

Player Development: Practice vs Games
Tom Turner, Ohio North Youth Soccer Association
September 2017



Soccer is a long-term athletic development sport, requiring a significant investment in team training / self-practice hours to reach a level of excellence.

Before the modern era, in the days when free play was the normal path to competence, youngsters would regularly compete in soccer activities for 2-3 hours a day, seven days a week. It was not uncommon for enthusiastic kids to log 10-20 hours of soccer per week in isolated skill development and in unstructured games of varying configurations with players of varying ages.



However, in the American soccer environment, it is not uncommon for aspiring young players to compete in over 100 games during the calendar year; invariably at the expense of a sound long-term training program.

Many adults and coaches believe that game play is more important than training at the youth level.

The numbers say otherwise....

The table below shows that a top level professional soccer match lasts 90 minutes. Each team is allowed a maximum of three substitutions. Once a player leaves the field, they cannot return. The “active” time, when the ball is in live play, is approximately 67% of the game time. Formal studies show the actual possession time per player (~2 minutes) to be very close to the statistical average (~2.14 minutes).

Level	Game Form	Max Game Roster	Game Time	Active Time	Ave. Participation	Ave. Playing Time
Professional	11v11	14	90 mins	60 mins	79% (11/14)	2.14 mins (60/28)

The corresponding numbers for youth games are noted below.

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Level	Game Time	Active Time	Game Form	Max. Game Roster	Ave. Participation	Ave. Time Possession
10U	50 minutes	35 mins	7v7	14	50%	1.25 mins
12U	60 minutes	42 mins	9v9	16	56%	1.31 mins
14U	70 minutes	49 mins	11v11	18	61%	1.34 mins
16U	80 minutes	56 mins	11v11	18	61%	1.55 mins
18U	90 minutes	63 mins	11v11	18	61%	1.80 mins

Assuming maximum game rosters for each age group and also assuming equal playing time, the figures show that playing 100 youth games per season produces a maximum of around 175 minutes of ball possession. At the professional level, playing 100 games in a season would only raise the average to around 225 minutes.

Even for the very best players who rarely leave the field, the average time of possession is still less than 3 minutes per game; or less than 300 minutes per 100-game season!

Level	Game Time	Active Time	Game Form	Player : Ball Ratio	Ave. Participation	Ave. Time Possession
10U	50 mins	35 mins	7v7	14:1	100%	2.50 mins
12U	60 mins	42 mins	9v9	18:1	100%	2.33 mins
14U	70 mins	49 mins	11v11	22:1	100%	2.23 mins
16U	80 mins	56 mins	11v11	22:1	100%	2.55 mins
18U	90 mins	63 mins	11v11	22:1	100%	2.86 mins

The table below highlights the value of training. Well organized youth training sessions maximize ball contact and provide players with repeated exposure to standard game situations.

The figures demonstrate that players can routinely enjoy more than 20 minutes of ball possession in just under two hours; and the 300 minutes of maximum ball possession

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for the top players can be achieved in approximately fourteen well-organized training sessions, which would take just over a month.

Training Activity	Player : Ball Ratio	Ave Time	Active Participation	Ave. Time Possession
Warm-up: Free Play (3v3)	6:1	15 mins	100%	2.5 mins
Individual Skill Development	1:1	15 mins	100%	7.5 mins
2v2 Ladder	4:1	20 mins	100%	5 mins
4v4 Games	8:1	30 mins	100%	3.75 mins
Game Form Practice 7v7 / 9v9 / 11v11	16:1 (Est. roster:16)	30 mins	100%	2.5 mins
Total Average Time of Possession				21.25 mins

Stated another way, attending well planned training sessions for SIX MONTHS can produce approximately the same number of ball possessions as SIX YEARS of playing 100 games per season.



In the Games vs Practices Debate over Long-Term Individual Development: Who's Kidding Who?