soccer came from an experienced state director of coaching who noted “they pay my salary”. Recreational players are the largest source of revenue to many if not most of the state association. Growing the base creates additional revenue to enhance all state programs.

Another great reason is that the entry players are all recreational. With out a vibrant and growing base, select programs and not grow and thrive. Recreational soccer is the base of the whole soccer pyramid in the United States. The broader the base is, the greater the number of potential elite players to be identified, the greater the number of fans for the national teams, and the greater the success of the United States in world competition.

A final reason is it is part of our mission at US Youth Soccer.

“US Youth Soccer is non-profit and educational organization whose mission is to foster the physical, mental and emotional growth and development of America's youth through the sport of soccer at **all levels of age and competition.**”

How to Encourage Growth and Enhance Recreational Soccer?

The simplest ways to encourage growth of recreational players and programs is to sure that the players get to play in a fun environment.

The “Participation and Pleasure” model works should be used to evaluate and enhance all programs on the state and local level.

Model	Emphasis	Excellence	Body	Decisions	Opponents
Pleasure and Participation	Active participation	Perform to capabilities	Source of enjoyment	Shared	Needed

Each program, process, event, competition can be evaluated by the checklist below:

Does the program/completion

- Encourage active participation? ___ yes ___ no
- Allow all players to perform to their capabilities? ___ yes ___ no
- Provide a source of enjoyment? ___ yes ___ no
- Share decisions with the players? ___ yes ___ no
- Value and appreciate opponents and encourage sportsmanship? ___ yes ___ no

If you get yes on all five, you are encouraging growth. You are meeting the recreational player’s needs and encouraging their continued participation in the sport.

For each no answer, you have to “fix it”. It’s the same process as coaching a team, if you see a problem on the field; you have to “fix it”.

If you see a problem in a recreational program, event or such, you have to “fix it”

Effective and pervasive coaching education programs are a major “fix it” for many problems in recreational play.

Education of parents and supporter through Parent Education and other activities is another major “fit it” for many other problems.

Re-evaluation and program redesign is another fit it up tool. Small sided games, festivals instead of tournaments are examples of such re-evaluation and redesign successes.

Effective training of recreational administrators in the basic precepts of recreational soccer also is a good tool to help keep programs true to the basic requirements of the players.

Pitfalls to Guard Against

Programs that are designed well but executed poorly i.e. become to competitive

Administrator who lose focus as to the realities of recreational soccer

Well meaning parents, coaches, administrators and board members who just don't get it – who just don't realize why kids play recreational soccer – to have fun.

Volunteers who want to help solely for the benefits they perceive they can obtain for their player, their team, their organization.

Failure to use the checklist above to identify problems in recreational programs.

Failure to "fix" problems identified by using the checklist.

Focusing on elite players and programs to the detriment of the recreational player and programs.

The Role of the Director as a Technical Resource for the State Board for Recreational Soccer

Insuring that Recreational "stays" Recreational

Because Recreational player parents are less sophisticated in the sport, the DOC must be able to articulate to the State Board the needs of its recreational component. Too often we hear that Recreational Leagues complain about not getting enough support, but can't say what they want. The DOC should lead both the leagues and the State Board to the realization of what is needed and how it is to be delivered.

Insuring that Recreational Needs Are Addressed

Elite player's parents are far more vocal than recreational parents. This causes many boards to focus on select play, National Championship competition and the Olympic Development Program – the more noise, the more attention.

The Director of Coaching has to maintain the balance by constantly informing the board on recreational issues and providing information on how programming can be improved and increased.

The Director of Coaching is ideally suited to listen to the feedback from recreational program participants and evaluate the needs to develop solutions that address the underlying needs of the participants. Bring those needs and a suggested solution to the state board is critical to the health of any recreational program within a state.