PRACTICE VS GAME
WHICH IS BETTER FOR DEVELOPMENT?

In any sport, players develop skills via a combination of practices and competitions. This begs the questions: what should the practices-to-games ratio be; how often should we schedule games; and what is the total number of games and practices for optimum development. Given that many experts attribute player burnout to excessive number of games and unrelenting pressure to perform, answers to these questions will have a huge impact on the quality of experience and performance levels attained.

When it comes to youth soccer, the volume of practices and games is dictated, directly or indirectly, by the coaches and the parents. This is an area of considerable debate and misperceptions, where economic factors, status chasing, bragging rights, player recruitment and other factors are thrown into the equation and cloud the issue for well meaning but confused parents. It is hoped that this article will assist parents and coaches in making more informed decisions that will benefit player development.

One very important measurement in player development is how much skill a player learns that is 'transferable' to the next team he/she will join. In other words, as players grow and move from team to team, from level to level, how much of what they learned in the past is useful in the future. For example, a choreographed movement rehearsed and learned to execute in a corner kick has no residual value once the player leaves the team and joins another. But the ability to strike a ball is a skill that will always prove useful, in any team and any level.

In soccer, coaches tend to divide the trainable components of the game into four categories: Technique, Tactics, Fitness, and Psychology. We start by outlining the effects practices and games have on each of these components, in order to arrive at some conclusions and recommendations and clear up the confusion.

TECHNIQUE

By player's technique, we mean the ability to control and master the ball and execute the complete repertoire of receiving, passing, dribbling, shielding, shooting, heading, etc.

Benefits from Games: The best way to improve technique is through constant repetition and high volume of contact with the ball. Games provide very limited technical benefits since players don't get many touches of the ball. When you have 22 players sharing one ball, each player only gets on average 20-40 ball touches per game. In fact, depending on position and amount of minutes played, some players only touch the ball 10-20 times per game.

Benefits from Practices: In a well structured practice that is geared towards technical development, players would typically touch the ball hundreds of times in one single practice. By keeping the player-to-ball ratio small (1:1 through 4:1) and using small-sided games, each player would easily accomplish 200-400 touches, and often even more, in a 90 minute practice session.

Conclusion: Without question, practices provide much better technical development than games. Players will learn technical skills mainly in practices.

TACTICS

Tactical development refers to the decisions players make, with and without the ball, in both attack and defense. Examples of decisions with the ball are: which technique to use, which kicking surface to use and where to play the ball. Examples of decisions without the ball are: positioning, when and where to make runs and how to support teammates. Good decisions are based on the sound principles of play, such as Support, Width, Depth, and Mobility. These principles are always applicable and constant, regardless of team formation.

When players are well coached and versed in the sound principles, they are more likely to make good decisions.

Many people associate tactics with Team Formation, Strategy and System of Play. Team formation, strategy and system of play are decided and conveyed to the team by the coach. But it's the players' ability to make good decisions on the field, based on the universal principles, that determines the success of the strategy/system of play.

Benefits from Games: Games help the players develop an understanding of how to play together and result in better team cohesion. There is no question that playing games will improve the overall performance of the team as players get to know each other. Games also provide players with a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the tactical framework laid out by the coach.

When coaches and parents see their team improving from game to game, it's only natural for them to conclude that the players are developing and that the games are responsible for the development. But are the players *really* developing or is it simply the *team cohesion* that is developing.

Parents must remember that once a player leaves a team, the cohesion and understanding that was previously attained is no longer useful with the next team and the player is basically starting from scratch in developing cohesion with new teammates.

Hence, the salient question is, did the players learn the sound principles of soccer and are they better at solving tactical problems, regardless of which team they will join and which formation will be used. Players who learn to solve soccer problems are more

adaptable and more valuable to a coach employing any system. It's hard to assess exactly the contribution of games towards the residual tactical skills that players take with them from team to team. But, just as with technical development, the frequency of 'learning moments', those moments when a player is around the ball and making decisions, is much lower in a game than in a practice.

Benefits from Practices: In a well constructed practice, under the guidance of a knowledgeable coach, the potential for learning how to solve soccer tactical problems is enhanced by more repetition and more scope for the coach to provide feedback. The use of small-sided activities further increases the learning opportunities.

Conclusion: A quality practice will be more effective at teaching the tactical principles than a game. Games improve team cohesion and teach players functional roles. But since cohesion and functional roles are to a large extent team-specific, the long term benefits from games are limited. Also, when players are tactically intelligent, cohesion and roles are easy to teach and it doesn't take many games to accomplish.

FITNESS

Soccer fitness has many components, such as speed, stamina, agility, power, and flexibility. Experts agree that until players complete their growth spurt and their cardiovascular and neuro-muscular systems reach maturity, emphasis on fitness training has limited benefits. Hence, fitness training of young players should not assume a high priority and should be done mainly with the ball.

Another fact about fitness is that it is reversible, meaning that when a player stops playing or training he will lose some of the fitness level gained. For example, loss of stamina, which is the foundation fitness for soccer, can occur within just two weeks of inactivity. The good news is that the human body adapts quickly and fitness levels can be regained easily when players resume training.

Benefits from Games: Players and coaches often talk about 'match fitness'. They are referring to the fact that the best way to become fit for games *is* to play games. This fact is correct and is based on the principle of sport specificity. As players play in games, their bodies adapt to the rigors of playing and they become not just fit, but 'game-fit'.

But since fitness is reversible, as soon as they stop playing games, as in the off-season, they lose the peak match fitness. Fortunately, the pre-season and the early part of the next season will take care of this and allow them to regain the peak game fitness.

However, the danger of physical burn out of players due to playing too many games is real. Especially when players play multiple games per weekend, as is the norm in youth tournaments in the U.S. Care must be taken to allow for complete recovery after an exhausting weekend of play. This means that whenever players play in a weekend

tournament, they are too tired to train in the first half of the week and training volume is reduced, which means that player development suffers

Benefits from Practices: The one advantage practice has over games is that the coach can manipulate the activities to create specific fitness demands and overload the players in order to improve a specific fitness component. But, just as in games, when players stop training, they lose a certain amount of fitness.

Conclusion: Since fitness at the youth level is not a high priority and its levels fluctuate based on the stage of the season, the ratio of practices to games is not a major issue in the context of long term player fitness development. The biggest issues are fatigue from over playing, burn out, and the time needed for recovery from exhausting tournaments that could otherwise be used to train and develop the players.

PSYCHOLOGY

Players' performance depends heavily on their mental state and psycho-social maturity level. Sport Psychology encompasses many aspects, some of which are goal setting, mental preparation, coping with performance anxiety, dealing with winning and losing, confidence and self image, social interaction, team bonding, and enjoyment and fulfillment.

At the youth level, ***enjoyment***, ***social interaction***, and development of a ***positive self image*** should be of paramount concern and the main objectives of sport.

Many studies and surveys of young players conducted by sport psychologists confirm that the most common and important reasons young players participate in sport are: enjoyment, be with friends, and learn new skills.

Benefits from Games: Players love to play games. Games provide the motivation to improve and the incentive to train. Players of all levels love to compete, but elite players are especially aroused by the challenges of competing against quality opponents.

In order for games to provide optimum benefits, it's vitally important for coaches and parents to make sure that the players' enjoyment and motivation is not overly depended on the game results. Obviously, winning enhances enjoyment and adds a sense of fulfillment to the game experience. But, when dealt with appropriately, losses can be viewed as valuable learning experiences and kept in perspective.

Games can easily become a dreaded event for players who lack self-confidence or players who spend long periods sitting on the bench. Since a prime objective of youth sport is to develop a positive self image, players who are confined to bit roles or spend most of the time on the bench are not likely to develop self confidence. Players who are verbally or mentally abused by coaches or parents are also likely to dread the game day experience and quit sport altogether.

Benefits from Practices: Obviously, practices don't have the 'buzz factor' of games, but a well constructed practice that comprises the correct level of difficulty and keeps players engaged and challenged can have similar psychological benefits as games.

A sign of a good practice is when players are so engrossed in the activities that they lose track of time and beg to continue when the practice ends. If practices sometimes get a bad rap and are associated with boredom, it's mainly because of poor coaching.

Conclusion: Both games and practices can and should contribute towards a healthy psychological growth of players. Games are inherently more enjoyable and motivating than practices and are an integral part of the psychological imprint on young players. Games also serve the purpose of gauging progress, monitoring the effectiveness of training, and planning the training sessions.

But on the flip side is the growing concern that the excessive number of games in youth soccer's elite level, coupled with the long distance and frequent travel, are contributing to burnout and loss of enjoyment. The undesirable side effects of too much too soon are well documented and include the 'been there, done that' syndrome, the pressure to win and qualify for the prestige tournament, the high expenses of travel, and the loss of quality family time.

Since enjoyment, social skills and self image are the key aims, the most important factor affecting long term psychological benefits is the manner in which the adults deal with game results and pressures to win. To this end, the ability of the coach to make games and practices a fun and fulfilling experience is more crucial than the ratio of practices to games.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OPTIMUM PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

To recap, this article attempts to answer the key questions regarding the optimum number of practices and games at the youth level. From the comparison of benefits broken down above for each trainable component, it is clear that practices have a much bigger impact on the technical and tactical development of players than games. Players experience many more touches on the ball and more learning moments in practices compared to games. In fact, the number of ball touches in games for each player is practically negligible. Hence, practices should outnumber games by a large ratio.

Practices are more conducive to long term technical and tactical development since they provide the skill foundation that is transferable from team to team and from level to level, whereas games tend to develop 'perishable' benefits, such as team cohesion and match fitness.

Furthermore, the excessive number of tournaments and associated travel and fatigue contribute to physical and mental burnout. The problem is that the symptoms of burnout are not always immediately apparent and can stay undetected for months or years before they manifest themselves. A torn ACL sustained in an innocuous, moderate activity could easily be the cumulative result of endless multi-game tournaments and lack of downtime over the previous few months or years.

Another way to look at the issue of practice-to-game ratio is to compare games to school tests. If practice is for learning and games are for gauging progress, it follows that much more time should be spent learning than testing. Teachers don't prescribe tests every second day in school because it takes valuable time away from learning. If the ratio of practice to games is 1 to 1 or even 2 to 1, it's like spending every second day in school doing tests instead of learning new things.

Imagine a gymnast attending an inordinate amount of competition events frequently, at the expense of practice. It's clear that a gymnast should spend hundreds of hours training and perfecting technique before attempting to enter a competition. It's also clear that in a gymnastic competition, each competitor is only active for a couple of minutes and that such an event has no impact on skill development. Well, a soccer competition is also devoid of any meaningful skill development for the same reason, namely that each player only comes into contact with the ball for a total of a few seconds over the course of a ninety minute game. The only difference is that soccer is a team sport which requires developing team cohesion in addition to the individual skill. But we don't need so many games to achieve team cohesion. Individual skill acquisition should be the priority.

Experts cite the '10,000 hours' rule of thumb for skill development. The expert consensus for any sport is that it takes around 10,000 hours of technical training to reach an elite, 'Olympic gold' level of performance. To achieve this volume of practice, an athlete would have to train 10 times per week for 10 years, and that's exactly what Olympic gold aspirants do. If we tried to calculate the number of hours players such as Ronaldinho or Zidane spent working on technique by adding up all the hours they spent on their own from a very young age to the hours spent in team practices, it will probably add up to 10,000 hours by the time they reached the age of 20.

In all the major soccer playing nations, young players spend a lot more time practicing than playing. However, In the U.S. there is a mistaken belief that players develop by playing games and the player development culture is evolving in the wrong direction, with emphasis on games at the expense of valuable practice time. The end result is that competitive level players are asked to play 80-120 games per year, many of which are lumped into multi-game weekend tournaments.

The common rationale that drives coaches and parents towards all these travel and games is the search for quality competition, and that players develop by playing against good players. But this ends up promoting quantity rather than quality. Players get into the habit of pacing themselves through games to survive the marathon and, by the time they

face quality opponents in the later stages of the tournaments, they are too exhausted to derive any meaningful benefit.

While it is definitely beneficial for good players to play with and against other top players, the benefits really kick in when players attain a good technical base. Players in the early stages of skill acquisition (ages 6 to 12) need to experience success and develop the confidence to execute the skills. Many players who are thrown pre-maturely into a highly competitive environment against better opponents are not likely to try new tricks and are more likely to play conservatively and hold back. It might be better in the long term to be the big fish in a small pond for a while, before jumping into the big pond.

Parents need to monitor the amount of games their child is playing and make sure a rest and recovery period is implemented after each season. As a rough guideline, the recommended number of games per year and the practice-to-game ratio are shown in the table below:

Age Group	Number of games Per year	Number of team practices per week	
		Recreational	Elite
U-8	20-30	2	2
U-10	20-30	2	3
U-12	30-40	2	3
U-14	30-40	2	3-4
U-16	40-50	2	4
U-18	40-50	2	4-5

Ideally, the games should be spread out in a frequency of one game per week. Also, young players, especially between the ages of 8-16, who aspire to play at the professional level, should supplement the team practices with additional ball practice on their own.

Elite level players should set aside 4-8 weeks of off-season rest each year, for regeneration and recharging. It's hard for the top youth players to find time to rest since they are more likely to be involved with many programs simultaneously, such as club soccer, high school soccer and ODP. This is where the parents need to be educated and avoid getting carried away by all the tournaments and invitations and insist on rest periods.

Another undesirable feature of youth soccer that needs to be minimized is the time spent traveling. Many elite players spend an inordinate time traveling out of state and across the country to play games and tournaments. Some players are also traveling excessive distances to team practices every week because they would rather play for a top team located in another community than play for their local team. This is an issue with no easy answers. But parents should consider the pro's and con's carefully and keep in mind that the hours wasted traveling each week could be spent practicing to improve technique. In the long term, practicing instead of traveling might prove a better investment of time and a whole lot cheaper.