

# Stop the Tournaments

*Too many games, little preparation and no training opportunities*

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**By Jay Martin, Ph.D.**

Tournaments, tournaments, tournaments. They are overwhelming youth soccer in this country. Everyone wants to play in tournaments. Soccer America has an entire issue devoted to tournaments. Every soccer publication in this country lists pages of tournaments for our children to attend! Every year the biggest decision a club team makes is "which tournaments do we attend?" Most clubs have a person or three who do nothing but prepare for tournaments.

Stop the tournaments, I want to get off.

Tournaments are hurting America's soccer playing youth.

Soccer tournaments started in this country as a way for clubs to raise funds to pay the bills. Great idea. Clubs would sponsor a tournament early in a playing season or in the summer when league play was suspended to make some cash. Now these tournaments rule youth soccer. It is now very important to participate in these types of events. Many clubs recruit players based on the tournaments they attend. Many coaches entice U-16's, U-17's and U-18's to their club by promising attendance at tournaments where college coaches will attend. Many players (and their parents) choose a club solely based on attendance and success in certain tournaments. Today, the main focus for teams, clubs, parents and players is tournaments.

The weekly league game (or two) is secondary to tournaments. And maybe games are even eliminated from the busy tournament schedule. In Central Ohio where club teams must participate in a sanctioned league in order to be allowed to play in tournaments, some clubs have a team for the weekly league (usually a weaker team) so the A team can compete in tournaments all over the country. If you don't get into the tournaments of your choice? Change clubs or create your own tournament. It works. Try it.

These tournaments allow our soccer playing youth to play a variety of teams in a variety of states all year long. But they are expensive. It costs the average family a weekend, car mileage, hotel expense, entertainment for between games, food and video game money.

Why? Because everyone plays in tournaments. The kids will become better players. The college coaches can see them play. Yes, everyone plays in tournaments – except youth teams in other soccer playing countries.

The weekly game is the most important game in most other countries. The teams have one week of training. One week of learning. One week to prepare for the game on Saturday or Sunday. The most important aspect of learning the game happens in well-founded training programs. The habits necessary to become a complete player are developed in training.

Training is important. Training is critical to the success of these soccer-playing nations.

Why is training important? It allows a supervised and progressive means to learn the game, if done properly. It allows the player, coach and team to focus on the areas of the game that will influence performance. What are those areas?

- Fitness
- Constant technical improvement
- Improvement of tactical understanding based on problems in the previous game
- Improvement of the mental aspects of the game by applying stress in the training situation in a variety of situations
- Team building

Do any of these things happen during a tournament? Not very likely. The very nature of tournaments prevents this from happening.

Maybe in America we are uncomfortable with training. It is still a fact that some of our youth soccer coaches still do not have the background

in the game as a player to feel confident in the design and execution of a training session. The obvious solution is play games. So, we play games and don't train.

Soccer teams in Germany, England, Holland, etc. do play in tournaments, but those tournaments are usually during a holiday break or serve as an excuse to go to Madrid for a week. During the season it's the league games that count. The entire focus is on the league game. Promotion, relegation and rivalries all depend on the weekly game. Only in America do the players play in tournaments to collect patches for their bags or to add a medal to their collection or to spend Memorial Day in Lexington, Ky. Play, play, play. What happened to training?

Tournaments are killing soccer in this country. Young players can't learn how to play in these types of situations. Everything about these tournaments is bad for the development of American soccer players.

Tournaments allow players and teams with slow pace or no pace to succeed. Teams play three games in a 24-hour period and, if they are lucky, play two more and win a trophy. Assuming we accept the fact that minimum recovery takes 24 hours, it is physically impossible to play that many games in a short time. In a recent tournament in Central Ohio, for example, a U-18 team played at 4:45 p.m. and 6 p.m. Saturday night and at 7:30 a.m. Sunday morning. What can a coach expect to get from the players in these games? Nothing. It's not possible to play soccer in these situations. These tournaments breed Underwater Soccer. Nice and slow, no change of pace, no defending.

Soccer is not meant to be played this way. Soccer is a game that is played when the player is uncomfortable, when the player closes in on fatigue, when the player runs, works and defends for 90 minutes. The very early laws of the game of soccer stressed a physical component by not allowing a lot of substitutions. Fitness is a part of the game. Ah, so you think there is a fitness component when playing in a tournament? No, there isn't. There is an energy conservation component, not fitness. American youth players stop running when they are uncomfortable. Since they're playing so many games in a short weekend, they just don't run at all.

When the players try to move on to the next level (college), they are shocked to realize they cannot make the team. They don't know how to play. They don't know how to run and they don't know how to work. They don't know how to defend. They don't know what the physical aspect of soccer is all about. They have never been taught what it takes to play this game at a high level.

Technical development in a tournament situation? No chance. The games do offer a variety of opportunities to cultivate technical improvement, but because the games are so slow and there is very little defending, the time and space available for players is not realistic for a real soccer game. In fact, it's counterproductive. When a player does get into a "real game" where time and space are limited he/she cannot play.

Tactical improvements? Don't look here. There is no time between games to either discuss any tactical problems or work on them before the next game. If your team faces a "formation" or "tactic" you haven't seen before, what do you do? Hope you don't see it again. As a rule, there is very little teaching going on in regards to tactics in many clubs. The prevailing mentality is simply "find the best players and let 'em play!" Not a bad strategy. But as players move on in their soccer career, an understanding of tactics is very important. Even a constant teaching/review of 1 v. 1; 2 v. 1; 3 v. 2, etc., is essential to complete the maturation of a soccer player. This tournament mentality does not allow this teaching to take place.

A player who relies only on athletic ability without learning the game will hit a "soccer plateau" and not get any better. This happens far too often in the United States. There is too much emphasis on the athletic ability of a player at the expense of soccer ability. In addition, tactics are important in the development of the whole team.

If you agree with Alan Wade that the most difficult aspect of coaching a soccer team is "getting all the players on the same page," then you will agree that teaching tactics is very important. To accomplish that, the team must have time to train together and learn about tactics after each game.

And the problems do not end there. The mental aspect of the game is lost. Soccer is a game where the mental aspect is so very important. In fact we delight in selling the game as a players' game and as a mental game. But we do nothing about it. No less an authority than former German international Jurgen Klinsman believes that working on the mental side of the game is lacking right now in soccer all over the world. There is no mental preparation during tournaments at all. "If it's 2 o'clock it must be Vardar. Let's go play." The young players do not learn that a warmup prepares you to play physically and mentally. Rather they show up, perform some cursory warmup (or no warmup at all) and

play. As a result they simply go through the motions of the game and never get any better.

Preparation is important for the individual and for the team. The game of soccer is both physically and mentally demanding. It is the responsibility of the coach to prepare for both. In tournaments preparation does not happen.

Fields? Are you kidding? So many teams want to attend tournaments that most tournaments don't have the space necessary to supply good fields. Fields are created on any space possible. The grass is too long, the holes are too big, the field is too narrow and very bumpy. The fields create problems with injuries and bad soccer. Narrow, bumpy, heavy fields are not the surface to learn how to play. These fields contribute to a very direct style of play and don't allow for any creativity or any positive dribbling. The fields at most tournaments are simply unplayable.

Officials? There is a shortage of officials all over this country. Any fall weekend will see many officials working a high school game in the morning and a college game or two in the afternoon and evening. As the hours on the job increase, the quality goes down. This is exactly what happens with tournaments. Officials will do four, five or six games each day.

Officials have been known to eat lunch while working a line. And, how about that six o'clock game? What can anyone expect from an official who has been on the field for six or eight hours? These long hours for officials can cause real problems in tournaments.

Some parents and coaches argue that they "cannot get better" playing the same old teams, that tournaments allow better competition. Every other league in every other country plays the same teams each year. The concern for these teams is to make themselves better. There is very little concern about who they play. The teams train hard all week to put what they learned on the field on the weekend. They learn how to play the game systematically and with a sound progression.

Our "tournaments kids" miss out on a lot of necessary soccer information. Traveling eight hours to play three games in 18 hours does not make a team better. Quality of competition is important, but the quality of each team's effort each game is what counts in the end. The time spent traveling would be better spent training at an intense level and preparing for the game on Saturday.

Some tournaments have addressed some of these problems. The Cincinnati Blue Chip Classic each April allows each team to play only once each day. The teams play three games in three days. Not great, but better than the usual five games in two or three days.

Recently adidas began an Elite Soccer Program (ESP), which brings some of the best male and female soccer players to a site for five days of training and games. Each of these programs allows the players to "be seen" by college coaches while playing only one game a day. The players have a chance to play the game at a higher level than the weekend tournaments. The college coach can see if the kid has a game. But these "new tournaments" come with their own problems.

The players attend these tournaments "to show". They don't care about the score, they care about showing. After a big loss it is not unusual to hear on the sidelines, "Hey dad, how did I do? Did I show well?" These types of tournaments promote selfish play and players who don't care about the score. A recent unscientific survey by *Soccer Journal* asked college coaches what were the problems with incoming freshmen. Two of the top five responses said; 1) the players don't know how to win; 2) the players are selfish and don't know how to play as a team. So even these tournaments cause real problems with the players!

A tournament now and then is fine. It can be fun for the club, the players and the parents. Maybe they can travel to some cities that are fun. A tournament can bring a team "together" and build some morale. But too many tournaments will prevent the natural progression of learning that will take place in well-organized and thoughtful training sessions. Training sessions that use the last game as a learning situation to build on and training sessions that prepare the team for the next opponent. The old coaching expression that "the game is the best teacher" is not true. Games used as a laboratory and supplemented by systematic and progressive training sessions are the best teacher.

Stop the tournaments!