

## Tournament Play - Good or Bad?

Bobby Howe, former Director of Coaching for the United States Soccer Federation, now the Director of Coaching for Emerald City FC, one of the top clubs in the state of Washington, looks at the benefits and dangers of tournaments. [Click here](#) to find out more about Emerald City FC and for contact information.

### Tournament Play - Good or Bad?

*by Bobby Howe*

I had the privilege of coaching the United States U-20 National Men's team from 1989 to 1993. During that time we attended several tournaments including the World Championships in Australia in 1993.

Tournaments worldwide are used for many reasons including those to determine State Champions, National Champions and World Champions. Tournaments in the United States are also used to "showcase" players to college coaches and to provide travel experiences for players. However, in many cases they are used to provide fundraising opportunities for clubs. While all the above are very valid reasons to participate there is most definitely an over-use and in many cases, an abuse of players in some tournament activity.

Tournaments should be a test of skill and not a test of endurance. The play should provide like competition and should be challenging. Each player's daily playing time should be no longer than would be played normally in one full match. E.G. If eleven-year-olds normally play games that last an hour they should not be expected to play more than 60 minutes each day of a tournament; if the tournament calls for two games a day, each game should last 30 minutes (15 minute halves). Sixteen year olds who normally play matches of 80 minutes should not be expected to play more than 20 minute halves.

The kick-off times each day should enable the players to eat at a reasonable hour so that their "fuel" will have the maximum effect during the game. Rest and regeneration are as vital to overall preparation as training. Yet this very important component is neglected by many tournament organizers.

The ratio of training sessions to games at youth level is approximately 2:1 and at professional level, 3 or 4 or 5:1 depending upon the volume of games during the season. Tournaments do not provide the optimum balance between training and match play.

Coaches should research tournaments carefully. Does the tournament provide the most accurate level of competition for the players? Is the tournament used to "showcase" players to college coaches? Is the tournament the end product of a period of training? Is the tournament used as a pre-season activity? Where do the tournaments fit into the overall yearly schedule?

There is no real need for players under 13 to play out of state and there is no need at all for any club player to participate over a family holiday (Christmas, New Year, Independence Day, Thanksgiving) unless for a special showcase tournament to accommodate college coaches' availability.

The game of soccer is not meant to be played for more than forty weeks per year. Therefore, at youth level players should not be expected to play more than forty games. Tournaments should not increase the forty game limit, but should merely supplement existing league and cup schedules that do not meet the limit. In most cases three tournaments should meet this requirement.

While participation in a World Cup Tournament is a major goal for a coach or a player, the journey towards that lofty achievement is equally important. Player selection and good preparation are the keys to success.

There were many events in our preparation that led to an eighth place finish in the World in 1993. My favorite tournament during that time was held in Croix, France. The tournament was held over three days and each team played four games. The duration of all games was forty minutes except the final that was seventy minutes. The tournament was challenging and exciting.

Teams traveled long distances to participate and elite clubs including Benfica and Barcelona entered their U-20 teams because they recognized the value of the competition. They also understood that the quality of play was far more important than the quantity of minutes played.

Tournaments are a very important component to the development of players in the United States. However, the value of tournament play really comes down to two critical points that most benefit the player ---- it should provide the challenge of competition and also, respect the value of skill over endurance.

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*In our January newsletter of this year Sam Snow, the United States Youth Soccer's Senior Assistant Technical Director, also wrote an article about tournaments. Getting the expert opinions of two very experienced and accomplished coaches will help clubs and team coaches make better decisions about the do's and the don'ts with regard to tournaments.*

*If you haven't read Sam's article [Click Here](#).*