

How to Avoid Blowouts in Recreational Soccer

Blowouts (where a team wins over another by 5, 6, 7 or even more goals) are a no-win scenario for both teams. The players on the team that won were not challenged and learned essentially nothing. The players on the team that lost are disheartened and frustrated. The parents are angry and thinking about pulling their kid, and the coach is humiliated and looking for a place to complain.

If you run the score up on a team, you better believe that the losing coach will be talking to the other coaches in your bracket. Don't be surprised if those teams then begin canceling their games with you, because they don't want to be your next victim. Then your team has less and less games to play, and they get frustrated. It becomes a vicious cycle that is completely avoidable if you take the necessary steps to keep your matches competitive.

Preventing a blowout starts at practice. You should explain to your players what your expectations are and how you'll handle it if it happens. If your team is far superior to their opponent, give your team a new or different challenge. The ideas below will force your players to play harder and learn more, and they are more likely to have fun while doing it.

Often you can sense the skill level difference very early in the game, even while the score is still 0-0. How you handle the situation will be far more effective if you don't have to come up with your strategy during the game. Next, get up by 2 or 3 goals, and then implement your strategy. If your opponent scores, return the favor.

Below are several ideas you can utilize. As you develop your strategy, use some, all or even none of the suggestions; but please, plan something. Be proactive and take action before the score becomes lopsided. If you don't, you may remove the opportunity for your other players to score.

Keep in mind that it is the responsibility of the coach to manage the score, not the referee, parents or opposing coach. Don't embarrass your opponent by announcing that your players can't score any more goals. That's as demoralizing as hammering them 20 to 0. Keep it your team's private business. Use a code word or signal and be discreet. Your opponent should not be aware that you are pulling back.

- Work on passing. Limit players to 2 (or 3) touches of the ball, without dribbling. If a player violates the limitation repeatedly, sub them. Don't keep reminding players "two touch" during the game.
- Work on possession. Make five (or other appropriate number) consecutive passes before allowing a shot. If the other team possesses (or touches, which is a tougher limitation) the ball, then start over. Don't let players count the passes out loud (it's rude). If you make every player on the field touch the ball before shooting it teaches defenders to use their goalkeeper as an option.
- Work on developing two-footed players. Force players to only use their non-dominant foot for dribbling, passing and shooting.
- Work on shots from distance. No players allowed in the Penalty Area, which promotes players to switch the field and/or work the ball backwards. Players can also work on learning to bend the ball.
- Work on spreading the field and crossing. The ball can only enter the Penalty Area from the side.
- Work on heading (for players 12U and above). Players can only score with their head. This can be used in conjunction with the ball entering the Penalty Area from the side if your team is skilled enough.

Teach your players about soccer

- Let your less experienced players take throw-ins and goal or corner kicks.
- Tell your players that if they score, you will sub them out. It then becomes interesting to watch as players make decisions on what they are going to do (possess, pass, score, set up a teammate to score, etc.)
- Play your defenders as attackers to learn more about offside management.
- Play with 5 or more defenders. Have them work on long balls into to the other half of the field.
- Work on development in a real competitive environment. Mandate 10 moves or fakes from each player before the end of the game, ones they've not mastered yet.
- Work on getting all your players behind the ball when the other team attacks.
- Put your players in their weakest positions where they can learn and develop.

As a last resort, you can discretely and tactfully offer the opposing coach the chance to add additional players onto the field. You can also offer to exchange players to help balance the teams, but again, communicate options like this respectfully with the opposing coach. Remember that they may not accept any suggestions like this. The aim is to ensure that all players (on both teams) maximize their enjoyment of Soccer.

Winning by a double-digit margin doesn't prove that you are a great coach or that your team is the best in the state. A margin of victory this large will suggest that you ran up the score on kids that had given up on the match – and maybe on Soccer altogether. Don't be that coach.

Don't make excuses for a lopsided result. Find a way to avoid letting it happen in the first place. It's too easy to say after the fact, "I did my best to keep the game close" or "I tried hard to get the kids to stop scoring." Try harder. If players don't listen to the restrictions imposed upon them, put them on the bench.

Finally, a coach should have zero tolerance for their players taunting, mocking or in any way belittling overmatched and/or less skilled opponents. Any behavior of this nature from players should be dealt with swiftly and appropriately. Teach your players to let their skills speak for themselves, to respect their opponents and to recognize their effort.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with being the better team on any given day. There is also nothing wrong with making sure the other team knows you're the better team. What is important is that you provide that knowledge in a way that doesn't make your opponents want to quit Soccer forever. The critical concept is that you and your team should be the model of good sportsmanship and always conduct yourself with class.

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If you are the coach of a team that is clearly overmatched and losing, your approach and attitude can turn a very unpleasant situation into a positive one for the players. If they are able to shrug it off, you are most certainly an excellent coach. Some suggestions to help manage a game like this:

- Set your expectations and measure your success on improvement in shooting, crosses, passes, wall passes etc.
- Ignore the score and have fun.
- Let players play where they want.
- Compliment and praise your players for never giving up and being good sports.
- Encourage your kids to be positive in their comments to their teammates and the other team.
- Be sure to shake hands after the game; leave any anger or bad feelings on the bench.
- Respect the other team and remember that without an opponent there can be no game.

If your team finds itself playing a far superior opponent, how you handle the situation can define your team. Be positive and teach your players some important life lessons by demonstrating good sportsmanship and by being a positive role model with a mature attitude. Honor the game and congratulate your opponent for being an excellent team during post-game handshakes. Your players and parents will learn and reflect your behavior.