

## 9.5 Reasons My Kids Play Competitive Soccer – Is It Worth It?

You hear a lot these days about competitive sports and kids. Some of the talk tends towards negativity for one reason or another. Recently, my 17 year old daughter and I went to a competitive soccer tournament together and we reminisced about the great memories and times we've shared around the sport we love. Our conversation started over a card game in our hotel room. We talked about hilarious moments, deep friendships and overcoming struggles and challenges. We also talked about our family time together, our very first "away" tournament and how much we've changed and grown over the years. Perhaps we talked about this stuff because my daughter is heading off to college. We were both sentimental as we discussed how that weekend spent in a hotel located in the arm pit of California was going to be one of our last. Besides, she was beating me in our card game, and being the competitive guy I am I had to come up with something to disrupt her success.

After our conversation and card game I started to think about the time and effort we expended over the years and asked myself, "Was it worth it?" This is an especially important question since I have a 12 year old son who is in the thick of playing competitive soccer. In addition, we're in the midst of trying economic times and competitive soccer carries a decent price tag. As I contemplated this question over the course of several weeks I came to a very strong, simple and emphatic conclusion: "Yes!" As part of that conclusion I developed 9.5 reasons for my answer. Here they are:

1. **My kids love it** – yes, there are moments when some aspects of competitive soccer are a pain, but those moments are outweighed by a genuine love for the game and teammates. During my conversation with my daughter she said, "You know, there were times when I felt like quitting but I'm so glad I didn't...I wouldn't have been on a State Cup Championship team that got to play in Hawaii or had the friends or experiences that I've had."
2. **Competition is an unavoidable aspect of our society** – Competition is frowned upon by some people. They think it's best to avoid competition and conflict because people can go sideways when issues surface. I'd rather raise kids that face reality and strive to be overcomers. Through competitive soccer my kids learn how to confront challenges and use competition to bring out the best in them.
3. **Problem-solving occurs in a team environment** – Issues always arise when you get more than two people together. How you respond and address those issues has a lot to do with how successful you will be in life. A team comprised of individuals who work together and sacrifice for each other can accomplish objectives beyond their apparent abilities. Developing team problem-solving skills through competitive soccer training and games prepares my kids for the challenges they'll face when they "get a real job."
4. **No timeouts or "flow of play" disruptions** – You get one break in soccer: halftime. That means all week you sharpen your skills and prepare for the game by learning principals and action patterns. These principals and patterns create the foundation for "on the fly" decision-making that must be implemented in the flow and confusion of a game in order to be successful. No other game requires continuous, spontaneous, anticipatory decision-making and actions.

When life comes at you in unexpected ways, your ability to anticipate and make wise decisions “on the fly” will reap great rewards. And just like in work, the most effective employee or team uses corporate principals as the basis for improvisational decision-making without direction or supervision from a boss or manager. There’s nothing more liberating than knowing what you need to do from challenging training sessions and past game situations, and then doing it without having to have a coach or supervisor tell you what to do while you’re playing or working.

5. **Quality time with my kids** – The hours spent driving to and from practice and games, as well as the tight quarters of “camping out” in a hotel room create the perfect environment to skillfully and lovingly get into my kid’s “business.” Just tuning-in and overhearing my kid’s conversations with their teammates in the car can reveal a lot about what’s going on in my child’s heart. I like being there for them and talking through a difficult interaction with a teammate or a tough loss. I’m amazed at the great questions and issues that surface on our drives and overnight hotel stays. Competitive soccer provides the platform and bridge to deepen my relationship with my kids. I just have to work on being safe, loving and honest so that I earn the right to have my kids open-up to me.

6. **Exposure to different cultures** – As players of the world’s most popular sport, my kids get exposed to the customs, perspectives and languages of diverse people groups. This past soccer season my son had Hispanic, European (English and German), Asian and African-American teammates. In addition, watching soccer played in its grandest venues such as the English Premier League and World Cup expands my child’s horizons. My son was moved by the story of Ivory Coast during the most recent World Cup. Evidently that African country and its factions ceased fighting their civil war so that everyone could watch and root for their country’s national soccer team. Also, my son’s geography is fairly advanced because he watches and identifies a favorite professional player and is curious as to what country he’s from. As a result, my son experiences favorable exposure to various people groups who share a common bond and interest in the “beautiful game.”

7. **Development of discipline and good habits** – Playing competitive soccer fosters the formation of healthy fitness, eating, sleeping and study habits. It can also help facilitate the avoidance of “bad choices.” All it takes is two chocolate chip pancakes at IHOP between games during a tournament for your child to realize that their low performance and excruciating stomach ache might have something to do with their poor meal choices; Or, a high schooler realizing that their late night partying before a key match contributed to their team’s loss. This past season my son had a new player join his team. The team practiced early one hot summer morning and the new player wasn’t holding-up well as he was bent over at the waist. The coach asked him what was wrong and the kid said his stomach was killing him. The coach then asked him what he ate for breakfast and the boy managed a painful smile and said, “Fruity Pebbles” as he held back the urge to purge. Learning how to eat well and view food as fuel, get good sleep before games, make exercise a routine in one’s life and to manage one’s time to maintain good grades are some of the life-long habits formed through competitive soccer.

8. **Lasting friendships through one’s “soccer family”** – Adults setting up chairs and standing next to each other on the sidelines sharing a common interest in their child’s team success more often than not develop deep relationships that last for a lifetime. Together, they weather the high

and lows of the soccer season, and often support each other as difficult personal experiences occur. Most of the time the support comes in simple forms like a smile and hug, or a listening ear during a deeper conversation. In very rare instances, “soccer families” experience and work through tragedies together. This last soccer season one of our players unexpectedly and suddenly lost his Dad. During emotionally stretching events like this, major forms of support can naturally surface as we care for those we have come to love and appreciate while rooting for our children and unwittingly developing meaningful friendships on the sidelines.

**9. A healthy outlet for anxiety and anger** – Running around and sweating in the fresh air can create a new perspective on your circumstances by stepping outside them. And just hanging out, laughing and being with your teammates can adjust your attitude. Getting the focus off yourself and your personal issues during soccer training or games provides a healthy break from things you’re anxious or angry about. When my parents divorced when I was a teenager I developed explosive anger. The soccer field was the one place I had to safely direct my emotions. My opponents may have suffered a bit during that season of my life, but having the ability to channel my anger through a positive venue was a huge help in overcoming my personal struggles.

**9.5 Opportunities for college scholarships and professional play** – Last and certainly least, competitive soccer provides the training, playing experience and exposure for a young player to play at the next level. I gave this item only half credit in terms of being a reason for my kids playing competitive soccer on purpose. Statistics show that only a small percentage of youth soccer players make it to higher levels of soccer after high school. And if as a parent you obsess about college soccer or your child’s soccer career, your child has a much higher probability of not making it past high school soccer. I had the privilege of playing Division 1 college soccer, but that was not a goal of mine or what I played for as a kid. It never crossed my mind, until maybe my junior year of high school. As a youth soccer player, I just wanted to play, be the best and hang with my teammates. I also wanted to play like those fuzzy German guys I watched on public television on Sundays. That was the only soccer we had on TV while I was growing up, but it inspired me. And along with the encouragement of some great coaches, parents and some gifted teammates, I developed a passion for the game and a work ethic that earned me the bonus of playing at the next level. Looking back, it all seemed very unforced. My parents challenged me to become all I could become, but more as a person and less as a player. The level I had the fortune to play at was icing on the cake. Looking back, the things that really count are reasons one through nine above.

All the best to you as you enjoy the people and experiences associated with our “beautiful game”, and may you look back and emphatically say, “Yes, it was worth it!”

*About the Author: Daron Anderson coaches at Placer United Soccer Club between his “real job” as a management consultant for financial institutions, real estate developers and professional service firms. He has a National D coaching license and holds degrees in finance and human resources/organizational development. He and his wife, Betsy, have three children and live in Roseville, California.*