



Success in Tryouts

By Bruce Brownlee

Soccer tryout season arrives soon for many players and coaches. Glee and heartbreak will once again prevail, perhaps in equal parts, as coaches and players struggle to organize competitive youth soccer teams.

Because of the growth of the sport in teams and players, the great majority of coaches who will be selecting youth teams never played soccer in their youth, never took part in a soccer tryout, and don't have enough experience in team management to recognize many common tryout perils. Similarly, most players and parents are driven to tryouts by misguided motivations that arise partly because of the lack of a long cultural history in the sport.

These players and parents look to their youth experience with other sports and subconsciously use the behavior of coaches, players in these sports as a model.

Despite their best efforts, coaches will make tryout mistakes that will handicap their newly assembled teams for months or years to come. Similarly, many players and parents will fall into tryout traps that will provide at least a year of regret and, in some cases, lasting difficulty in the game.

We explore here some common myths about tryouts, and then look at fourteen ways to fail as a coach at tryouts, and how to learn from these failures. We conclude with a practical plan for clearing out problem players before tryouts begin.

Tryout Facts and Fiction

There are many common beliefs about tryouts that are simply wrong.

1. Fiction: The purpose of tryouts is to find the most competitive players.

Fact: A series of successful tryouts actually sort out the players and teams so that players are lined up with teams with other players of similar skills, similar competitiveness, and a similar commitment to training.

2. Fiction: Coaches can easily recognize all the best players.

Fact: Many youth coaches do not have sufficient experience to reliably

distinguish between players with slightly varying ability levels. Many do not quickly recognize promising project players, or overlook gifted players who have crucial abilities to read the game or make clever attacking passes. It is too easy to overlook such players in favor of larger and faster players, or players who use the ball a great deal.

3. Fiction: The best players are selected.

Fact: An assortment of the best and not-so-best players are selected.

4. Fiction: Many players got their position through politics.

Fact: A few players get their position through politics. The coach's daughter, the board member's son, these are common. In some cases average players make a better team because they provide transportation for the star player who has no ride to practice and matches. It happens.

5. Fiction: Good teams don't have vacancies.

Fact: Healthy teams change a few players each year. Job relocations, injury, and commitments to other sports take a few players away every year, even from the best teams.

6. Fiction: Coaches will always want the star players.

Fact: Some star players have nightmare parents who are never happy and who annoy and disturb most of the other team parents. Better coaches avoid these "stars" for the sake of protecting team chemistry.

7. Fiction: Players who aren't on the best teams by U14 will never make it.

Fact: U16 is more like it. Many U14 stars disappear by U18. Some who depended on athleticism are passed by those who develop skill and tactical speed. Others fall to injury, bad home situations, and interest in other activities.

8. Fiction: There is nothing that a player can do to improve at tryouts.

Fact: There are many effective steps to follow in preparing for a tryout. See [How to win friends and influence coaches at ODP tryouts](#). All other things equal, better skilled and more athletic players do better at tryouts.

9. Fiction: The best players should try out for the best team.

Fact: Below U17, it is more important to get excellent training than to be on the best team. Parents and players should seek out the very finest trainers available, even if the trainers don't yet have killer teams. Many early "killer teams" are built by enthusiastic parent coaches with limited training ability but great organizational and recruiting ability. These teams fade away during the high school years, overshadowed by teams that gained their playing ability through extensive training and player development.

Learning from Tryout Failures

Now that we've explored a few of the more popular tryout myths, let's enjoy fifteen of the most common and entertaining failures experienced by well-meaning coaches.

1. Taking a player as a project, but failing to explain it to the player. A project player is a kid with outstanding athleticism or with exciting playing ability, but who lacks a well-rounded set of abilities consistent with the rest of the team. A project player should be expected to attend all practices and extra practices, and to work harder than other players to achieve skills and tactical speed consistent with the rest of the team.

Often project players are selected for athleticism (speed, size, strength, aggression), but chosen from rosters of less competitive or less committed teams where training and travel requirements were less demanding. When the coach does not get total player and parent commitment to both the more demanding training and travel schedule of the new team, and to the extra training that goes along with the "project player" status, there will be regret all around and the experiment will fail.

2. Promising a spot to a returning player before tryouts. Your sentimental favorite, near the lower third of your team, is looking sad, worried about making next year's team. In a moment of sentimental weakness, you confide that you have already decided to keep that player on for next year. Ten minutes later, you realize that, one of these years, your sentimental favorite has to go, but you've just dragged on the torture for another year instead of moving the player on to a team consistent with the player's ability and commitment level.
3. Being reluctant to cut an injured player. A nice kid near the bottom third looked good to go. This is your first year with the team and you didn't really get to see much of this weaker player before the player was injured, out for several weeks. Tryout time arrives, what to do? Well, will it do any good to delay moving the player on to a team for which the player is better suited?

At the same time, don't miss a chance to get a life time commitment and a loyal player by keeping an injured player who is likely to come back and be a big contributor. Really good players, in terms of both performance and behavior, are always hard to find, so if the injury is the only problem, retain the player.

4. Failing to provide a clear plan for the year to all prospective players. As an adult, you, the coach, would certainly not take on a year-long consulting assignment without a look at the statement of work or a project plan. Why should a family and their player be attracted to your program if you can't show a clear training and competitive plan for the year? If you want the best players, fight for them the fair way, prepare.
5. Not checking out families of prospective recruits. No matter how good the player looks in tryouts, and no matter how congenial and team-oriented the player seems to be, taking on a set of problem parents can sabotage your plan for developing the team. Many great players show up with nightmare parents you will never

- please, and who will work to undermine your authority or to redirect the team away from your goals and toward their goals.
6. Signing up the star player who is a whiner or discipline problem. Sign up a whiner and then spend the year focusing all your attention on placating or disciplining the whiner. The time you need to spend to develop the rest of the team will be lost, and, at the end of the year, the whiner will probably move on. You've lost most of a year trying to put things right, and a lot of your previously loyal players will be thinking about moving on.
 7. Carrying a weaker player who is not improving. Don't prolong the agony. If a kid is not improving and is not really working hard to get better, the coach has the responsibility of making space available for an ambitious player who deserves a chance. Stop kidding yourself, if you haven't done any good for the kid in the last year, let someone else have a chance, make the cut.
 8. Not being prepared for tryouts. A great many coaches waste a lot of their time personally registering tryout players, struggling to find bibs and cones, and getting the tryout started. Precious time lost at the start of the tryout takes away vital observation time, and leads to hasty decisions. Get a couple of soccer moms to cover registration, have a tryout plan, and keep it simple.
 9. Failure to introduce oneself. It never fails to amaze. Ask 10 kids coming back from tryouts who their coaches were, most don't know the full name of the coaches present. This is a crime. You, the coach, must establish a relationship with the tryout players. You are trying to recruit a few of them. Make the players repeat your name, even as you learn theirs.
 10. Having too many tryout activities. Coaches who go through twelve different activities in a tryout waste precious time in transition between activities, taking time away from small sided match observation. This is a serious failure, leading to errors in selection.
 11. Focusing the tryout on a series of technical evaluations. Don't surround your tryout players with parents with clipboards and stopwatches. Dribbling through cones for the fastest time is not a match skill. Time wasted in elaborate technical evaluations can not be made up later, and wastes precious match observation time. Instead, use technical work with individuals and partners with ball as a technical warm-up, and observe the technical warm-up.
 12. Failing to get to meet and talk to the parents. Committing to a player without meeting the parents is about as scary as agreeing to marry someone you've only talked to on the telephone but never met in person. You just never know what you are going to get.
 13. Not teaching a lesson. You have to teach the rest of the year, so why not teach a short lesson as part of one of your tryout sessions. What if that potential star player you are observing actually hates to train and learn and prefers to goof off in every training situation except scrimmages. Wouldn't it be better to find out now?
 14. Not inviting players to tryout. Past a certain age (about U13 or U14), kids won't show up for tryouts unless they will have a good chance of making the team. They won't come out just to be cannon fodder and to get cut at the end. If you want good players to attend the tryout, you'll get more by calling them and inviting them.

15. Not clearing out problem players before tryouts begin. Don't scare off new players by letting them see your old problem players whining, goofing off, or showing you disrespect. Move out the problem players well before tryouts, or they will cost you much more than they've already cost you.

Orchestrating Graceful Exits

16. If you, the ambitious coach, want to recruit good new players at tryouts, you need two things: a happy team and a vacancy. Encouraging unhappy players to move on to other teams is a good way to create a vacancy and a happy team at the same time. The key to making this work well is to start early.

Suppose, for example, that your team has a really excellent player. You love the kid, and the player does a great job on the field every week, a dominating player with real ability.

However, despite all your efforts, heart to heart talks, memos, e-mails, phone calls, personal meetings, and behind the scene efforts, the hovering parents of the excellent player can't be made happy. They choose to worry about minor problems, to find something to complain about every day, and like to pick and choose the team activities they'll permit their player to attend. The problem parents were unhappy on their last two teams, and they're not happy in your team. Your other parents avoid them. You, the coach, have to help this player and family move on to a new, and hopefully happier situation.

The key to finding a graceful exit for each departing player is starting early, well before tryouts. Away from the team and other parents, start a conversation with the parents. At first, see if you really can address the problems discussed. Most likely you can't.

Next, once you realize that there's no way to save the player, find a way to agree with the parent's complaints about the team situation, whatever they might be. Continue by agreeing that you have been unable to solve the problems mentioned, and don't have hope for resolution going forward. Then, shut up. Silence works in your behalf as the parents work themselves into the corner and slowly begin to realize that they are on the way out. Over a period of several weeks, you and the parents will start to agree that you don't see a future with the player in the team. Before long, you can start discussing plans to have the player slide off the team at the end of your final season with the expectation of trying out somewhere else.

On the final day, show respect for the player and don't get sentimental.

