



## Equal Playing Time (EPT) in Youth Recreational Soccer

"Equal playing time is a debate about the value of inclusion in sport. At the heart of the value of inclusion is the belief that anyone who wants to play sport should have the opportunity. Within the value of inclusion sits the issue of playing time. One way of being inclusive is to ensure that all team members play the same amount of time in a game or, alternatively, over the course of a season, all team members have roughly the same amount of playing time. That is, in both instances, of you make the team, you get to play."<sup>1</sup>

If you do a Google Canada search for "Equal Playing Time", you will receive approximately 719,000 hits. One thing is consistent, regardless of the sport, the organization, or the country of origin: ***Equal Playing Time is in the best interest of not only the athlete, but also the coach, the organization, and the sport itself to the extent that in most youth sport, EPT is the rule, not the exception.***

To really understand why the findings were so consistent, we must look at the bigger issue and ask what the core purpose of youth sport is. Most experts and parents alike look to youth sport for learning the skill required by the sport itself as well as life skills such as self-esteem; participation and fitness; communication; teamwork, respect, and good sportsmanship; freedom to experiment, take risks and explore challenges, and make mistakes – all in a non-threatening environment. An athlete does not learn these lessons solely by watching or sitting on the bench.

### **The Benefits of Equal Playing Time**

#### ***For The Youth Athlete:***

***Avoid contention among players.*** Youth are sensitive to and intuitive with favouritism regardless of the intention of the coach. Perceived favouritism demoralizes players, creates resentment, and they fail to try their best. In the worst case scenario, they give up the sport. Team wins at the expense of individual self-esteem are in fact, losses.

***Minimize player fatigue.*** If the top players get exhausted due to too much playing time, and the other players have limited game experience, it could cost the whole team in tough physical games.

***Maximize player development.*** People learn by doing. Without access to playing time and game specific situations, players cannot learn. 'Competitiveness' of sport should be about self-improvement and setting attainable goals. Winning is inherent in sport and is difficult to de-emphasize. However, winning at the cost to the individual impedes player, team, and club development as well as the advancement of sport.

***Active for Life.*** "Players may choose to play soccer as a purely recreational activity regardless of their level of ability or disability. Soccer can be enjoyed as an integral part of any personal lifelong wellness plan. Adult players can also become active in the coaching and administration of the sport. The recruitment and retention of players, coaches, referees and administrators is key to the ongoing development of both grass roots and elite soccer in Canada".<sup>2</sup>

#### ***For The Coach:***

***Avoid contention/confrontation between coaches and parents.*** Parents will not objectively judge their own child's ability and coaches should not expect objectivity from parents. If each team member is shown respect, fairness, and given the opportunity to play and develop, parents won't need to judge.

***Simplify coaching decisions.*** Exposing all players to all situations means that coaches don't need to guess about who can do what or handle what. Knowing what your athletes can do in a game situation makes coaching easier.

***Improve team chemistry.*** Focus comes when players perceive that everyone is being treated fairly and working as a team. Plus, athletes who are having fun have better game AND practice attendance.

#### ***For The Organization/Club and the Sport:***

***Retain members and athletes.*** 75% of youth drop out of team sport by the time they are 13 – mostly because they are not having fun anymore. Loss of confidence or self-esteem means loss of fun; fear of failure is not fun.

Emphasis on teamwork and both joint AND individual victory promotes the sense of belonging, contribution and enjoyment AND continued participation.

***Recognize equal investments.*** Equal access to game situations is the logical expectation of an equal financial contribution.

***Encourage volunteerism.*** Grassroots youth sport organizations rely on volunteers to deliver programs to their membership. Volunteerism suffers when the membership is unhappy (yes, over playing time) and then the levels of the program degrade along with the number of skilled volunteers.

1. Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport: <http://www.cces.ca/en/equaltime>  
2. Canadian Soccer Association: [http://www.canadasoccer.com/wellness/2008\\_LTPD\\_Wellness.pdf](http://www.canadasoccer.com/wellness/2008_LTPD_Wellness.pdf)



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### Strategies for Coaches to Deliver EPT

*Communicate.* Conduct pre-season meetings with players/parents and share your goals, your techniques, and your expectations with the whole team. Commit publicly to EPT and respect for the sport, the officials, the volunteers, the players and the organization. Know how to reach your team members and make sure they know how to reach you. Request updates regarding illness, vacation time, and family commitments so that you know when you will be missing players on practice and game day.

*Plan.* For game day, plan your lines. For practice day, plan your drills. Having a plan and being organized will enable you to deliver the program fairly to all members of the team and create an inclusive environment.

*Stick to your Commitments.* Honour your prepared game line-ups that ensure equal playing time for all your players. Stick to your game plan even if the team is losing - - kids play sports to have fun, not to win. Deliver on what you committed to publicly.

*Have a Helper.* Recruiting a trusted helper who shares the EPT philosophy will enable the coach to focus on game strategy and instruction during the game. Concentrate on watching the game and identifying each and every success your players' experience - big or small. Trying to keep track of how much each child plays during the game is next to impossible. Your helper can watch the elapsed game time to ensure line changes are made fairly.

*Look for Opportunities.* Help players earn "starter" time with contests set up at practice. Earn penalty kicks as rewards for sportsmanship, skill development, or teamwork. Assign "homework" geared to improve competence AND confidence. Find rewards for ALL athletes on the team and the team will reap the rewards.

### Pickering Soccer Club Equal Playing Time Policy

The major aim of the Pickering Soccer Club is to promote, develop, and govern the game of soccer in the City of Pickering. One of the ways to achieve this is to provide equal playing time for all players participating in our Recreational program.

All Directors, Coordinators and Coaches should ensure that this policy is followed.

If a parent believes that their child is not being treated fairly, they should discuss their concern(s) with his/her coach. Should the concern(s) not be effectively addressed, the parent should contact (in writing) the appropriate Recreational director.

### Pickering Soccer Club Code of Conduct

*Coaches Code* (with respect to EPT):

- Treat players with respect and allow them to participate equally no matter what talent they have.

So, what does all this mean at the Pickering Soccer Club?

We ask, indeed insist, that each and every valued volunteer coach adhere to the policies and codes stipulated above. While factors such as skill, attitude, attendance, conditioning, position, standings, and roster size, can certainly influence games at highly competitive levels, they are certainly not the Pickering Soccer Club's primary criterion for allocating playing time in the recreational environment.

The interpretation of our policy has always allowed for some flexibility based on **the season as a whole**. When a coach becomes aware that a player may miss the next two weeks of games/practices due to vacation, he/she may wish to allocate that player some additional playing time this week. If a player(s) played the whole of the game last week based on the numbers of players in attendance (i.e.: a reduced/thin roster), then perhaps someone else will play more than that player(s) this week. These fluctuations are acceptable in the spirit of equal playing time over the course of the season.

Sports Esteem put it aptly when they explained that **"When teams exist for the team's sake and not for the players', as is the case in professional and collegiate sports, then coaches are left with no other choice than to give more time to their best players. However, until that test is true, coaches should make sure their player times are equal."**

Bottom line, coaching recreational soccer is about the children and their full inclusion. It is not about the coach, or someone's personal agenda. We want the youth of Pickering on the pitch, enjoying being part of the team and the community, staying physically active, and of course, enjoying the Beautiful Game!