

COMPETITIVE SOCCER: Are You Committed? **by Gary Williamson, North Texas Soccer State Coach**

1. Introduction

Competitive teams for young soccer players are increasing in popularity and attracting greater participation. As the number and variety of teams flourish, it becomes increasingly urgent for parents to investigate the suitability of the different programs for their children. Parents have the right and the responsibility to ask questions before allowing their child to participate on a competitive team. The physical and psychological welfare of children should be the primary concern of those responsible for overseeing the running of such teams.

This article presents a broad overview as well as a number of questions that parents should consider when evaluating the soccer teams available to their children. A review of these questions will serve as a guide for evaluating the degree to which a particular team meets the expectations of parent and child.

2. Contact

Local club or team administrators are ultimately responsible for program structure and operation. Identifying the administrators is an important first step. Once identified, parents with questions or concerns can contact them.

Most clubs/teams welcome these calls since knowledge of parental concerns helps the administrators develop a beneficial soccer program for the participants.

In addition to checking with program administrators, parents should make an effort to meet the adults who will actually be working with the young athletes. Coaches can provide information not available from administrators about certain types of concerns.

Parents of children who participated in the program previously are also a valuable source of information.

3. Direction

Is there a clearly stated vision and philosophy for the club or team? This is important because without clear focus, people who participate may have unrealistic expectations.

4. Philosophy

About 95 percent of competitive players will never go beyond playing at the collegiate level, it is important for the parents to keep this in mind during the select soccer years. It is critical that your son or daughter has an enjoyable experience.

Measures of Success

Parents should be concerned if success is equated only with winning, or whether there are other ways of achieving success. A child's enjoyment of participation in sports will certainly be affected by feelings of achievement or failure. For example:

- Does success mean winning a soccer game?
- Does success mean putting out 100% effort and doing your best?
- Does success mean having tried your hardest, you have achieved your potential?
- Is success recognized and rewarded verbally by coaches and parents?

- Do the coaches take time to learn each child's strengths and weaknesses in order to match the player to situations that will give them a better chance for success?

Psychological and Developmental Factors

By asking appropriate questions, parents may be able to determine whether or not their child is likely to enjoy the program and benefit from participation. Questions that help to understand the club or teams' philosophy and objectives are:

- What degree of emphasis does this club/team place on enjoyment of the sport, learning the skills of the game, and competition (winning and losing)?
- Does the club/team emphasize participation by all children, or is the amount of participation based on the skills of individual players?
- What level of skill is assumed at the start of the program? Are the fundamental skills of soccer taught?
- Do separate leagues or divisions exist for different levels of competition? If so how are the teams grouped?
- Are the players made to think of soccer as "serious business", or do they have fun at the practices and games? Are they encouraged to think of the opponent as "the enemy", or are they taught that competitors can also be friends? Are they allowed to play as children or as adults?

5. Organization

Before one begins asking questions concerning the content of a program, its general structure and organization should be examined. This type of information should be obtainable from the program administrators. The following list of questions identifies some points of organizational concern for interested parents.

- What is the administrative structure of the club? Who is in charge? Who do we contact if we have questions or suggestions?
- Who sponsors the club? Is the club run as a non-profit organization?
- Does the club have a written set of goals and guidelines available to parents? If so are the club/team objectives compatible with the reasons why the parents and children want to become involved in the program?
- Is there a registration or entry fee of any type? How are these fees spent?
- Do the adult leaders make all the decisions affecting the program, or do the players and coaches have some voice in the decision making?
- What is the makeup of the board that governs the club? What kind of leadership opportunities is offered to parents who wish to volunteer their time?

6. Adult Supervision

The quality of the coaching and administration greatly influence the benefits that children will gain from participation. Many of the adult leaders will be unpaid volunteers, so parents should remember to be realistic in their expectations. However all of the adult leaders should possess some basic characteristics which are favorable to the development of young people. Here are some questions to consider:

- Find out who will be coaching the team?
- What is their playing and coaching background?
- Have they a proven track record of taking teams and individuals to the next level?
- What is their educational background?

- Do they have a coaching license and at what level?
- What kind of training is required or provided for the coaches?
- Are the coaches required to attend classes, clinics or workshops?
- Do the coaches have first aid and emergency care training?
- Do the coaches know how to teach soccer skills to children?
- Are the adults in this club people that parents would like to see their children imitate?

7. Level of the Team

Be aware that because your child was the star of their recreational team this does not guarantee a starting position at the competitive level.

- How successful was the team last year?
- Is your child's ability a good match for the talent level on the team? This has implications for playing time.

8. Playing Time

At the select level playing time is not guaranteed. Playing time is earned through attendance, hard work and performance in practice and games. At this level, the coach has to consider the welfare of the team over and above individual players.

Check also to see if your child is allowed by your club/team to guest play for other teams if asked.

9. Fee Structure

Most competitive teams require one upfront fee that includes: coaching fees, league fees, tournament fee, club administration, field rental fees, home association registration fees. Additional expenses include two uniforms, training suit, equipment bag; some teams are sponsored or participate in fundraisers in an effort to minimize equipment expense. Families are responsible for any out of town travel expenses including transport, hotels, meals, coach's expenses and tournament fees. Club/team fees can range from \$400 to \$700 per season.

10. Time Commitment

When you sign up for competitive soccer, you are signing up for the entire soccer year which runs July 31 through August 1. This includes:

January	High School. Indoor Soccer
February	High School. Competitive leagues begin U14.
March	High School. Competitive leagues begin U14 – U18.
April	Competitive leagues.
May	Competitive leagues finish. State Cup. Memorial Day Tournament.
June	Regional tournament for State Cup winners. Tournament play.
July	Try-outs for competitive teams.
August	Qualifying tournaments for league play.
September	Labor Day tournaments. Competitive leagues begin.
October	Competitive league play.
November	Competitive league play.

December Out of town tournaments. High school practice begins.

11. Practice

Teams generally play on one day of the weekend usually in the classic competitive state league. In addition, each team usually trains twice a week. Some teams do have optional practice for players who seek extra skill training. Make sure you enquire about:

- What is the location of the training site? How many times a week does the team train?
- What is the general schedule for practices and contests? Is attendance required at all practices and games? Are provisions made for children's absences due to family vacations, etc?

12. Specialized Training

Is skill training offered in addition to regular team practice? Some teams have a goalkeeper coach, for example, who conducts regular sessions.

13. Skills Clinic

For the U-10 player considering select soccer, this is an opportunity to evaluate the coach and the club while also obtaining good technical training. Cost usually \$5. Pick three or four to visit based on your criteria (quality coach, location, club status, level of participants in the clinics, fee structure, etc.).

14. Equipment

What kind of equipment is required for soccer? Is any equipment provided through the club sponsor, or is each child responsible for providing their own?

15. Travel

Generally teams travel to two or three out of town tournaments in the fall and one or two in the spring. In between friendly games are played either in town or a short day trip away. Car pools are normally available for players or parents if needed.

16. Grades

Most teams stress the development of the individual person not just the soccer player. Overall player's grades should improve as a result of participating on a competitive team. Competitive players are usually very motivated to excel and time management is an important skill they acquire as a result of their busy schedule. The self-discipline required to be successful at this level usually transfers to the academic world as well. Indeed many of the elite competitive players go on to graduate and play soccer at some of the top academic institutions across the country.

17. Multi Sports

Some competitive teams encourage participation in other sports as it promotes all-round ability and also serves as a break from soccer. As players become older, they realize the dedication necessary to do well in soccer and they often elect to focus on this sport alone.

18. Observation

Once you have narrowed your choice to a handful of teams it is a good idea to go and observe practice as well as the games on the weekend. This will give you a feel for the team and the coaching style to see if it is a good fit for your child.

19. Tryouts

Tryouts are held every year during the month of July. Your child is permitted to tryout at several clubs/teams. Players are required to sign a contract to commit to a team on July 15.

20. Summary

Determining the suitability of a soccer team for your child need not require answers to every question suggested here. It would not be realistic to expect a particular club or team to meet the highest expectations in regard to every one of the concerns mentioned. As a parent you can sift through the ideas offered and compare them with your own personal standards. This should provide you with a reasonable list of questions to pursue. Seeing your child benefit from participation in a sound soccer program will reward the effort and interest shown.