

TNT Dynamite Soccer Club – Notes from the DOC
High School vs. Club Soccer

My high school soccer coach said it best: “There is nothing like High School soccer.” This simple and general statement is accurate, for both the positives and negatives of High School soccer.

The differences between High School soccer and Club soccer can be categorized into the following: the style and the quality, the coaching and the overall experience.

The Style and Quality: this is typically the biggest and most noticeable difference between High School and Club soccer. Generally, Club soccer is a better quality of the game – the teams typically consist of players who compete and train year-round, which means the training sessions and matches produce a better quality of soccer (more possession-oriented, more in-depth strategies, etc); and the coaches are typically more knowledgeable and experienced.

This difference is more pronounced for younger High School athletes, who transition from competitive Club matches to Junior Varsity or Freshmen level matches if they cannot make their school’s Varsity team, which can happen due factors outside of their control: school/program policies, the inability to compete physically with players two-to-four years older or to a wealth of talented older players who make Varsity over them.

This difference in quality and style is also recognizable in Varsity programs where few players participate in Club soccer. A competitive and committed soccer player should expect frustration in this environment, but this frustration can be managed with a proper mindset (see below re: experiences).

However, there are some Varsity programs that primarily consist of Club soccer players, and the level of play internally at practice can be as good if not better than Club teams. Assuming they also compete against similarly talented teams and are coached by a knowledgeable teacher of the game, this can be a positive experience.

The Coaching: the coaching in High School soccer is inconsistent. There are numerous factors that contribute to the quality of coaching:

District Hiring: since the school is required to follow certain hiring practices, this can mean that the best available coach is not hired when a program has a vacancy, as there may be an employee in the district who receives first right at the position.

Preferences and Commitment Level of Coaches: many coaches choose to focus their efforts on Club soccer, because the quality and commitment level of player is typically higher, the commitment level to a High School program is greater than a club team (inversely, since the commitment level to a Club team is less, a coach may work with multiple club teams and earn additional salary by doing so).

With lesser coaches involved in High School soccer, the instruction to players may not be as artful, specific and meaningful compared to that of Club coaches. In fact, there may be instruction given to players that contradicts what Club coaches teach. This may be a case of lack of knowledge, or a case that it applies to the style-of-play the coach is attempting to teach. Either way, this can be frustrating and confusing for the competitive soccer player.

That being said, there are numerous, quality coaches dedicated to the high school game. Remember that these statements are more general and not absolute, as there are examples of brilliant tacticians and teachers-of-the-game involved in High School soccer.

The Overall Experience: the greatest advantage that High School soccer has over Club soccer is the non-soccer experiences: the camaraderie on a team when representing your school and the social experience of playing with your schoolmates; the jokes and stories riding the bus to-and-from games; and the off-field team dinners and bonding. While these can certainly be part of the Club experience, players typically remember these moments with their High School teams most.

For players transitioning from Club to High School soccer (especially for those doing so for the first time), it's important to remember these factors so their frustration (if it occurs) does not get the best of them.

From a player-development standpoint, High School soccer typically does not improve a player's abilities and skills; more often than not, it stagnates or regresses due to the reasons already stated; the exception is when the rare High School experience (the quality of their teammates, coaches and competition) is as good if not better than their Club team. However, even when the competitiveness is sub-standard, the experiences in High School soccer can teach valuable life lessons: patience, pride, and the value of being part of a team.

High School vs. Club Soccer for 9th Graders Eligible to Play Year-Round

Given the age group determination in Club soccer (players born on or after August 1 play in one group), there are often players who enter High School as freshmen who are eligible to play U14, year-round soccer. This creates potential issues for both the player and the club if the player wishes to pursue high school soccer in the fall for boys and the spring for girls in Michigan.

There is no set-policy in the club for players in this position; however there are several questions we consider when determining the best avenue for each player:

1. Is their projected placement in their high school program (Varsity, JV or Freshmen team, starter or role player, etc) an improvement to their status on their club team, is it a lateral movement or is it harmful to their skill development? We must consider all elements (the quality of their High School team, their opponents, the coaching, etc as well as that of their Club team) when answering this question.
2. If it is not an improvement, is their value in playing High School soccer significant enough to warrant the change?
3. For the club team, how detrimental is losing a player for a season to their High School team? At tryouts, does a potential half-year player who is talented and fully committed during their Club season outrank a full-year player who is not-as-talented but committed to play year-round?

Each player in this situation is unique, which is why a standard policy is not adopted. When considering options in this scenario, it is best to discuss these variables with your Club coach and Club Director, so they are aware of your situation and can help guide you through this potentially confusing process. Families are also encouraged to read the "Selecting Your Soccer Club" article that is also published, and use the criteria listed to compare their High School team to their Club team.