

# How fair can tryouts really be?

*(Because it's tryout time in many parts of the country, we've gone to the Youth Soccer Insider archives for this 2007 article on team formation.)*

**By Ian Barker**

If you are the coach of a competitive youth soccer team approaching the end of a long season and looking to retool for the next season -- what is the best method to select your new group?

More than reasonably, it could be to evaluate the talent you find yourself in competition with on a regular basis over the season and the talent of younger players, or those assigned to other teams within your own club, and invite them to join you.

Having identified this talent you may want to have the invitees train with you a couple of times or guest at an event. Overall this could be a very solid, successful and intelligent way to improve your team.

The more common reality of team formation is something entirely different. It often involves club-wide tryouts at which players perform one to three times in a variety of activity, often culminating in small-sided games for a cadre of coaches with clipboards. Then a club panel is adjourned to review the results and direct the new team formation.

Why is this format so much more prevalent than the "scouted" version?

Club-wide tryouts have an appearance of fairness. Rather than "recruit" players, a club can "target" market tryouts and appear more benign. Each club coach gets some inclusion in the process and the club maintains a measure of control.

But in club structure, how fair can a tryout really be. More importantly, how reflective of ability can it be?

A small-sided 4 vs. 4 is not likely to demonstrate the defensive abilities of a player who can read the game, cover space quickly and has superior ability in the air and on the ground defensively.

Similarly, watching 30-60 minutes of 11 vs. 11 with substitutes and players of widely mixed ability is unlikely to identify the playmaking capabilities of a central midfielder who sees the ball a mere handful of times.

While it can appear fair to have all the players evaluated at the same time and under the same format, is it really fair to all the players to be of such potential mixed ability?

Do clubs really want to limit themselves to making placements based solely on the performance

of the tryout in the pursuit of an appearance of fairness?

What is the incentive for a club coach to give up two or three players to a stronger team within the club? The chances that the displaced players will automatically drop down are not assured and often the coach loses his top talent and is required to find new players. In such a system it is understandable that club coaches take great ownership of their players.

In a typical club system where parents fund their child's experience and pretty directly the club and its employees -- team formation can be the most difficult part of the year.

The better parents understand the development strategy of the club and the better the coaches manage their feelings of ownership over players -- the easier it can be.

In a "healthy" club, parents must perceive fairness and question themselves if they may believe the coach and club intentionally misplace talent.

Sometimes the explanation of the disgruntled that a process is "political" is actually reflecting the opposite case, where it is the inability to unduly influence a process that leads the person to the assumption of unfairness.

For the majority of youth soccer clubs a blended approach to team formation can be very successful and should include:

- \* Player evaluation conducted over the course of the season by club coaches;
- \* Formal tryouts for eligible players within and outside the club;
- \* Targeted marketing of opportunities to players from other clubs pursuant to the league/state rules;
- \* An element of the team coaches' feedback and personal choice;
- \* The interest of the club, team and individual player, particularly in terms of development and retention.

The traditional club tryout used in isolation is not an effective team formation tool. In the majority of youth clubs, however, tryouts serve a variety of good purposes and if managed well can set a club apart from its competition.

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