

Tennis vs Soccer

different approaches
you decide

Terry,

Great class and interesting topics!

Kyle started playing soccer when he was 4. He had a few practices and then he started playing. Since that time he's played probably 150 league games keeping score.

When Kyle was 5 he started tennis lessons.

Tennis by nature is a pretty difficult/confusing sport to play. You have to learn how to serve, how to volley, how to hit a forehand, backhand, overhead, flat serve, topspin serve, backspin volley, etc. You are on your own, and referee your own matches. The scoring system is also pretty strange. Get into a tie breaker, and many adults are confused. Kids think it will be real fun to play, show up on a court, and after chasing and shooting balls all over the parking lot, they eventually give up. There is no instant success. Tennis is all about ball control and it takes a long time to develop the basic skills. Until you can control the ball, you can't really play. You chase balls.

For years, Kyle never played a real game of tennis – despite taking lots of lessons. It was all fun games, drills, etc. Many of the parents, on the sidelines, discuss if the lessons are worthwhile. Does Craig (the tennis pro) know what he is doing? "They never play tennis." You'll see a fair number of kids come and go. I started wondering myself, but I've known Craig a long time, and trust he knows what he is doing. He's a well known area pro. Only a few players hang with it. Everyone wants instant success these days.

Last year, after taking lessons for over 3 years, Kyle played his first competitive games of tennis in a few interclub matches. He lost most of the games, but won a few points here and there, against mostly older players. The club pros write down scores, but they don't make a big deal which club won or lost the overall match. You'd have to ask them to know.

Craig kept moving Kyle up, to more and more advance lessons. This past winter he practiced mainly with 12-14 year olds. This spring he moved up another bracket to practice with Craig's tournament players, typically only high school competitive players. Craig asks all the time how old Kyle is, "He's just 9?".

Since he was 5, I'd say Kyle has played no more than 10-15 actual tennis sets in competition. All the practice times and lessons focused on ball control, learning how to hit certain shots, learning how to keep score, basic things. He's played over a hundred soccer games in the same time. There was never a focus on winning a game, in fact there were no/few games to worry about winning.

This past spring, Craig started matching Kyle up against high school competitive players. Kyle is 9, almost everyone he practices/plays with now is between 14-18. They'll play knock out, etc. where you start with 6 kids on either side of the net, take a shot, pass the racket and play until the last man is standing. You get 3 misses, then you are out.

Playing against high school players, he is often the last man standing! A few weeks ago when Kyle won, Craig asked the other player how old he was, and the player was 17 and on Francis Howells tennis team. He had beat out the other 8 or so teenage players as well.

Last week he played in an interclub match against Creve Couer Racket Club. All of his matches against older players. He won 2, tied 1, lost 1 match. The players keep their own score, and referee their own matches. There is no big focus on which club won or lost.

What's this to do with soccer? Well it's pretty much what you've described in the class. The teams today focus so much on winning, individual skill development can take a back seat. Children start playing soccer at 4 because it's one of the few sports you can "seemingly" play at that age. It is relatively easy to explain kicking the ball into a goal and staying within a few lines. The rules are left up to the referees to enforce. You can run around, kick a goal here or there, and seemingly play the sport.

Despite saying scores don't matter, everyone keeps score. All soccer leagues Kyle has played in update and post the standings on their websites regularly to tell of team success. Everything is tracked, from goals allowed to goals scored, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc. While the skills involved to really play soccer are much like tennis, slowly learned over time, the focus even at a very young age shifts to the team score, so players on a "good" or "bad" team, end up feeling good or bad – likely by the parents. Parents are always discussing the win loss stats on the sidelines.

Kyle plays several sports and enjoys them all. Someday he will probably pick a few to concentrate on, but for now he enjoys soccer, tennis, baseball, swimming and golf. The only stressful thing for him in soccer is the whole club soccer thing. Each club seems to have something negative to say about the other. Players and parents discuss what teams and which clubs are the best. Ultimately, I think finding a good coach and playing with friends is the key. If it's not fun, they won't keep playing long anyway.

It would be interesting if soccer players just trained for a few years, scoreless, before playing in actual league games. If the focus was not getting into competitive league play right away, but to have fun and develop skills first.

But like tennis, the parents would probably think the coach/pro did not know what he was doing!
Great class.

Thanks,