

Sports & Recreation

To go, or not to go

SPORTS Comment

Dave Whitehouse is a longtime coach who moved to Yellowknife in July. He has coached teams at two Canadian national tournaments.

Editor's note: The following is a discussion on the value of sending Northern teams to the Canada Games. Although the context focuses on the sport of soccer in the NWT, it is meant as an observation of all team sports North of 60 and their participation at Canada Games-level competition.

Dave: I am a soccer coach with 14 years experience and I am familiar with provincial and national competitions, as well as being part of administration for programs at the community, premier and city level. I feel I have some idea of what is required to be competitive at a tournament such as the Canada Summer Games. First, it needs to be understood by the players, as well as the parents who support them, what the team may be in for. At the Western Summer Games, the girls team lost four games with a total of 56 goals against and 0 goals for. It is my understanding that most of the time the other teams were just keeping the ball away from the NWT team, thus creating a game where the team would basically chase the ball for possession.

This is not the way the game is meant to be played and should have been an awakening to the fact that NWT teams are not ready to perform at that level of play at this point in time.

The teams the NWT will be facing are in most cases the provincial U18 teams, which are made up of the 17 best players from each province. Most of these teams have been together since they were U13, playing at a highly competitive level against other provincial teams, as well as some high level U.S. and European teams in various tournaments and competitions. This tournament is also an outdoor tournament.

Look around Yellowknife and count the number of outdoor soccer pitches available. Then note the condition of the pitch, including size and markings. Both pitches I have seen appear small, have no grass in the middle or goal area and the markings are either faded or non-existent – and I am told these are the best pitches in the area.

I have yet to see corner flags at any game I have observed. How long is any pitch in the North even available to train on when they are snow-covered for most of the year? The short summer season limits the use of whatever outdoor area is available, so you move into a gymnasium with hardwood floors and indoor soccer balls. As a coach, you are unable to put the players into an 11 vs. 11 situation due to size restrictions, and are forced into small-sided games with variations that limit the necessary training for strategies and techniques specific to the outdoor game.

When you are able to get outside, you have no one local to play against at the level you need to warm up for a competition of this magnitude.

I appreciate what the people here are trying to do with the resources that they have and applaud them in their efforts. However, should they wish to compete in an outdoor game at a national level, then they may need to look at obtaining proper training facilities — specifically a full-size indoor pitch with artificial turf — first. Then they can work on developing players for that particular game.

Let's not put the cart before the horse. I personally see no merit, rhyme or reason for the NWTSA (NWT Soccer Association) to send teams to the Canada Summer Games. Instead, it may be better for the development of the players to attend tournaments they can be competitive at and hopefully find some sense of success, then build on that.

I liken the present situation to sending the local ping-pong team to a national tennis competition. It just makes no sense. The two games really have nothing in common other than hitting a ball over a net.

The moral is: look before you leap. As a coach, I would never put my team into a tournament I knew they would not be competitive at, as it can be demoralizing to the players and consequently encourage them to quit the game.

However, if the players and parents who support them are fully aware of the realities they most likely will be facing and are willing to limit their expectations and accept the most likely outcome, then more power to them. Enjoy the experience, but don't come back saying you weren't aware, while blaming the coaches for any lack of success.

Are Northern teams equipped for Canadian competition?

Chris: I appreciate your comments. I would have to say players, coaches and parents are fully aware of the fact that Yellowknife soccer players are out-matched at the Canada Games.

This subject has been a topic of long-running and widespread debate among a number of stakeholders in the sport of soccer and a variety of other sports in the NWT. Some do not see the point of sending teams to these games just to get destroyed and humiliated on the court.

But there is also the other side of the argument. Why should kids in the North be deprived of the experience that other Canadian athletes get? As well, participating in the Canada Games is not only about being on the court or field.

It's about representing your team and territory. It is also about the chance to meet hundreds of other athletes and experience and watch high-calibre competition in your sport and a host of others.

While the teams are at the games they do more than compete. They spectate, tour a different city and engage in social activities.

Yes, there is a potential for disappointment and frustration if they are completely decimated down there, but many I have spoken to still enjoyed the overall experience.

For some players in smaller and more remote communities in the North, the competition is secondary. For many of those athletes, travelling to tournaments may be their first opportunity to travel away from home. The chance to experience a whole new world

that southerners take for granted is a chance of a lifetime for them.

On the other hand, there have been instances where players have broken into tears mid-way through games because they have been beaten down so badly by the other team. I guess it's a question of what your goals are when you head to a tournament like the Canada Games.

The basketball teams, for instance, have decided not to go because they feel it will be too demoralizing for a young, rebuilding team. But they have gone in the past and they have not had a lot of success on the court. Does this help a team get better? Probably not.

But, I guess most teams look beyond the winning and losing and try to show players the kinds of opportunities that are out there. Those involved with NWT soccer know they are disadvantaged due to poor training facilities, a short practice season and no regulation soccer fields, but they choose to go anyway for the experience.

You mentioned that many athletes may choose to quit the game because of the experience of being slaughtered at a national tournament. Others argue they will quit if they are not given the opportunity to compete at high levels of competition and travelling out of the territory is a must because there are few competitive opportunities in the NWT.

I am neither agreeing nor disagreeing with your comments, just relaying that there are two sides to this argument and they have been tossed back and forth for a number of years.

As time progresses, I do foresee an improvement to players' skills due to a focus on development. Yellowknife is also planning an indoor field facility to be built, which will include soccer fields. The project is slated for 2009. Some speculate it may be sooner if the capital is awarded the 2008 Arctic Winter Games.

Dave: I appreciate you will have a different slant or see things from more angles on this subject. I had read previous articles on

“Why should kids in the North be deprived of the experience that other Canadian athletes get?”

SPORTS Comment

Chris Puglia is the Sports Editor for Northern News Services.

two teams (basketball and another sport), which had decided not to send teams and I applaud them, as I believe they have put their players and their game first.

There are a number of tournaments out there that will give players all that you mention and more. The one that comes to mind is the USA Cup in Minneapolis.

There, players meet others from all over the world, not just Canada, and there are so many things to do and participate in it is almost mind-boggling. You are also able to register at a performance level that is equal to your ability and therefore be competitive with other teams in your group. Check out their Web site at www.usacup.com if you would like more information.

I wonder why the NWTSA is so determined to send players to this particular tournament? Is it because it is what the players want? Have the players been advised of other options?

Is it for the coaches? Have they explored and provided other options to the team? Where does the funding come from? Is there a question of grant repayment for not attending? My personal philosophy is that the team comes first.

Is this good for the team or are there other options such as the USA Cup or provincial tournaments? It annoys me to see what they are doing here in regards to the game and the kids. This is not development, but a lesson in humility.

My concern as a coach would be for my player(s) in tears and what should be done about it. Train these kids properly and at least give them an opportunity to be somewhat competitive with the lesser teams.

Chris: Whether or not it is right for Northern teams to be attending competitions of this level is an issue that will be debated well into the future.

One good reason why Northern athletes should have an opportunity to compete nationally lies in the examples set by many individual sports.

The North has had phenomenal success in sports like swimming, biathlon, speed skating and cross-country skiing.

We've had athletes on the podium in national and international events. In team sports, due to population and facilities, those results are slower coming and may never come. However, there have been individual athletes from basketball, hockey and soccer programs who have gone on to play at the university level. In the case of hockey, there have also been those who have played or are playing at the professional level.

The question is: would that have happened if they were not exposed to competitions like the Canada Games?

It's a question that is hard to answer. Some would say to be the best you have to compete against the best. Others would say to improve, you have to experience success.

Perhaps there is a way to do both.

Have your say: If you would like to comment on this subject, please e-mail to sports@nsl.com.

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