

BC Soccer 2018 Player Retention Survey

Why Do Youth Play Soccer?

Why Do They Stop Playing?

What Can We Do About It?

Findings of a Survey among 2,400 BC Youth Players: 2018

January 2019

Situation Analysis & Objectives

- BC Soccer and other provinces have been investigating reasons for the decline in Canadian soccer registration over the last ten years. Registration peaked in 2008, since when the number of players in Canada has declined by nearly 100,000. In all provinces, this decline has largely been among female youth players, especially teens, and among 'grassroots' players.
- While BC Soccer has experienced smaller declines than Canada overall, BC registration is now also suffering, especially among teenage girls.
- Over the last five years, analysis in Canada and BC has included:
 - Regular statistical analysis of national and provincial registration and player demographic
 - Review of literature on sports participation
 - A survey of 300 soccer leaders: coaches and executives running teen soccer.
- The prior analysis clearly showed the primary issue is a decline in player retention. More players are dropping out of soccer than in the past, especially in the teen years, U-11 to U-18.
- While prior research identified possible reasons and strategies for soccer to respond, there has not been direct input from the 'clients' of soccer organizations, that is, the players themselves.
- In Spring 2018, BC Soccer decided to better understand the needs and attitudes of youth players by conducting research among the players themselves, or their parents for younger players.
- The objective is to better understand youth players' motivations for playing soccer and their reasons for discontinuing playing, and to develop recommendations for action by soccer bodies.
- Many factors influence playing sport. Some of these are external (societal trends, lifestyle, family) about which soccer bodies can do little in isolation. However, some reasons for stopping playing are internal to the sport. This survey focuses on soccer-specific issues to give guidance as to actions soccer organizations can take to encourage more players to keep playing soccer.

Research Approach

- This 2018 BC Soccer Player Retention Survey was conducted using on-line research among 2,381 youth soccer players or their parents, aged from Under 6 to Under 17.
- The survey was conducted at the end of the players' last season, questions focusing on their recent experience and intentions for next season.
- To give a cross-section of Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island and Interior players, the sample was drawn from 21 of BC's ~ 100 community youth clubs, covering all except the BC Soccer Premier League. The Coastal season generally runs September to March, so the Coastal survey took place in June 2018. The Interior season generally runs April to October, so the Interior survey took place in November 2018.

- Survey invitations were sent to the 21 cooperating clubs' players/parents with a link to an online survey. The invitation came jointly from their club and BC Soccer to enhance participation.
- The questionnaire collected background information and questions probing motivations for playing, satisfaction with their program and their likelihood to play next season.
- Importantly, six questions were "open-ended questions", to collect responses volunteered in players' own words, to give unparalleled depth of response and understanding.
- The key question in the survey was the likelihood to play for the club next year, using a standard marketing research 'propensity to participate' question. It is known in the research industry that almost all saying "definitely will" can be expected to follow-through, as will a proportion of the "probably will" group. However, almost everyone responding either "might or might not" or saying they are not likely to play can be considered highly unlikely to register next year. It is critical to understand this "Unlikely" group, who show the attitudes of players not expected to continue playing soccer next year. (Only a few noted they would be playing for another club).
- 14,000 invitations were sent out, responses being received from 2,381, i.e. 17 percent. Some of the 2,381 responding completed only part of the survey, 1,775 completing all questions.
- Surveys are subject to sampling error dependent upon the sample size. On a sample of 2,000, results are accurate +/-2%, 19 times out of 20. On 1,000 sample: +/-3%. On 600 sample: +/-4%.

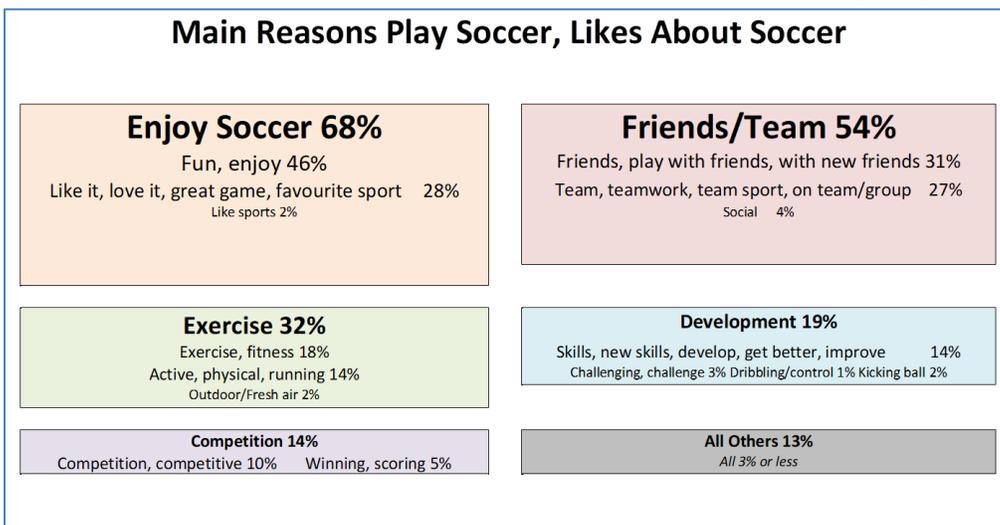
Main Findings

1. Survey Respondent Profile

- **The survey provided a good cross-section of youth players belonging to BC's community grassroots clubs, who account for over 98 percent of all youth players.**
- About one-third of respondents come from each of the Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island and Interior region, including the Thompson Okanagan, Kootenays and the North. Two-thirds of the sample were male (62 percent of all BC players are male). Half of the sample were playing U6 to U10, 20 percent U11 to U12 and 30 percent were playing U13 or older.
- The sample matches the BC player concentration in grassroots soccer. Seventy percent of respondents play at house, bronze or similar levels of play, one-quarter at gold, silver, Div. 1,2 or equivalent, and six percent played at 'metro', equivalent or above. They have played with soccer clubs for an average of four years.
- Seventy percent play a wide variety of other organized sports and 80 percent of the remainder take some regular physical exercise, including biking, walking, skiing or swimming.

2. Reasons for Playing Soccer

- **Players' primary reasons for playing soccer are very clear: to enjoy soccer, have fun and be part of a team with friends. Other significant appeals are exercise, to develop/improve and compete. Having a good coach is also a major priority.**
- Players of all ages, genders and regions are very clear why they play soccer. The leading reasons volunteered in players' own



words for playing are to enjoy soccer and have fun (mentioned by 68%) and to be part of a team with friends (54%). Other significant appeals are exercise (mentioned by 32%), to develop and improve (19%) and competition (14%).

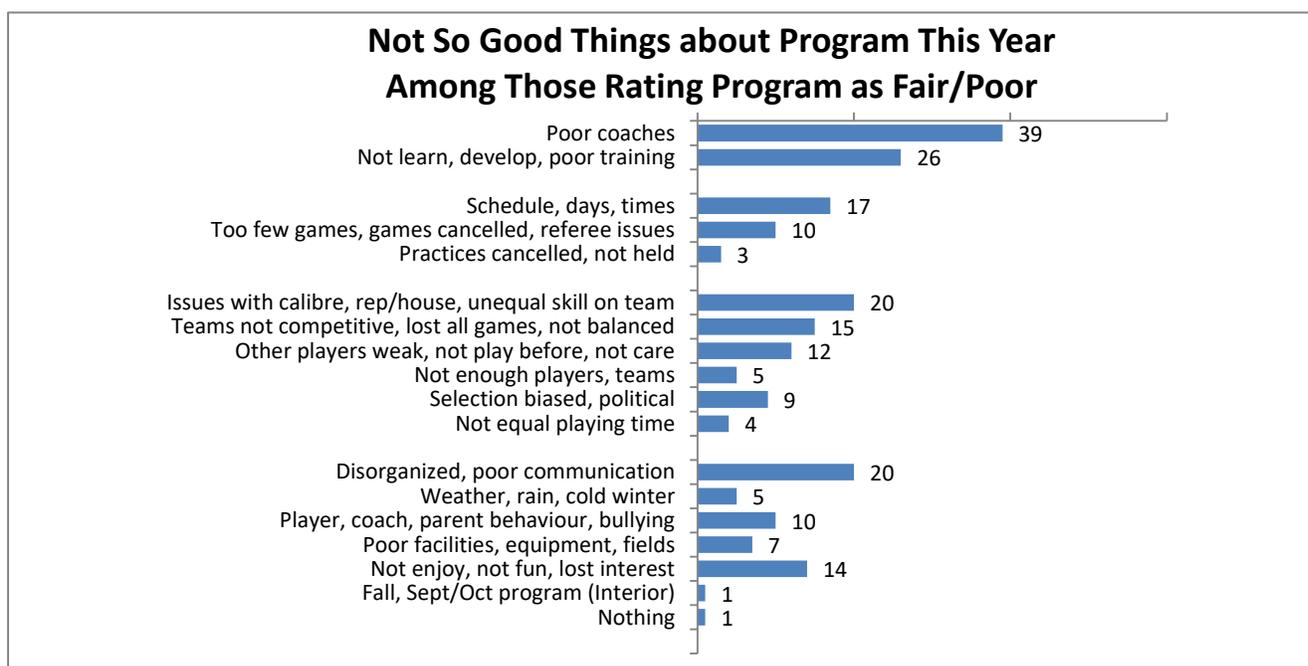
- These priorities are mentioned to equal degrees by those satisfied or dissatisfied with their program this year and those likely and unlikely to play next year.
- When probed on the importance to them of 12 different features of soccer programs, the factors which were volunteered are also rated as important. In addition, 'having a good coach' is critical, very or quite important for 80 percent, the highest rating. 'Respect', 'having fun' and 'learning to be on a team' are important for 70 percent, skill development for 60 percent and playing with friends for 50 percent. Priorities are consistent across age, gender, region, satisfaction and retention.

3. Assessment of Soccer Program This Year

- **75 percent of players rated their soccer program as good, but one-quarter feel it was only fair or poor. The primary factor driving assessments are the quality of the coaching, the sense of teamwork and the team being competitive.**
- Three-quarters of players rated their soccer program as very good or excellent, 25 percent saying their soccer program was 'excellent' and one-half saying 'very good'. However, one in four

were less happy, describing the program as only fair or poor. Assessment is consistent across age, gender and regional groups.

- Four aspects are volunteered as the best parts of the program this year. Forty percent commented on good coaches, while one-in-six cited each of their friends on the team, teamwork, and playing games. Improving skills and having fun were each strengths for 13 percent. Among those assessing the program as excellent, over one-half volunteered this was due to the coaching.
- The less positive features, especially among those unhappy with the program, were very specific about the problems they experienced. The primary problem mentioned by 40 percent of those less happy with the program was that they did not get good coaching.
- Also, one-quarter of those giving lower ratings said they did not learn or develop. Other contributory problems relate to: team formation concerns, e.g., the calibre of the team, not being competitive, selection issues and other players on the team being weaker; scheduling challenges; and poor club communication.
- When players rated their program on the 12 key factors, the highest overall satisfaction was recorded on the team showing respect, focus on fun, learning to be on a team, playing as much as team mates and playing with friends. Results were consistent by age, gender and region.

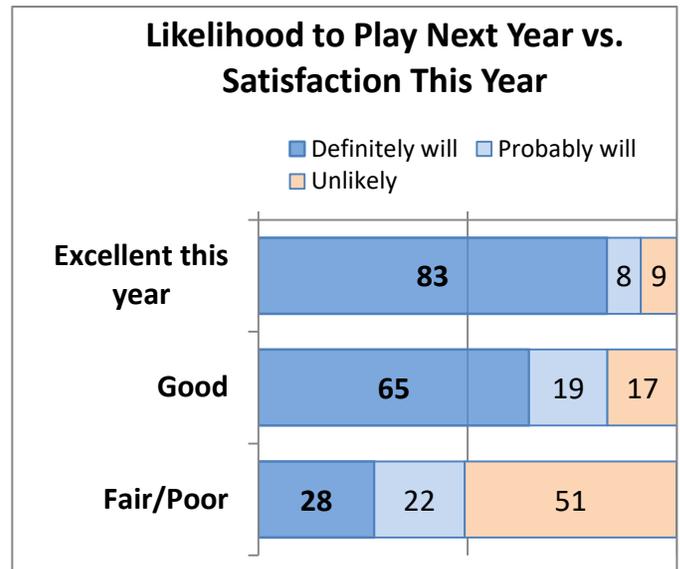


- While opinions given on each factor were related to the rating overall, there were some significant differences among those unhappy with last year's program. Ratings given by those regarding their program as only fair or poor were over 40 percentage points lower than the ratings given by the 'excellent' group on four dimensions. The biggest differentiator was 'having a good coach', 93 percent of those saying their program was excellent gave a good rating on coaches, while only 42 percent of the group rating the program as 'fair/poor' rated their coaches as good. Other factors also with much lower ratings among the less satisfied were focus on skill development, learning teamwork and the team calibre not being high.

4. Likelihood of Playing with Club Next Year

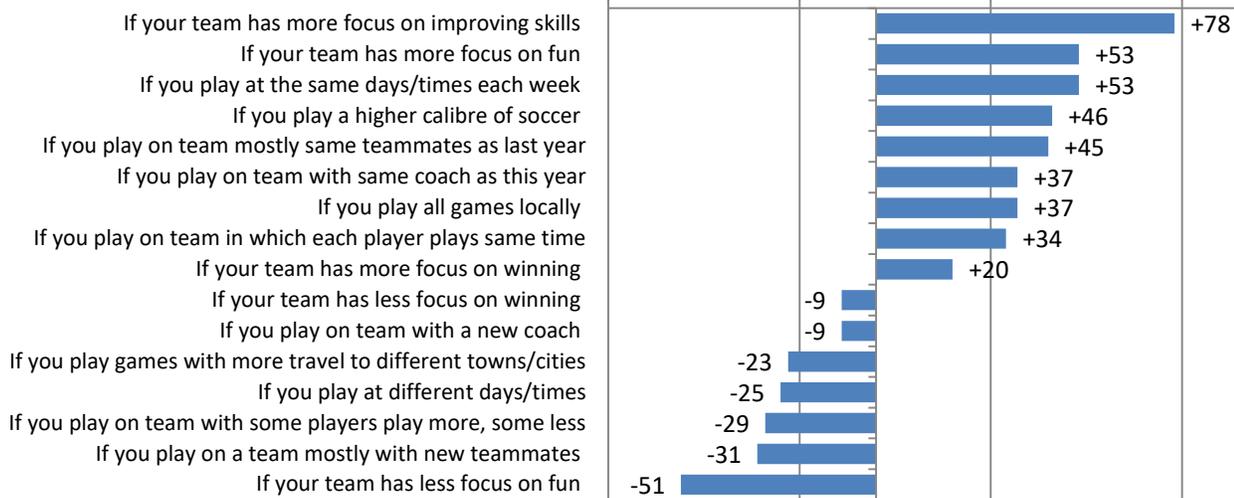
- **Over 20 percent of players are unlikely to register next year, largely due to their unhappiness with this year's program, with teen females the most at risk. Encouraging more to stay in soccer requires better coaching, helping players improve, keeping team-mates together and scheduling to be more consistent and local.**
- On the critical issue of whether they would play next year, sixty percent of players said they would definitely play for their club next year, 17 percent more said they probably would play, but 23 percent were less likely, either saying they 'might or might not play' or likely would not play. Most of this group, the "Unlikely to Play", is expected to drop out of soccer. *(Only 1 in 12 noted they would keep playing with another club)*
- While 60 percent overall say they definitely will play next year, likelihood of registering is equal across age groups, but lower among female players (53% definite) and Interior players (47% definite). Under 9 to Under 14 boys are the most likely to stay in soccer, while teenage females are more 'at risk' of dropping out. Ten percent of all survey respondents were girls playing U13 or higher – but this demographic represented 15 percent of those unlikely to play next year.

- The strongest driver of interest in playing next year is satisfaction with this year's program. Among those saying this year was 'excellent', 83 percent say they definitely will play for their club next year. Among those saying it was only fair or poor, just 28 percent are definite they will continue.



- Players planning to continue say this is because they enjoy it and they love their sport. Those unlikely to continue cite interest in other sports, having lost interest, not enjoying it any more, poor coaches and schedule issues. Results are similar by age and gender, except more females say they have lost interest or enjoyment, more boys plan other sports. When asked to suggest changes to encourage them to keep playing, better coaching, helping players improve and better balanced teams are most cited.
- 16 potential changes to soccer were explored: five enhance interest in playing, five decrease appeal. The five strongest changes with "Net Impact" (% more likely to play minus % less likely) of over +45 are improving skills, more focus on fun, playing same days/times, playing at higher calibre and keeping the same team-mates. The five factors most likely to kill interest, with net negative impacts of over -20, are less fun, moving to a team with new team-mates, unequal playing time, playing at different days/times and travelling more. Results are similar by gender, but players U11 and older are less concerned about travel and playing time and more concerned to win.

Net Impact on Likelihood of Playing Next Year “More Likely Play” minus “Less Likely Play”



Recommendations for Action

- **Soccer’s youth players have been very helpful in describing their needs and attitudes in this survey. They have outlined clear issues for soccer organizations to help address registration declines. Some of the issues are not new, but these now coming from players themselves should strengthen everyone’s concern to address them.**
1. The prime cause of lack of interest in continuing in soccer is simple - dissatisfaction with the program. The correlation between satisfaction and intent to re-register is very strong. Soccer must strive to maximise how good are its programs, ‘good’ meaning only: “does the sport meet its client players’ needs”. While females are not more unhappy with programs, they are at more risk of dropping out of the sport when dissatisfied, so meeting their needs is especially important.
 2. Dissatisfied players are unhappy for two major reasons. The most critical issue is team coaching. Players’ language is about ‘team coaching’ rather than ‘development’, the coach providing their program on the ground. Coaches get credit for a good year, but if players’ varied needs from soccer are not met, coaching will be described as poor and players will be lost.
 3. The second issue is team competitiveness - unbalanced play saps interest. Clubs and leagues must strive to balance teams to maintain healthy team dynamics. If imbalance and one-sided play are not quickly remedied, players will be lost.
 4. Soccer organizations must recognize that while improving skills and playing at a high level are certainly a priority, this is only one of players’ needs. At least as important in the reasons youth play and enjoy this team sport is fun and being part of a group, on a team of friends, and teamwork. Anything which lowers identification with their team risks lower registration. Moving older, lower-level players between teams is ill-advised; it is a significant risk to staying in the sport. Clubs need to keep teen recreational teams together as much as possible.
 5. Clubs and leagues need to make soccer fit in better with busy family life. For recreational players, having consistent days and time of play would be a major help to keep players engaged, and less travel to other cities also useful. While many factors determine schedules, soccer must encourage leagues and municipalities to work to do whatever it takes to address consistent day/time of play in particular, so helping deliver on everyone’s goal of more participation.