

Tournaments versus Festivals

by Ian Barker

Now that summer is coming to an end and the most recent sacrifice of every weekend is over for soccer families I would like to start a dialogue as to the value of tournaments. By “value” I mean the soccer value of tournaments to youth players and their coaches.

The grind of a tournament can have some very disturbing effects on the experience for all involved. As tournaments progress so does the attrition. The possibility of a playoff game or games must be factored into preparation. The demands on the best player increases as elimination stages approach and equally the demands on the lesser player decreases. Players, coaches, parents and referees become more sensitive to the need to win at the same time as fatigue is at its highest. Consequently it becomes harder to keep in perspective the ideals of youth athletics: sportsmanship, enjoyment, and participation. Very often the last game of a tournament is the poorest in quality of soccer and the poorest in the behavior of those involved.

What is the point of a tournament from the soccer point of view of the player and the coach? There is already more than enough competition and pressure to win in league play and State Tournament and State Cup. Could weekends of play not be better used if they were approached as an opportunity to develop players and work on team concepts? In order to get closer to this as a goal I suggest tournaments be replaced by “festivals” whenever possible and especially at younger ages.

A “festival” format would allow for teams to know exactly how many games they were to play and who their opponents would be in advance of the event. Teams would not have to worry about potential additional games in playoffs. Scores could be posted and some people will always expect that, but scores would not determine who got a trophy. All players could be awarded participation awards.

In the “festival” format coaches would have more incentive to play all their players equally, experiment with line-ups and tactics and have more time to observe the game rather than coach to win in the short run. Players would realize that not every error is necessarily life and death and the opportunity to be creative and take chances is encouraged. Parents might enjoy the games a little bit more because the pressure to win, which already exists in league and state playoff, is off and consequently the pressure on the referees is less and the whole demeanor of the sideline might improve.

There can still be high degrees of competition in a “festival” format. In fact the degree of competition might improve. Instead of schedules being devised to ensure the host club's team gets to the final, and its strongest potential opponent is scheduled away from it until then, now schedules can put teams of like quality together immediately. Rather than a good team having three walkover type results and then one meaningful final game there is more to be gained playing three competitive games to close scores and leaving the

event having learned more about the team's competitive ability. Winning and losing can still matter, but that does not have to be because the winner gets a trophy. Rather the results matter in terms of what the team, its players and coaches and parents learnt about its soccer ability.

Whether tournament play is the only way to go for older ages I am not sure. However, at ages where player development is still the critical responsibility of the club coach I maintain that the benefits of festival play are very important. One of the reasons not to change is that people will not want change and will not understand it. If, however, change might be for the better it should still be considered. Pragmatically clubs can still make money at events, players still see opponents they would not normally meet and the whole community feel of the big event can persist. The change that the "festival" format can lead to is one which considers more the soccer reasons for participation and puts winning into a clearer perspective, and which avoids the "physical abuse" of the players asked to play too much in deteriorating conditions. Hopefully the intrinsic value of the weekend event can replace, in significance, some of the extrinsic values, which have come to dominate.

It seems like this is a good time of year to throw this out as a discussion point. I would welcome any and all observations from those of you that host tournaments, participate in them or attend them. If there is significant discussion on the matter I will ensure it is published.

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