

Assessment and accountability in youth soccer: how parents grade coaching, refereeing, and the soccer infrastructure

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Abstract

The term accountability is used extensively in performance management. In youth soccer, accountability is often discussed in the context of issues such as quality of coaching, officiating, responsiveness to stakeholders, scheduling of games, building parental involvement and support, and philosophical orientation to the sport. As part of the assessment process, parents of youth soccer players assigned a grade of F to A to reflect their perception of the effectiveness of their soccer team or league in addressing these issues. The implications for system accountability, and continuous improvement in youth soccer programs were then examined.

Keywords: assessment, soccer, coaching, refereeing



Introduction

The terms assessment and accountability are used extensively in performance management. Quite simply, assessment is the process of documenting, usually in measurable terms, knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs. Accountability is a concept in ethics that involves either the expectation or assumption of being answerable to stakeholders. It is often used synonymously with such concepts as answerability, enforcement, responsibility, blameworthiness, and liability (Davis, Gentili, Calkins, and Trevisan, 2002; Earl, 1999; Schedler, 1999). In management, accountability is the extent to which managers and/or service providers are responsive to addressing the needs of stakeholders, or answerable for attainment of clearly communicated expectations (Harwood, 1994; Best 2004).

In youth soccer, accountability is often discussed in the context of performance in areas such as quality of coaching, officiating, responsiveness to stakeholders, convenience in scheduling games, building parental involvement and support, and philosophical orientation to the sport (Duffus, 2004). Ultimately, this is reflected both in a process of continuous improvement, and in the quality of the athletes the system produces.

Assessment-accountability is the process for recognizing, measuring, and rewarding excellence - all based on performance. Unfortunately, assessment-accountability in youth soccer is complicated by the lack of clearly communicated expectations, and a culture which eschews use of quantitative assessment of performance along the path to achieving objectives.

The key to addressing assessment-accountability issues in youth soccer is a performance-based system that compares results to expectations, and holds the system accountable for performance that lags expectations. Unfortunately, this researcher was unable to identify published peer reviewed youth soccer research which specifically address the assessment and accountability issues.

Accountability in Youth Sports

National youth sport leaders recognize the importance of accountability in youth sports. This, together with both absence of suitable performance metrics, and unease about the perceived gap between expectations and results, has led to an assessment report by “Citizen through Sports Alliance” entitled, “2005 Youth Sports National Report Card” (www.sportsmanship.com). Its objective was to articulate where youth-sports is succeeding and where it is failing. Specifically, the report was motivated by concerns that on the whole, youth sports has;

1. “Lost its child-centered focus, meaning less emphasis on the child’s experience and more emphasis on adult-centered motives, such as winning
2. Suffered from the actions of over-invested sports parents, who maintain unrealistic expectations and fail to behave in a way that promotes the development of their own child and others.
3. Failed to provide sufficient background checks, training and evaluation for coaches, who are so instrumental in the youth sports experience.
4. Focused on early sports specialization, leading to burnout, overuse injuries and a hyper-competitive atmosphere focused on travel team participation at an ever younger age.
5. Lost the voice of the child, who is participating in sports for his or her own goals, which experts say, include fun, friends, fitness, and skill development.”

Interestingly, the CTSA report did not explicitly address the issue of accountability-based periodic assessment. Neither did it focus on the potential impact of the assessment on continuous improvement of youth sports in the United States.

Table 1 presents the 2005 Youth Sports Report Card for community-based youth sports programs. The report card, which was prepared by a national panel of experts including “authors, attorneys, researchers, youth sports organization leaders, youth coaches and parents,” graded key features of youth sports to reflect expert perceptions of how well they addressed the needs of 6 to 14 year old players (www.sportsmanship.com). Grading performance is a summative assessment performed at the end of the period or season. (See Table 1: 2005 Youth Sports National Report Card)

The highest grade is for officiating, while coaching, which potentially has the most impact on qualitative development in youth sports, received a C- grade. According to published research, many of these issues also apply in youth soccer (Hirschhorn and Loughead, 2000; Coakley, 2007).

Aside from methodological issues; e.g., health and safety, and parental involvement and parental behavior, are double-barreled and need to be addressed separately. The report is mute to the sample size of the raters, the composition of sports included, and whether they were representative of the various youth sports, including soccer. Inasmuch as no sport-by-sport assessment was provided, there is no way to assess how these grades apply to soccer, or any other youth sport activity.

In general, the information provided on the report card is useful in providing policy directions for the development and management of “Youth Sports.” However, inasmuch as youth sports is not monolithic, and different sport activities are independent in philosophy, structure, management, expectations, and outcomes, there is no way to meaningfully utilize the CTSA grades as accountability tools in planning and managing specific youth sports activities.

Finally, while the assessment by experts is interesting, more useful assessment can be provided by key stakeholders of particular youth sports; e.g., parents and players. This level of assessment will facilitate enhanced accountability. Parental assessment in youth soccer is the focus of this research.

Youth Sports Research

The institutional orientation to youth sports is largely driven by parents who perform dual roles as voluntary administrators of youth sports programs and activities, and are also the principal spectators and supporters at games. Research has shown that parental motives for volunteering and participating in the youth sports are not always child-centered (Coakley, 2007). Indeed, research has identified a panoply of parental needs satisfied through youth sports (Bower 1979; Lewko and Greendorfer, 1988; Green and Chalip, 1997; Kidman, McKenzie & McKenzie, 1999).

While the needs of participating children are paramount, they converge and often conflict with those of other stakeholders, particularly parents. For example, researchers have identified personal socializing as a major benefit of parental participation in their children’s sports activities (Lewko and Greendorfer, 1988; Green and Chalip, 1997; Kidman, McKenzie & McKenzie, 1999). Also, parents often seek vicarious pleasure, with the hope of gaining glory from their children’s success (Bower, 1979), and sometimes, parental ambitions exceed those of the children, to a point where children participate in a particular sport as a duty, rather than for

pleasure (Evans, 1993). According to Gould and Petlichkoff (1988), children of these parents are most susceptible to dropping-out of the sport (Coakley, 1992; Petlichkoff, 1993; Brady, 2004).

The diversity of needs exhibited by participating children in youth sports include having fun (Coakley, 2007; Bauer, 2002), social (Messner, 1992; Adler, 1998; Creager, 1999; Hasbrook, 1999; Bauer, 2002; Yee and Flanagan, 1985; Bergerone, Cei, Ceridone, and Formica, 1985; Hubbard and Robertson, 2004), competition (Coakley, 2007), gender (White et al., 1992; Adler and Adler, 1998), Hasbrook, 1999), emotional (Coakley, 2007), control and dominance (Creager, 1999; Hasbrook and Harris, 1999; Ingham and Dewar, 1999; and Coakley, 2007), Family connectivity (Messner, 1992), and physical fitness (Fox, 1988; Harrison, 1999; Nixon, 2000; Bauer, 2002).

Research also differentiates between parental needs; e.g., enjoyment of the sport (Coakley, 2007), vicarious (Smoll and Smith, 1989; Smith and Smoll, 1996), emotional (Messner, 1992), economics (Wolff, 2003; Poppen, 2004), and social status (Adler and Adler, 1998; Messner, 2002; Miller et al., 2005), and motives; e.g., developing life lessons (Adler and Adler, 1998), performance ethic (King, 2002; Wolff, 2003; Sokolove, 2004a), mental and emotional (Adler and Adler, 1998, Tolbert, 2005), self esteem (Miracle, 2000; Fejgin, 1994; Hunt, 2005), and character and values (Gano-Overway, 1999).

Non-intersecting parent and player needs and motives can lead to dysfunctional relationships (Coakley, 1992; Fortanasce, 1995), negatively impact player development (Smith and Smoll, 1996; McEwin and Dickinson, 1996; White, 1998), be physically and emotionally stressful to players (McEwin and Dickinson, 1996; Anshel, 1997; Murphy, 1999), minimize player enjoyment of the sport (Engh, 1999), and facilitate development of negative self-concept (Hamacheck, 1995; Smith and Smoll, 1996). Also, this dysfunctionality exacerbates physical stress and can be potentially injurious to players who often are driven to work beyond their developmental capabilities (Kirk and Kirk, 1993; McEwin and Dickinson, 1997).

The intersection of stakeholder needs, as well as factors that retard or inhibit player needs satisfaction and development becomes a logical focus for solution strategies.

Research Issues

The issues to be addressed by this study are motivated by the assessment results on youth sports published by the CTSA; “Youth Sports National Report Card,” the importance of assessment and accountability in youth sports, and the dearth of published research on parental assessment in youth soccer. Specifically, the research was designed to:

- Collect grading data on issues perceived as important to parents of youth soccer players; e.g., child centered focus of the program, coaching, refereeing, player safety, scheduling, skills training, and soccer fields.
- Compare parental grading of youth soccer to the CTSA grading of all “youth sports.”

Research Methodology

The sample to support this research was collected from male or female parents of soccer players aged five to ten years old in October 2006. Soccer teams were previously identified from the rosters of registered players, and parents randomly selected.

Undergraduate marketing research students from Florida Gulf Coast University personally distributed the questionnaires to previously identified parents, and waited while they were completed and returned. The occasion was game-day at soccer fields located in various southwest Florida communities (e.g., Lehigh Acres, Naples, Fort Myers, San Carlos, and Gateway). The data collected were attitudinal, grading, evaluative and demographic. The research identified no statistically significant differences between the data generated at the various research sites.

In collecting grading data, parents were asked to assign a grade of A, B, C, D, or F to reflect their perception of how their soccer team and program addressed the specific identified needs of their soccer playing child. Though unbalanced, and inherently biased, the grading model used was selected for two reasons: 1) It is predominantly utilized in pre and post secondary education and is thus familiar to parents, and 2) it was used in the CTSA grading schema and should thus provide results that are comparable.

Where possible, every effort was made to eliminate respondents with confounding perspectives. Thus, parents with more than one child playing were eliminated since this would involve assessment of more than one coach. Also omitted were parents with children who play both recreational and competitive youth soccer, and parents where the same child played both recreational and competitive soccer.

Eight hundred and twenty one questionnaires were distributed and 383 were satisfactorily completed (response rate = 46.6%). The sample distribution included 44.9% men and 55.1% women. In completing the independent samples t-test, the “Equal variances not assumed” test was used to check for statistical significance between the means.

Analysis

Table 2 presents the analysis of the parental grade data, the assigned and where applicable, the CTSA grades (See Table 2. Parental Assessment and Grades: Assignment Versus Expert Models).

Child-Centered Focus

Overall, the grade assignment model used in this research shows that parents perceive youth soccer as being child-centered. The mean grade for all respondents was B+ (B- for parents of children playing competitive soccer, and B+ for those playing recreational soccer). This suggests that parents perceive program goals, structure, and activities as implemented with a focus on meeting the needs and wants of their children.

The difference in responses between parents of children playing competitive, and those playing recreational soccer were statistically significant. Indeed, as the descriptive terms imply, the former is more focused on winning than the recreational teams where the focus is on fun and nurture. While, this hypothesis was not tested in this research, it is widely accepted in youth soccer, and probably explains much of the differences in perceptions. The relatively low standard deviations of both recreational and competitive groups imply that the level of agreement was strong and highly focused for both groups.

Coaching and Officiating/Refereeing

The overall parental grade for both competitive and recreational coaching and officiating was “B.” No statistically significant inter-group differences were observed.

Player Safety

Parents perceive soccer as a safe sport. Probably, this perception derive from the reality that from the earliest age, most teams emphasize warm-up strategies to minimize injuries. Also, referees by training are sensitized to the issue of injury prevention.

In spite of this, more could be done to minimize the likelihood of injuries. For example, little emphasis is placed on safe play in skill training sessions. While there is strong concern for injury prevention, the lack of programmatic safety procedures in skills training suggests limited commitment to player safety. In spite of this, the focus on injury prevention is very obvious to parent spectators. The high positive grade (B+ overall and for both recreational and competitive) is undoubtedly an affirmation of the injury prevention strategies.

Skills Development-Training

Overall, parents grade the skills development/training their child received a “B.” The grade by parents of children who played competitive soccer was “B+” compared to “B” for recreational. The difference between both groups is statistically significant ($P = 0.067$). The higher grade by parents of competitive players probably reflects the general perception that these are well trained “elite” soccer players. Among soccer parents, many of whose children has played together on the same team and been coached by the same person many seasons. In this environment, there a strong personal relationship between parent and coach, and perception of the coach-trainer as being both experienced and having a strong regimen of training skills.

Soccer Fields

Competitive teams, are often referred to as travel teams, because generally, they compete against teams in different communities, and unlike recreational teams which are community-bound, and often play at one site throughout the season, travel to play at different sites. A reality of this experience is recreational teams utilize soccer infrastructure; e.g., fields, equipment, etc., that are uniformly well maintained. This uniformity does not always exist at the various sits at which competitive teams play. This especially applies to playing fields, and is reflected in parent grading of “soccer fields.” Overall, parents grade the soccer fields “B+.” However, the grade by parents of children who played competitive soccer was “B-” compared to “B+” for recreational. The relatively large standard deviation among the former parents suggests a large variation in the standard of field maintenance that they perceived. The difference between both groups is statistically significant ($P < 0.000$).

Scheduling of Games

Especially in communities with limited field availability, recreational teams tend to have preferred, more convenient scheduling; community-based, mornings, in hot climes and afternoon

in colder climates, with the needs of competitive teams being secondary. Reasons include the relative power of recreational programs, which often comprise as much of eighty–ninety percent of players in a community. Also, recreational players tend to be younger, and thus perceived as warranting less stressful playing times. Time, and travel distance are additional factors that influences scheduling of competitive games, and quite likely, parental grading. While the overall parents grade scheduling of game was “B+”, the grade by recreational parents was B+ versus B for competitive. The difference between both groups is statistically significant ($P < 0.000$). While the research did not investigate reasons for the difference, it seems logical that convenience, time and distance are major factors.

In all situations where comparative grades for both the assigned model and the CTSA model are shown, the former grades are consistently higher. This means than parents graded less harsh than the experts. However, one must caution that comparison is somewhat meaningless since the CTSA grades reflect “expert” assessment of all youth sports, while the results of this research are for soccer only, and the graders were parents.

Parental Involvement

As shown in Table 3, only 12.3% of parents whose children participate in youth soccer reported active participation (e.g., coaching, refereeing, administration, team support, etc., in the coaching process. Among these, 4.2% were extremely involved and 8.1% were moderately involved. (SEE TABLE 3: Involvement as a Volunteer in Youth Soccer)

The research results are cause for optimism that parental involvement in team and program assessment might lead to increased volunteerism. Over 15% expressed high likelihood of some involvement as volunteers, while 22.7% expressed moderate likelihood, and 61.9% were unlikely to be involved. The 15.4% expressing high likelihood is somewhat comparable to the 12.3% that indicated that they currently volunteer. The optimism derives from the 22.7% that expressed moderate likelihood of being future volunteers. This group constitutes an important marketing opportunity for youth soccer programs.

Conclusions and Implications

Grades are based on assessment of past performance, and communicate the assessor’s perception of the performance level for the identified variable. Assessed grades varied from B- to B+, suggesting that in general, parents has a favorable perception of the seven youth soccer issues identified. Specific grades by parents are:

- | | |
|----------------------------|----|
| • Child-Centered focus | B+ |
| • Coaching | B |
| • Player Safety | B+ |
| • Officiating (Refereeing) | B |
| • Soccer Fields | B+ |
| • Scheduling of Games | B+ |

The grading showed that parents of children who play in recreational and competitive soccer similarly assess coaching, officiating, and player safety. No statistically significant differences were identified. However, parents perceived significant differences between the child-centered focus of the sport, skills development, the soccer fields on which they play, and scheduling of games. Parents of children who play recreational soccer graded the sport as

reflecting a more child-centered focus. They also graded the soccer fields on which they play, and scheduling of games more favorable than parents of competitive players. Conversely, parents of children who play competitive soccer graded skills development-training more favorable than parents of children who play recreational soccer.

The attainment of performance excellence has long been an important feature of sports. In youth soccer, as in other sports activities, performance excellence is largely related to win/loss scores. Generally, the win/loss statistic serves as a surrogate for good coaching, refereeing, skills, etc., and is the principal measure of success. A high win/loss statistic means a winning team, while a low win/loss statistic means the opposite. Yet, most youth soccer parents will argue that other measures of success; e.g., children having a "fun" experience, and playing with friends is more important than winning and losing. This is particularly evident among parents of younger, recreational soccer players. For these parents, success also means player development; e.g., emotional, skills, etc, and enjoyment of the soccer process. The logic of the win/loss statistic suggests that while it feeds emotional gratification, it is not particularly useful in management of the youth soccer process. Certainly, it does not address issues such as whether it meets the diverse needs of the players. For this, performance assessment; e.g., grading of performance, particularly at a disaggregated level; e.g., coaching, refereeing, training, etc., is desirable. Such an approach will enhance accountability in youth soccer.

Assessing performance is not an end but the beginning of the accountability process with a focus on ensuring managerial responsiveness to the needs and concerns of stakeholders. Thus, parental assessment in youth soccer should not be one-time event but part of a process that facilitates better and more inclusive management of the soccer program. The ideal is assessment of coaches, referees, scheduling, etc., at regular intervals throughout the soccer season; e.g., at the end of each month. Following assessment, feedback should be provided to involved stakeholders. Unfortunately, for logistical and other technical reasons, this hi-frequency assessment regimen is not perceived as feasible with a volunteer soccer management. However, there is consensus that a more reasonable occasion is the end of each season.

Involvement by parents in assessment of teams and programs would likely empower more parents to increased volunteerism in all aspects of the youth soccer process. While the research did not provide guidance on the specific areas in which parents would likely volunteer, increased volunteerism could mean more active parental participants as coaches, referees, etc. in the youth soccer process. The respondents that expressed "moderate likelihood" as potential volunteers constitute a significant marketing/recruitment opportunity for teams and programs.

Youth soccer programs should utilize assessment tools to obtain measures of performance that are useful in improving the operational effectiveness of the entire soccer program. This assessment will identify areas of perceived strengths and weaknesses, and enable development of strategies to improve overall performance. For example, based on the specific levels of performance identified in the assessment, soccer programs will be better able to develop processes, reward, recruit, recognize, retain/release, select and train coaches and referees, improve training and educational programs, and develop infrastructure to ensure attainment of identified stakeholder needs.

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Appendix

Table 1: 2005 Youth Sports National Report Card

Table 1: 2005 Youth Sports National Report Card ¹	
Area of Review	Grade
Child-Centered Philosophy	D
Coaching	C-
Health and Safety	C+
Officiating	B-
Parental Behavior/Involvement	D
Grading Key: A-Outstanding, B-Good, C-Fair, D-Poor, F-Failing	
1. Citizen Through Sport Alliance: Focus on Respect, 2005 Youth Sports National Report Card	



Table 2: Parental Assessment and Grades: Assignment Versus Expert Models

Table 2: Parental Assessment and Grades: Assignment Versus Expert Models							
#	Variables ¹	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Statistic	p	Grades	
						Assignment Model ⁵	CTSA Model ⁶
1	Child Centered Focus of Program	3.3211 ²	0.7080	-5.217	.000	B+	D
		2.7885 ³	0.6955			B-	
		3.4048 ⁴	0.6736			B+	
2	Coaching	3.1018 ²	0.7290	-0.666	0.508	B	C-
		3.0385 ³	0.7399			B	
		3.1118 ⁴	0.7279			B	
3	Officiating (Referring)	3.1958 ²	0.7169	0.851	0.398	B	B-
		3.2693 ³	0.6602			B	
		3.1843 ⁴	0.7256			B	
4	Player Safety	3.3290 ²	0.6682	0.007	0.995	B+	C+
		3.3846 ³	0.6614			B+	
		3.3202 ⁴	0.6698			B+	
5	Skills-development-Training	3.1201 ²	0.7600	1.1856	0.067	B	NA
		3.3654 ³	0.6577			B+	
		3.0816 ⁴	0.7801			B	
6	Soccer Fields	3.3083 ²	0.7801	-4.345	0.000	B+	NA
		2.7692 ³	1.2145			B-	
		3.3837 ⁴	0.6520			B+	
7	Scheduling of Games	3.3812 ²	0.6356	-3.285	0.002	B+	NA
		3.1154 ³	0.6464			B	
		3.4230 ⁴	0.6247			B+	
1. Grading scale used by parents: A, B, C, D, F							
2. All responses, N = 383							
3. Children play on competitive team, N = 52							
4. Children play on recreational team, N = 331							
5. Grade assignment model: A = 4.0; A- = 3.7-3.9; B+ = 3.3-3.6; B = 3.0-3.2; B- = 2.7-2.9; C+ = 2.3-2.6; C = 2.0-2.2; C- = 1.7-1.9; D+ = 1.3-1.6; D = 1.0-1.2; D+0.7-0.9; F = 0.0							
6. The CTSA grading is for "All Sports," including soccer. Thus, it not appropriate to directly compare grades under the Assignment Model to those developed by CTSA.							

Table 3: Involvement as a Volunteer I Youth Soccer

Table 3: Involvement as a Volunteer in Youth Soccer			
	High	Moderate	Low
Current level of involvement as volunteers	4.2%	8.1%	87.7%
Likelihood of volunteering given parental involvement in assessing teams and programs	15.4%	22.7%	61.9%
1. N = 383			