

PLAYER RETENTION IN YOUTH SOCCER CLUBS:

Why It Matters
and How To
Improve It

November, 2023

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the first data-based study of its kind to present **national benchmarks for player retention in youth soccer clubs.**

Methodology

To calculate the benchmarks, Sprocket Sports aggregated retention data from clubs across the country. The findings are particularly significant because the data is not self-reported from soccer clubs. Instead, **Sprocket Sports aggregated proprietary data from its player registration database of large and medium-sized “travel” soccer clubs across the US with a median size of approximately 500 players.** Rec clubs and elite teams such as MLS Next are excluded from this 2023 data set.

Current Benchmarks

As of November 2023, for the younger ages **U8-U13**, the overall national benchmark came in at **74% for the Girls and 78% for the Boys.** These benchmarks were relatively consistent throughout these age groups, ranging from 70% to 83%.

For the older ages **U14-U17**, the overall benchmarks were lower, at **66% for the Girls and 62% for the Boys.**

Complete data for all age groups can be found on page 11.

How Does Your Club Stack Up?

The benchmarks have been presented by Sprocket Sports to be used as a **common metric by which clubs across the country can measure relative progress and success.** However, Sprocket recognizes that these benchmarks might not be applicable for clubs who do not fall in the large or medium-sized travel club bucket or who are located in hyper-competitive regional markets.

Why Does Retention Matter?

While there are other metrics to measure club “success” – such as number of championships or college players – **player retention was identified as one of the most critical success factors** by leading clubs and industry experts in interviews conducted by Sprocket Sports. Here’s why:

- **Club Financial Performance & Viability**
The cost of acquiring a new customer is 5-25 times more expensive than retaining an existing one. If you lose a kid at 6, you’re missing out on a potential 12-year customer.
- **Player Development**
The longer a player is with a club, the more you can impact that player’s long-term development. High player turnover makes player development more challenging.
- **Team Development**
Teams that play together for years have a big advantage over high turnover teams in terms of communication, cohesiveness and performance.
- **A Way to “Keep Score”**
Retention numbers offer an objective way to measure and track club and coach performance.

- **To Keep Kids Active**

Participation in youth sports is on the decline. Keeping kids in the game is important to their long-term health, development and well-being.

- **For the Good of US Soccer**

On a relative basis, youth soccer has seen a decline in participation over the last 15 years while other sports have had significant growth.

How to Improve Retention

Interviews with clubs across the country conducted by Sprocket Sports as well as parent survey data from Satori, a non-profit soccer analytics consultancy, point to two key factors that result in higher rates of retention and, ultimately, improved performance as a club: **player enjoyment and player development.** Best practices for clubs and coaches to drive enjoyment and development include:

- **Foster Community & Love of the Game**

Host club-wide social events and watch parties. Encourage all teams to regularly schedule off-field get-togethers.

- **Encourage “Free Play”**

Make fields and facilities available at scheduled times for “free play” and pick-up games without coaching. Reserve the last 15 minutes of every practice for competitive scrimmages with minimal coaching.

- **Communicate & Engage with Players and Parents**

Share club expectations, mission, and values at the start of every season. Actively listen and hold face-to-face meetings as much as possible to humanize interactions and avoid an “us vs them” mentality with parents. Invest in quality surveys and analysis to better understand the player experience.

- **Find “Just Right” Competition**

Place teams in the appropriate league – not too easy, not too hard. Allow top players seeking a greater challenge to “play up” with older age groups.

- **Partner With & Support Coaches**

Coaches play a big role in retention. Encourage them to track registrations and communicate with families. Provide training, curriculum, mentors and support.

SECTION 1: Why Player Retention Matters for Youth Soccer Clubs

Today's youth soccer landscape in the United States is challenging for club leaders. Parents demand a high level of coaching quality, frequently value winning over all else, and invest major dollars and emotional capital into their child's development – with high expectations for a return on that investment. Numerous obstacles – ranging from attracting and retaining coaching talent, to administrative burdens, to stiff competition from rival clubs and other sports – all contribute to the significant challenge of club management.

Given these challenges - what are the most important metrics for a club to track progress and success? “Wins”, “Championships”, and “Rankings” are metrics that resonate universally with many players, parents, and coaches. “College Placement” or the number of players competing at the next level is another “club brag” that is often cited as a measure of success. But are these really the most impactful and most important metrics to help young soccer players in the US? Should clubs make wins, rankings and college scholarships their top organizational objectives?

Many club leaders influenced by the relative success of European soccer understand that too much of a focus on “winning” as a top priority, especially at younger ages, can have unintended negative consequences and an adverse impact on player development. They also recognize that College Placement is not a realistic goal for most players in most clubs, given that only a very small percentage of club soccer players end up playing at the collegiate level.¹ So what else can be measured to track the progress of a club? What else should be put forth as the key metrics to “keep score” and assess “success” for a club?

Sprocket Sports interviewed soccer club leaders and industry experts across the country regarding the most important metrics and how to improve a club's performance on those metrics. This white paper shares key insights from both these interviews and also from Sprocket's proprietary data.

“Player retention has more impact on a club's sustainability and financial success than any other metric.”

– Dr. Matthew Robinson,
Professor of Sport Management at the University of Delaware

¹ <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2015/3/2/estimated-probability-of-competing-in-college-athletics.aspx>

Across the board, player retention was identified by many leading clubs and experts as a critical success factor and key metric for numerous reasons presented below.

Club Financial Performance and Viability

“Player retention has more impact on a club’s sustainability and financial success than any other metric,” says **Dr. Matthew Robinson, Professor of Sport Management at the University of Delaware** and a frequent speaker at the United Soccer Coaches Convention. “If a club has retention in the 50 percent range, I would question its financial viability over the long term. Think about the Life Time Value (“LTV”) of a youth soccer customer. If you lose a kid at age 6, you’re losing potentially a 12 year customer. In the business world, marketers try to attract customers at a young age and retain them for life. Soccer clubs could learn something from that thinking and invest in their programs for younger players to ensure that their offering for those young kids is not their weakest service level.”

“Many successful clubs don’t have issues with player retention on their top teams – whether that’s MLS Next, ECNL, or whatever elite platform,” added **Adrian Martinez, Vice President, TRACE**, “but the reality is that their 2nd, 3rd, 4th or even 5th teams in a given age group may face greater challenges in retaining players if they aren’t provided a great experience. The reality for most clubs is that they rely on those less ‘competitive’ teams to financially support the viability of their top teams and overall club, so they should prioritize those teams in deciding how they

administer their club and the service they provide to those families. Each year, player retention has a significant impact on a club’s short and long-term revenue and overall business model.”

From a financial perspective, it’s common knowledge in the business world that the cost of acquiring a new customer is 5 to 25 times more expensive than retaining an existing one.² The same holds true in youth sports clubs.

As an example of the financial impact, consider increasing player retention from 70% to 75%. For a travel club with 500 players and annual revenues of \$1 million, with an average annual price tag of \$2,000 per player, the increase in retained players from 350 to 375 means an additional \$50,000 in revenues for the club. Given average margins, that significantly increases profits for the club. And that’s just with a difference of 25 players. On the other hand, if player retention declines from 70% to 65%, revenues decrease by \$50,000 and profits will slump as well. These dollars can make a significant impact on a club’s financial viability.

“A lot of organizations have learned the hard way about the pitfalls of complacency on player retention,” noted Robinson. “In the long run, retention really matters - if you don’t have good numbers, that can lead to disastrous outcomes in the long run.”

² Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2014/10/the-value-of-keeping-the-right-customers>, <https://hbr.org/1990/09/zero-defections-quality-comes-to-services>, <https://hbr.org/2003/12/the-one-number-you-need-to-grow>

Player Development

Most clubs tout their ability to develop players, but player development of a soccer player happens over multiple years. In other words, player development is a marathon, not a sprint – and for a club to truly impact a player’s development, it needs to be part of the long-term journey. If a club is constantly turning over team rosters, it’s a challenge to make that significant of an impact on player development. As **Paul Spacey, Director of Coaching for FC England Soccer in Santa Monica, California**, puts it, “The longer the players are with you, the more effectively you can impact their development over time. Having a kid for a year or two – can you help develop? Of course, having them for five or six years – you can help them in a much bigger way. If you’re not retaining players, you can’t do that.”

Team Development

When teams play together for years, they develop a strong understanding of each other’s strengths and weaknesses. They also learn how to communicate effectively and work together to achieve common goals. This continuity gives them a significant advantage over teams that are constantly changing players. “Continuity is key in youth soccer. When teams play together for years, they learn how to communicate, work together, and read each other’s game. This gives them a big advantage over teams that are constantly changing players,” said **Bob Gansler, former US men’s national under-20 soccer coach**.

A Way for the Club to “Keep Score”

As **Kyle Rodeheaver, Executive Director of Seattle United**, notes, “Retention lets you know if you’re doing something right. If you’re doing something right, people don’t want to leave. If your retention rate is high, then you’re obviously doing something right.” **John O’Sullivan, Founder of Changing the Game project and Director of Coaching at Apex FC in Bend, Oregon** adds, “Without clear objectives within a club, people focus primarily on ‘winning’ - of games, leagues and tournaments - and that sometimes has negative consequences. It’s helpful for clubs to define other objectives and metrics – to keep the organization focused on its real purpose and to ensure that everyone is working together in a positive way.” In other words, retention offers clubs a way to track their own performance vis-à-vis player and parent expectations; if clubs are meeting and exceeding those expectations, player retention will be higher. Retention also offers clubs a metric upon which to assess and track coach performance, caveated with the reality that sometimes external or uncontrollable factors can adversely affect player retention, so it should not be considered the only metric for a club or coach.

“Retention lets you know if you’re doing something right. If you’re doing something right, people don’t want to leave.”

– Kyle Rodeheaver, Seattle United

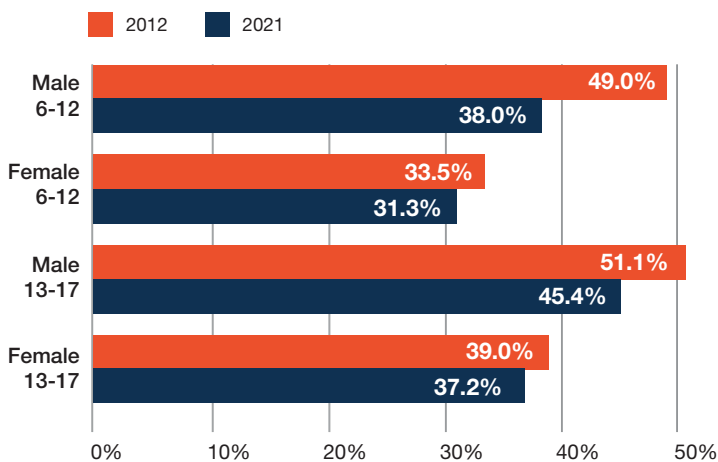
“Don’t Retire, Kid”

With more than 3.5 million kids ages 6-17 playing soccer every year in the US³, and as a sport that can be relatively affordable given the lower barriers to entry in regards to cost of fields and equipment, soccer has the ability to impact overall youth sports participation in the US in a substantial way – positively or negatively. However, participation in youth soccer, along with other sports, has been on the decline since 2008.⁴ This decline was further exacerbated by the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, although participation in soccer has now rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.

To combat the decline of participation by 6-17-year-olds in all team sports, ESPN and the Aspen Institute’s Project Play launched a “Don’t Retire, Kid” advertising campaign in 2019. Today, Aspen Institute’s Project Play 2024

Decline in Youth Sports Participation

Percentage of children who played a sport on a regular basis



Source: Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 2021

continues to collaborate with multiple sports organizations and prominent athletes – with a goal of helping meet a national US goal of increasing youth sports participation among 6-17-year-olds from 51% in 2021 to 63% by 2030. Keeping kids playing any sport is important for the development and well-being of youth for so many well-documented reasons – and soccer clubs can do their part to keep kids playing, ideally keeping them within their own club for many years of fun, health, and development of skills and life lessons both on and off the pitch. “Sports can play a vital role in the development of young people. They can teach kids important life lessons, such as teamwork, perseverance, and sportsmanship. Sports can also help kids stay healthy and active,” said **Tom Farrey, founder and executive director of the Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program.**

For the Good of US Soccer







While the above goal of increasing youth participation goes across all sports, most soccer enthusiasts and US soccer leaders would prefer to see kids playing soccer rather than leaving the sport to play other sports. When players leave a youth soccer club, they are often continuing to play soccer elsewhere – either across town or in another location. But many times, when a young player leaves soccer – especially at the younger ages of 8-13 – they are leaving the sport to play a different sport. On a relative basis, US soccer has seen a decline in participation in the past 15 years while other sports, including golf, gymnastics, ice hockey, lacrosse and tennis have seen significant growth.

³ Aspen Institute’s “State of Play 2023” Report: <https://projectplay.org/state-of-play-2023/participation>

⁴ Aspen Institute’s “State of Play 2022” Report: <https://projectplay.org/state-of-play-2022/participation-trends>

Soccer Sees Significant Decline

Percentage of children ages 6-17 who participated on a regular basis

Sport	Ages 6-12		Ages 13-17	
	2008	2022	2008	2022
 Golf	5.0%	6.1%	6.4%	7.9%
 Gymnastics	2.3%	3.0%	1.8%	1.1%
 Ice Hockey	0.5%	1.0%	0.8%	1.1%
 Lacrosse	0.4%	0.7%	1.2%	1.8%
 Soccer (Outdoor)	10.4%	8.0%	7.9%	7.1%
 Tennis	4.3%	6.5%	6.0%	8.5%

Source: Sports & Fitness Industry Association. Golf data came from National Golf Foundation. Tennis data came from U.S. Tennis Association

While the driving factors behind the success - or lack thereof - of the US Women's National Team and Men's National Team are often debated by many experts, pundits and coaches, there is no doubt that keeping more young players in the game would be a positive factor for the future of US Soccer at the international level. "The more kids we have playing soccer, the better the talent pool we have to draw from at the international level," said **Gregg Berhalter, US Men's National Team Head Coach**. In sum, to help grow the sport of soccer within the US, every club can have an impact by making it a goal to increase player retention.

WHY PLAYER RETENTION MATTERS

- **Club Financial Performance & Viability**

The cost of acquiring a new customer is 5-25 times more expensive than retaining an existing one. If you lose a kid at 6, you're missing out a potential 12-year customer.

- **Player Development**

The longer a player is with a club, the more you can impact that player's long-term development. High player turnover makes player development more challenging.

- **Team Development**

Teams that play together for years have a big advantage over high turnover teams in terms of communication, cohesiveness and performance.

- **A Way to "Keep Score"**

Retention numbers offer an objective way to measure and track club and coach performance.

- **To Keep Kids Active**

Participation in youth sports is on the decline. Keeping kids in the game is important to their long-term health, development and well-being.

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SECTION 2: National Benchmarks

Background and Data Set

Many clubs track player retention, but it's usually a prohibitive data management challenge for clubs to analyze the data and calculate the metrics efficiently, accurately, and consistently. It is also difficult to find practical data points of comparison. Sprocket Sports has worked with its clients and also with Satori, a non-profit organization that helps clubs measure and improve player experiences, to develop a Player Retention metric which allows clubs to easily track their numbers and compare them to national benchmarks. As part of that ongoing process, Sprocket has aggregated Player Retention data from many clubs across the country.

Sprocket's data set for this initial 2023 study is limited to large and medium-sized "travel" soccer clubs⁵ across the US, with a median size of approximately 500 players. Rec clubs and elite soccer teams (e.g., MLS Next) are excluded from this 2023 data set. The data presented below have been compared to Satori's data from the past five years, which returned similar results, providing evidence of the accuracy of these benchmarks.

While player retention is tracked for all age groups, experts understand that the "sweet spot" – and where clubs have the greatest ability to impact retention – is from ages 8 to 13. In the youngest age groups (ages 3-7), kids are sampling a wide variety of sports to find their favorite. And at the oldest age groups (ages 14-18), high school sports have a substantial impact on the decisions of players and parents to keep playing or not. In addition, at these older age groups, elite clubs recruit away many top players. In sum, retention ends up being lower and less controllable for a club at the older ages (14-18). Player retention here is defined as the percentage of players who played "last year" (the 2022-23 soccer year) in a core program and returned to play again "this year" (2023-24 soccer year). The retention benchmarks look only at players who played in the club last year – and then at those same players to see if they returned this year to the club, or not. For this analysis, players new to the club in 2023 are ignored; in other words, if a club has the same overall numbers year-over-year but is turning over 50% of their rosters, that club would be calculated at 50% player retention.

⁵ Other sports and Recreational Soccer will be included in future years.

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Benchmarks as of November, 2023

For the younger ages U8-U13, the overall national benchmark came in at 74% for the Girls and 78% for the Boys. These benchmarks were relatively consistent throughout these age groups, ranging from 70% to 83%.

For the older ages U14-U17, the overall benchmarks were lower, at 66% for the Girls and 62% for the Boys.

For Girls in the high school ages, retention remained high for 2009 Girls (last year's U14's), but declined each year from U14 to U17. This is not surprising given the reality of US high schools where academics and numerous other pursuits crowd these busy teenage schedules, and where making high school varsity rosters can be a deciding factor for girls in their choice of sports and other activities.

For Boys in High School ages, retention hovered around 65% for U14 through U16 but

then dropped off significantly to 52% for the 2006 Boys (last year's U17's).

Different Clubs Face Different Challenges, Contributing to Large Differences by Club

While national benchmarks are relatively consistent from U8 through U13, **the scores for specific clubs and coaches on player retention vary widely – from the low 50% range to the high 80% range.** A number of factors can be at play here, including competition from other clubs, geographic proximity to competitors, and access to higher level leagues. It's difficult, if not impossible, for a club to have 100% retention for all age groups and teams year-over-year, especially since retention is not fully within the control (or mission) of clubs, i.e., when a family moves out of town or when a player "moves up" to a higher league (e.g., MLS Next or ECNL). But, regardless of the circumstances, there are a number of strategies and tactics which a club can utilize to improve its Retention numbers.

U8-U13 Girls & Boys 2023 Retention Benchmarks

Last Year's Age	Birth Year	Player Retention
Girls U8	2015	71%
Girls U9	2014	78%
Girls U10	2013	81%
Girls U11	2012	72%
Girls U12	2011	70%
Girls U13	2010	73%
All Girls U8-U13		74%

Last Year's Age	Birth Year	Player Retention
Boys U8	2015	76%
Boys U9	2014	83%
Boys U10	2013	79%
Boys U11	2012	80%
Boys U12	2011	76%
Boys U13	2010	73%
All Boys U8-U13		78%

U14-U17 Girls & Boys 2023 Retention Benchmarks

Last Year's Age	Birth Year	Player Retention
Girls U14	2009	78%
Girls U15	2008	69%
Girls U16	2007	63%
Girls U17	2006	52%
All Girls U14-U17		66%

Last Year's Age	Birth Year	Player Retention
Boys U14	2009	67%
Boys U15	2008	66%
Boys U16	2007	63%
Boys U17	2006	52%
All Boys U14-U17		62%

SECTION 3: How Clubs and Coaches Can Improve Player Retention

What does it take for a club to improve player retention? Interviews conducted by Sprocket Sports with clubs across the country point to two key factors that result in higher rates of retention and, ultimately, improved performance as a club: **player enjoyment** and **player development**.

While few clubs or coaches would deny that player enjoyment and development are important aspects of any program, clubs with high rates of retention place these values at the forefront of their operations and view them as a club “mindset” to be embraced by all members of the community – directors, coaches, players, and parents.

Kyle Rodeheaver of Seattle United believes that a big part of the overall equation is whether the players enjoy what they are doing, understand the expectations and feel like they are developing. “It’s not all about winning or losing,” said Rodeheaver. “If you are playing on a team that may not be the strongest team, but you’re having a great experience and you’re enjoying your coach and your teammates — it’s very difficult for those players to leave.”

Survey data shows that these two metrics – enjoyment and development - are also most important to parents. According to a preseason survey of approximately 944 parents of players aged 8-18 conducted by Satori, parents ranked “Joy of Playing Soccer” and “Improvement as a Player” at the top of a list of six categories that also included “Winning Games & Tournaments,” “Club & Coach Communication,” “Mature as a Person,” and “Friendships.”

“The two most important elements to parents, by a large margin, were enjoyment and improvement,” notes **Adam Kuhn, Executive Director of Satori**. “Those two things were almost identically important across all levels of gender and age with only small variation based on level of play.”

“The two most important elements to parents, by a large margin, were enjoyment and improvement.”

– Adam Kuhn, Satori

Parent Priorities

Satori asked 944 parents of players between ages 8 and 18 to rate the importance of the six shown categories, with a response of 1 being the most important and 6, the least.

1. Improvement as a Player
2. Joy of Playing Soccer
3. Mature as a Person
4. Friendships
5. Club & Coach Communication
6. Winning Games & Tournaments

Player Enjoyment and Passion for the Game

Skye Eddy, founder of the Soccer Parenting Association, believes that players' passion for the game is essential to keeping them in the sport. "The most important development that we can give people is not necessarily the technical development, but the development of the love of the game," said Eddy. "It is foundational to everything else and we lose sight of that too often."

While many parents, players and coaches focus on college recruitment as the end goal or metric of success, the reality is that a very small percentage of kids actually end up playing in college. Understanding that reality helps shift the focus of what it's all about to fun. "It comes down to getting the coaches to focus on fun and enjoyment," says **Kevin Crow, Executive Director of Ballistic United SC** in Pleasanton, California. "This is a hobby for 99% of the kids out there. If you're having fun doing a hobby – no matter what it is - and you're getting better, you tend to come back. It's getting coaches to step back and not take it overly seriously. Kids

TIPS FOR CLUBS

- 1 **Foster Community & Love of the Game** – host BBQ's, ice cream socials, watch parties; organize outings to local professional or collegiate matches; encourage all teams to plan off-field get-togethers.
- 2 **Facilitate Pick-Up Games** – make fields and/or futsal facilities available at scheduled times for "free play" pick-up games, without coaching.
- 3 **Find "Just Right" Competition** – not too easy, not too hard. Place teams in the appropriate league. Allow top players seeking a greater challenge to "play up" with older age groups.
- 4 **Communicate & Engage!** – share club expectations, mission and values at the start of the season with players and parents. Encourage face-to-face meetings as much as possible. Actively listen to and partner with parents to avoid an "us vs. them" mindset. Don't wait until a player leaves the club to get feedback from your families. Invest in quality surveys and analysis that allow you to measure and improve the player experience.
- 5 **Partner With Your Coaches** - make sure your coaches know they play a big role in player retention. Set expectations, then support them with mentors, curriculum and training tips. Encourage them to track registrations and follow up with families who don't promptly register for the next season.

should be looking eagerly to come to practice – ‘hey mom, dad, let’s go! I don’t want to be late!’ If coaches are creating a fun environment, I think that happens pretty naturally.”

Let The Kids Play

Several coaches noted that one of the best ways to encourage enjoyment and passion for the game is to simply let kids play. This can be done by making time for scrimmages at each practice and by encouraging free play or pickup play, organized by the club, but uncoached.

“Sometimes, the best thing to do is coach less,” said Crow. “Sometimes you have got to just put the ball down and play.” Crow said he also thinks it is important for players to play pickup, where they can focus on their skills, try new things, and just play. He is thinking of establishing a free play area at the club’s practice complex, where coaches are not allowed.

Adam Kuhn, a coach for the Chicago Fire Youth Soccer Club (in addition to his role as Executive Director, Satori), says that a 15-minute scrimmage at the end of every practice has a huge impact on a player’s enjoyment of the sport. “Have a scrimmage and don’t focus on coaching points, or on

telling kids what they need to do better. For the last 10-15 minutes of training, just be a fan. Notice the things kids are doing well,” said Kuhn. “Show the kids that you care no matter how hard you were on them for the first 75 minutes of training. Let them see that for the last 15 minutes, you’re excited for them and you’re happy for them.”

Kuhn said players are far more likely to remember practice positively if they end by playing a fun scrimmage. If someone asks them how training went on a particular day, they are most likely going to remember how they felt at the end of practice. “And so it only takes 10-15 minutes to make a big impact on that feeling, which I think is a contributor to their overall enjoyment of the sport, and I think that the more they enjoy the sport, the more time they’ll put into it,” said Kuhn.

John O’Sullivan, Director of Coaching at Apex FC in Bend, Oregon, also points to the importance of creating positive and enjoyable training sessions. “The best way to structure training is to ask yourself if you would want to play in it. Because if the answer is ‘no,’ then probably your players don’t want to be a player in that practice, either.”

“ Kids should be looking eagerly to come to practice – ‘hey mom, dad, let’s go! I don’t want to be late!’ If coaches are creating a fun environment, I think that happens pretty naturally.”

– Kevin Crow, Ballistic United SC

The Importance of Team Camaraderie and Club Community

An important element of player enjoyment is the creation of friendships, camaraderie, and community. If players develop strong friendships with other teammates and feel a sense of belonging and loyalty to the team, they are more likely to stay with the club even if they have a losing season or go through a slump. Likewise, parents who connect on a social level with other parents on the team and feel known and heard by coaches and staff will create strong bonds of loyalty to the club. Creating community takes a concerted effort on the part of the club in an era where kids come to a club from different schools and different towns and the only time they spend together is at practice or at a game.

Sean Russell, a U8 and U11 Girls Coach for Seattle United, said he thinks that camaraderie within a team is critical to player retention. “I think creating a sort of culture within the group, and creating friendships within the team is one of the biggest pieces of it,” said Russell. “Because the things that I think keep players coming back to soccer and back to our team are one: they like soccer and they enjoy it. And two: they also enjoy the social aspect of it and enjoy being around their friends.” Russell says that one of the ways he helps foster friendships is by having players take time after every game to give each other “shout outs” of all the things they did well.

To build genuine camaraderie, players need to respect each other, support each other and understand that that they win as a team and lose as a team. The process of team building starts at practice. **Christina Murillo, Head of Development Phase (U11-U14) at Chicago Fire Youth Soccer Club,** has her players sit in a circle at every practice and say something about their week in order to create an environment where everyone feels welcome and kids can make new friends. “I think it’s important to instill the idea

that ‘OK, we’re not always going to be able to put you with your friends, but you’re going to make new friends,’” says Murillo. “And that’s good. It is great that they learn to get along with people from different backgrounds. That’s an important life skill.”

Many coaches talked about giving players leadership roles and responsibilities during practice as a way to get them more engaged with their teammates and foster camaraderie within the team. “I do a lot of work, particularly as the teams get older, on enabling players to lead things,” said Russell. “They have to lead little discussions during practice, they have to work on strategy for the scrimmage and I try to give as much of that responsibility to players as I can, just to get a little bit more of that investment and buy in from them.”

PRIORITIZE INCLUSION TO BOOST PLAYER RETENTION

“When an individual is a minority in any way, there needs to be an extra effort for the player to feel included. Diversity comes in different categories, such as race, socio-economic status, and many other variables that we cannot see on the surface. It’s the reason I thought about quitting in 8th grade, because I didn’t feel a sense of relatedness to my team. And a lot of that was because of the coach.”

– Christina Murillo, Chicago Fire Youth Soccer Club

Andy Philips, U8 Boys Coach at Sparta United in Salt Lake City, Utah, said he tries to create team chemistry by changing team leadership roles. “One thing we have implemented this year is that at every practice and every game we choose two captains, and those captains are in charge of the warmup, and of maintaining a kind of professionalism throughout the game,” said Philips. “They’re working with their teammates, and they take ownership of the team, so that’s huge.”

Many coaches and directors also stressed the importance of hosting team gatherings as well as club-wide events - such as watch parties or BBQ nights - on a regular basis in order to create a strong sense of community among players, coaches and parents. Apex FC has a weekly “technical night” where all the players and all the coaches come out and the teams go around to different stations, so that all the kids get to know all the coaches. O’Sullivan says the club started this in response to feedback from parents who complained that the club has several big-name coaches who coach one or two teams, but their kids had never seen or met any of them. “It’s been a big hit,” says O’Sullivan, “now every kid gets a weekly touch point, even if it’s only 10-15 minutes, and you have big-name coaches who know every kid’s name.” The club also has a popular trick-or-treat night where the kids come to practice in costumes. “It fosters this sense of community,” says O’Sullivan. “We’re not just a group of people who happen to wear the same uniform.”

TIPS FOR COACHES

- 1 Allow Time for “Play”** – reserve the last 15 minutes of practice for competitive games and scrimmages with minimal coaching. A dose of healthy competitive fun keeps kids looking forward to the next practice.
- 2 Watch Professional Games & Play FIFA** – get the team together for a watch party, let the kids know when games are on and talk about them at practice. If kids play video games in their free time, make sure they’re playing FIFA (now known as “EA Sports FC”)!
- 3 Drive Individual Player Development** – Let players set their own goals and help them devise a plan to reach those goals. Give feedback on a regular basis, but always start with the positive.
- 4 Build Relationships with Players & Parents** – Pick a parent and/or player each week to engage with just to get to know them better and see how they are doing on and off the pitch. Let them know you take an interest and have their back as a coach and mentor.
- 5 Develop Team Camaraderie** – Take time at practice for players to give each other “shout outs” or just to share something about their week. Let players take turns leading warm-ups, stretches or discussions. Ask for volunteers to organize monthly team get-togethers with parents and players.

Parent Engagement

Many clubs think they are communicating with parents because they send out a lot of emails, but that's not enough. As the saying goes, "the greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place." Face-to-face engagement with parents is critical, and coaches should understand that it is part of their job to develop relationships with parents. "Too many coaches think the parent is almost like the enemy and all they are going to do is criticize," says Crow of Ballistic United. "I say you have to do the opposite. When a parent comes to you, it's coming from love for their kid – it doesn't matter if they are right or wrong in that moment– you should listen and take the time to engage with that parent, who is the customer.

You can agree to disagree at the end of the day, but you have to listen. I think most people just want to be heard."

Changing the language from "managing parents" to "engaging parents" is a good place to start, according to **Murray Findlay, Executive Director of Chicago Edge Soccer Club**. "Everyone's on the same team, everyone wants the best for all the players on the team," says Findlay. "How do you work together to achieve that? It's getting around the mentality of "us and them." He believes that in-person communication is important for humanizing everyone because you can lose the nuances and personal touch in emails and online meetings.

RETENTION TIPS: YOUNGER VS. OLDER KIDS

Levels of Competition

"For younger players, it should be a less competitive and more encouraging environment," said **Tara Bilanski of Apex FC**. "For older players, it can be more competitive, but it also needs to meet their individual needs as they look forward to next level opportunities (ie. college) as well."

Decision Making

"It's important to keep parents of younger players involved in the decision-making processes as they will decide where their child plays," said **Murray Findlay of Chicago Edge Soccer Club**. "At the older age groups, there is more player engagement as they get more agency over their lives," said Findlay.

Social Groups and Flexibility

Keeping social groups together becomes increasingly important as players age. "For the older players, it is partly about keeping social groups together as some players will have been on teams with each other for 5 or more years as they start entering their high school ages," says **Sean Russell of Seattle United**. "And it also becomes more about being flexible with the high school players and recognizing that they have a lot of different things pulling them in different directions, like college recruiting, SAT's, etc."

Player Development

Player development is the second critical factor in achieving player retention. Players who continuously develop their skills and can recognize their improvement will stay motivated and want to keep playing.

“Player development drives retention,” says Rodeheaver of Seattle United. “If a player doesn’t feel like they’re developing, or the family doesn’t feel like their player is developing, then they’re more likely to find a different sport where they do feel like they’re going to develop. If a player feels like they’re developing, they’re not going to leave,” he said.

Cesar Ramirez, Girls and Boys Coach at Chicago Edge Soccer Club, said player development should be a club’s first priority. “Player development should always be the most important thing that we focus on. I’m competitive by nature so, of course, I want to

see my teams and players have success and win games. But not at the expense of player development,”

Unlike many other countries which place a primary emphasis on youth development, in the US, parents often equate winning with club success. Findlay of Chicago Edge highlighted that it falls on clubs to change this mindset. “Some of the more discerning parents can differentiate a performance from a result,” said Findlay. “But I think most of the parents can’t, quite honestly,” said Findlay. “Part of a director’s job is to educate the parents and highlight the difference.”

Goal setting and honest player feedback is important, of course, but it’s important to communicate in an encouraging and motivating way. **Renee Vai, U9 Girls Coach at Chicago Edge**, said she thinks positive communication is an important factor in keeping players improving and wanting to

HOW TO KEEP GIRLS IN THE GAME

With participation rates for girls’ soccer on the decline in the US, Sprocket Sports asked leading clubs how to reverse the trend. The key? More female coaches.

“Having female leadership within the club and female coaches helps with retention on the girls side, especially at the younger ages” said **Josha Kruvand, Director at Evanston Soccer, in Evanston, IL**. “They see a role model that they can relate to and it makes them feel less intimidated, and it just feels like a more welcoming environment.”

Angeline Impelido, a Coach at Evanston Soccer, said when she began coaching club soccer in 2005, she was the only female coach at her club at the time. “I’ve coached both boys and girls,” said Impelido, “It’s different with girls. I think just being able to relate to them changes how they talk to me - they get to be more themselves with me than with male coaches.”

In a profession that is still hugely dominated by men, **Tara Bilanski, Executive Director of Apex FC**, said that her club is able to attract more female coaches than other clubs because they have women in leadership positions, and having more female staff and coaches inspires young players. “Girls need to feel accepted and confident and then they can soar,” said Bilanski. “Boys need this to some degree as well, but not always.”

return to the team. “I don’t operate from a deficit mindset of ‘this is what you need to do better,’” said Vai. “It’s like, ‘this is what you do really well. Let’s identify those gaps, and let’s work on reaching a place where you feel good about yourself, and you feel like you’re accomplishing what you want to accomplish.’”

Competitive Balance

In order for players to develop their skills, as well as stay motivated and positive, it’s crucial for them to be competing at the appropriate level – not too easy and not too difficult. Don’t place teams in leagues in which they are likely to get clobbered at every match. Conversely, playing in too easy of a league gives players an inflated sense of their abilities and doesn’t push them to improve their skills. Development is also facilitated by allowing top players on a team to practice and sub with teams in older age groups or higher level teams.

Paul Spacey, Director of Coaching at FC England in Los Angeles, noted that competitive balance, especially for older players, is critical to aid player development. “They want it to be competitive. And when I asked our kids when we’ve lost the game 1-0 how much they enjoyed it, in comparison to a game that they won 6-0, without any exceptions, they all prefer losing 1-0 against a good team,” said Spacey.

“Player development should always be the most important thing that we focus on. I’m competitive by nature so, of course, I want to see my teams and players have success and win games. But not at the expense of player development.”

– Cesar Ramirez, Girls and Boys Coach at Chicago Edge Soccer Club

Personal Development

Many clubs also spoke to the importance of engaging with kids on a personal level as a key part of their development as players. “Coaches should strive to do more than just coach the technical aspects of the game,” said **Marco de Ruiter, Director of Sparta United Soccer Club in Salt Lake City, UT**. “The coaches with the highest retention rates are the ones who are dedicated to personal development and who really care about them. They are not just a soccer teacher, but they also check in: ‘How are things going? ‘How are things going at school?’ I think those are the tools that make players come back.”

Vai at Chicago Edge said that she makes sure players know she is there to help. “Any type of mentor-mentee relationship is about building a foundation of trust and making sure that players know that I am in their corner,” said Vai. “From that point on, it helps them understand that I have their best interest at heart.”

“If you’re a soccer coach and you’ve been in the game a while then you have access to all the same YouTube reels, the same X’s and O’s, and tactics,” said Spacey. “So, the differentiating factor is the engagement with players and whether the players feel that it’s a real engagement and not a false or fake one that the coach is just doing because it’s a job. The kids know that. They can feel that.”

Crow of Ballistic United asks every coach to pick one player and one parent each week to engage and build a deeper relationship simply by asking about their favorite club or player or if they have any brothers or sisters. “Whatever it might be – get to know your players as individuals,” says Crow. “Those things help you ride out the ups and downs of the season which almost every team has.”

Educate and Support Coaches

The success of any club depends on the strength of its coaches. Clubs with high player retention rates place an emphasis not only on recruiting the best coaches who buy into the priorities and values of the club, but also on educating and supporting them. Investing in coaches also makes them more likely to stay with club and provides a consistent club experience that is key for player retention.

“Developed players are a consequence of developed coaches,” said **Bobby Capewell, Executive Director of Ascension Flight Soccer Club in Louisiana**. “Our strategy is to educate coaches gradually over time and raise the standard of the majority of the coaches. People think they know what it means to be a coach because they used to be a player, but that’s like saying a horse knows how to be a jockey and vice versa. We pay for all coaches to go through coaching education on the club’s dime.”

Tara Bilanski, Executive Director of Apex FC, said that Apex has an in-house education structure where experienced coaches mentor new ones, which helps keep coaches working for the club. “This mentorship allows for young coaches to grow in a comfortable environment,” said Bilanski.

Spacey of FC England attributes his club’s success in attracting coaches to the club’s reputation as well as its clear, upfront communication. “Complete transparency from the outset - it’s so rare and people appreciate it,” said Spacey. “Once you have a way of operating that people can see and hear about, coaches come to you.”

Offering competitive pay so coaches can make coaching a full-time job is another important factor to retain coaches at a club, said Rodeheaver of Seattle United. A good culture helps too. “Are they supported or left on an island?”

Providing a good curriculum for coaches to follow, especially when they first arrive at a club, will help make them feel supported, said **Angeline Impelido, a U8 and U9 Girls Coach at Evanston Soccer in Evanston, IL**, speaking from first-hand experience with the club. “All the directors or even just the other coaches, they’re always providing material for us and helping us out, giving us a good game plan or footprint for how the season should be run,” said Impelido. “There was a set plan and a lot of guidance and support from the directors.”

Coach Retention and Coach Fit

Clubs with strong *coach retention* typically have high *player retention*. Given the importance of the “relationship game” with players and parents, it’s difficult to retain players if a club experiences substantial turnover in coaches every year.

Another key factor is “*coach fit*” – ensuring that coaches are hired and assigned to teams where they will be most effective. As **Michael Cockroft, Executive Director of Chicago Rush Soccer Club** notes, “When we’re hiring coaches, we try to fit a coach with an appropriate age group. Some coaches are better suited to coach older boys, or younger girls. Certain coaches are better at one age group than another.”

“Developed players are a consequence of developed coaches. Our strategy is to educate our coaches gradually over time and raise the standard of the majority of coaches.”

– Bobby Capewell, Executive Director, Ascension Flight Soccer Club

NET PROMOTER SCORE AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE PLAYER RETENTION

Club leaders and coaches often believe that player retention is outside their control, and some Analytics gurus may consider player retention to be a “lagging metric” - given that you cannot measure it until after the season when a player returns, or not. Another tool in the toolkit - and more of a “leading metric” or “leading indicator” - is Net Promoter Score (“NPS”), frequently used in the business world to track customer loyalty. Adam Kuhn of Satori has found NPS to be highly correlated with player retention – and considers NPS to be not only a measurement of “player experience,” but also an “actionable” tool for club leaders and coaches.

NPS data collection for clubs is simple: conduct a survey of parents once a season to assess “how likely they are to recommend XYZ club to a friend” and then ask why. This regular feedback loop not only provides a way to track progress for the club, but also gleans insights for club leaders and coaches as to what’s going well and areas for improvement. To learn more, contact Sprocket Sports to hear about the GRO program, a partnership with Satori to measure and improve player experiences.

SprocketSports

Sprocket Sports is a modern, all-in-one management and marketing platform designed specifically for youth sports clubs. Its comprehensive technology helps clubs reduce operating expenses, increase revenues, build their brand and engage with families. In addition to player registration and payments, Sprocket Sports offers websites, marketing and communication modules, administrative tools, dashboards, mobile apps, and more.

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