

Select Soccer for Magnolia Families – 2009

Magnolia soccer players and their parents are fortunate to have one of the strongest youth soccer programs in Seattle located in our neighborhood. Magnolia Soccer Club (“MSC” - see definitions of other capitalized terms on Page 7) provides not only a well-organized fall league but also a number of special programs such as the World Cup for young players, a summer program to get the season started, optional skills clinics throughout the year and resources to help coaches improve their skills. Finally, unlike other clubs, Magnolia teams play only against other Magnolia teams until U-10 adding to the community feel of our program.

These programs provide an excellent introduction to the sport for the young players. By nine or ten, some players are ready for a more challenging soccer experience. This article is to give Magnolia families an overview of select soccer with an emphasis on offerings for younger players. See also the SYSA website - <http://sysa.bonzidev.com> - “SELECT” link for an excellent general article on select soccer as well as the most current information on the tryout process.

It's important to note that SYSA has just begun a review of select soccer in Seattle under the project name Seattle United. This review will likely take months with few changes expected until 2010. One area that could see changes in 2009 is the tryout process. The SYSA website is the best place to get the details on any changes; there are several documents explaining the Seattle United project in the SYSA Select link. In the meantime, this article will describe the existing Select soccer landscape in Seattle as well as how the tryout process worked in 2008.

How does Select Soccer differ from Recreation Soccer?

MSC offers recreation (Rec) soccer which focuses on making soccer as enjoyable as possible for the majority of players so that they not only improve their skills, but develop a life-long love of the sport. MSC also works to make the team experience as positive as possible. MSC has adopted a number of policies over the years to further these goals. The following list describes Rec soccer in Magnolia. Some of the policies below are SYSA rules; others reflect MSC's view of how to best serve Magnolia's youth soccer players:

- No tryouts; players up through U-11 are assigned to teams by MSC (after that age teams generally stay together). Every player is assured of being assigned to a team.
- MSC assigns players to teams based on annual player evaluations to ensure that teams are neither too strong nor too weak. Team rosters are shuffled each year to maintain balanced teams.
- MSC assigns U-11 teams to SYSA Association play at the Silver level. U-12 and older teams may choose to compete at the Gold, Silver or Bronze levels.
- Players must play in their age group. Players are only allowed to “play-up” in the rare case where teams at the appropriate age have full rosters.
- Teams are encouraged to give all players equal playing time; at a minimum, all players should play half of each game.
- Practices and games are optional. A child won't lose their spot on the roster due to absenteeism.
- Practices are in Magnolia and players are generally from Magnolia as well.
- Rosters are often at SYSA maximums (for example, 14 players at U-11) to give as many players as possible the opportunity to play on a team.
- Rec teams have volunteer coaches, typically parents. No coaching License is required.
- Practices start in August and games run into November. The December All-City Tournament and Spring Soccer are optional. The cost is about \$90 for the fall season.

Select soccer, on the other hand, means:

- City-wide tryouts for U-11 and U-12, team tryouts U-13 and older. Players must compete for a spot on a team.
- To varying degrees, players must compete each year to keep their place on a team. From a practical standpoint, however, incumbent players have an advantage over new

- players because they are known to the coaches. This means it is more difficult for a Rec player to make a select team at U-12 and above than it is at U-11.
- Premier clubs, and some Select organizations, typically have at least an “A” team and a “B” team for each age group. Some Premier clubs have 8 or 10 teams for the younger age groups.
 - Players can be from anywhere, though most are from SYSA member clubs.
 - Teams typically practice 10 or 11 months of the year with the focus on fall league play. Most teams take part in state-wide tournaments in the winter. Teams use the spring and summer for training with the occasional scrimmage or tournament.
 - While teams encourage participation in other sports, players may risk losing playing time if they consistently miss practices and games. In extreme cases, players may lose their spot on the team.
 - Fees ranging from roughly \$500 to \$2,000 depending on the level of professional coaching. The low end of this range is for teams without paid coaches – FC Shoreline falls into this category. This cost does not include the cost of travel to games & tournaments. Teams may offer scholarships. The cost increases with older teams, largely due to greater travel.
 - Players are allowed to play-up in age based on ability. This is relatively rare, one or two players a team. An exception are “developmental” teams discussed below.
 - Teams are required to have a Licensed coach who may or may not be a parent. Teams may also pay to have a professional trainer and may supplement training with required or optional clinics (such as speed training and goalkeeper training).

District Select versus Premier Soccer

The term “Select Soccer” encompasses two levels of play – Premier and District Select (commonly, just “Select”). Premier is the most competitive level (though there are at least three levels of league play) while District Select teams range from the quality of a good Rec team to those that can compete with Premier level teams.

The Premier club for SYSA is Emerald City Football Club (EMFC) [emeraldcityfc.org]. ECFC is designed for the player that wants to train and compete at the highest level. Because the ECFC website offers an excellent overview of that Club’s philosophy and programs, there’s no need to review that here. In addition, there are a number of other Premier level clubs in the region (but outside of SYSA) such as Crossfire [crossfiresoccer.org] located on the east side of Lake Washington and Northwest Nationals [nwnationals.org] based in south Snohomish County.

Premier clubs have begun offering a wider range of teams; ECFC added 3rd and even 4th teams in certain younger age categories in 2008. In response to this growth, there have been additional PDL leagues formed to accommodate teams which often represent the third, fourth or even fifth tier team for a club at a given age level. Also, some clubs (not ECFC) offer teams designed for underage players called “developmental” teams. Most of these teams play in the lowest of the three Premier leagues (P3), but in rare cases they enter District leagues.

District Select teams can be a part of a larger organization or they can be formed by an individual coach (usually, this means a successful Rec team decides to move to Select.) The term “District” refers to District 1 [wsysad1.com], the WSYSA region that includes SYSA.

Hillwood and Shorelake (in north Seattle) are the SYSA clubs that have most consistently offered District teams under the name FC Shoreline [fchoreline.com]. In 2008, Westside United [westsideunited.org] grew from a single Select team in 2007 to six teams. With the sponsorship of the Ballard, Magnolia, Woodland and Queen Anne clubs, Westside offered 2 BU-11 teams, 2 GU-11 teams and 2 BU12 teams. The Blue Arrows from Capitol Hill offered two successful boys Select teams in 2008 at the U-11 & U-12 levels. They will likely add teams in 2009.

The table below summarizes some of the key differences between ECFC/PDL and District Select:

	ECFC / PDL	District Select
Level of Play	ECFC competes against the strongest teams in the State. Starting in 2008, ECFC offered a wider range of teams, but all play in a Premier league.	Wide range of competitive level, but generally quite a bit higher than Rec. The strongest teams compare with a premier "B" team.
Game Locations	ECFC plays in the PDL against teams from around the State. For U-11 games are local (Puget Sound). For older teams, league games can be in Spokane, Tri-Cities and Vancouver.	League play against District 1 teams, generally from King, Snohomish and Skagit counties. Optional tournament games can be outside of District 1.
Cost	\$1,900 (including team fee of \$1,100, uniform cost of \$400 and tournament fees of \$400), plus travel costs (2008 costs).	\$500 (Shoreline) to \$1,500, depending on the level of professional coaching, travel and optional costs (extra tournaments).
Coaching	Very experienced coaches plus a highly regarded coaching director. A large coaching staff allows ECFC to offer support in case a coach can't make a game or practice.	A combination of licensed parent(s), volunteers and paid coaches (some very highly qualified). Smaller organizations offer less backup support to individual teams.
Practice Locations	Throughout Seattle, but U -11 teams often practice at Ingraham & Nathan Hale High Schools.	At fields assigned by the club that sponsors the team. So, a Ballard team will practice on Ballard fields.
Teams	ECFC offers at least two teams for both boys and girls at each age level. After selection in the City-wide tryouts, players are evaluated early in the season and assigned to a team. Offering an "A" and a "B" team (sometimes "C" & "D" as well) adds another level of competition. Players can be moved up or down as late as August when rosters are set.	SYSA District Select teams generally do not have an "A" & "B" team, but this varies. In 2008, the U-11 Westside teams were considered A & B; the U-12 teams were not.
Tryouts	Players must compete for their spots each year. Competition increases for spots on older teams.	Less competition due to narrower interest in these teams. However, players must try out again at U-12.
Parent Work	Professional organization in place reduces the amount of parent work.	The need for parent volunteers varies but it can be significant if there are no paid coaches.

The 2009 Tryout Process

All players interested in SYSA U-11 and U-12 select soccer must take part in City-wide tryouts, although the exact dates have not been determined. The earliest dates the 2009 tryouts can take place are May 2nd and May 16th for U-12. [This is a change from previous years when tryouts took place in January and February.]

SYSA has historically offered U-11 players free, optional "Training Sessions" the month before tryouts – the dates for these have not been set for 2009. For U-11 & U-12 players, tryouts are typically combined for ECFC and all SYSA District Select teams. The SYSA website will post the select tryout and Training Session dates and locations for each age group. In the past, the actual dates were not known until about a month in advance due to field scheduling issues.

There will likely also be an optional parent information meeting a few weeks before tryouts. At this meeting SYSA representatives will explain the tryout process and present the teams taking part. Also, ECFC and District Select coaches will be available to answer questions.

The Historical Tryout Process

While all of the specifics of the 2009 process may not be known until just before the tryouts take place, it's likely that they will look similar in many respects to the 2008 tryouts. The following review will focus on the 2008 tryouts for the U-11 age group – though U-12 was similar.

The 2008 U-11 tryouts consisted of four optional tryout sessions located around the City (with players required to attend at least one) and a final mandatory tryout session for all players hoping to be selected. Each player was assigned a numbered jersey to be worn at all tryouts to help coaches evaluate the players over a number of sessions.

Players were broken into small teams and then rotated through a number of small-sided games. With 100+ players on the field, these sessions can initially seem overwhelming for both parents and players. Pretty quickly, the players settled into the routine and they focused on playing soccer. That's why it is important to attend more than one of these optional sessions – the kids have more of a chance to figure out that they can just play and not worry about the “process”.

They tryouts are probably harder for parents who have to watch on the sidelines and worry not only about how well their child is playing, but also about whether or not the coaches have a chance to see their child's play. With so many kids playing all at the same time, and with no individual drills or skill evaluations, it's not clear how the players are being evaluated. However, these sessions do allow the coaches to see all of the players in a relatively short period of time. And, the more sessions your child attends, the more visibility they'll receive.

An important thing to keep in mind is that the coaches are, for the most part, life-long soccer players. This gives them the ability to quickly evaluate each player. While parents focus on such obvious factors as how many goals their child scores, the coaches look for things most parents miss – the ability to use both feet, field vision, body position, effort, and teamwork.

The optional sessions also provide an opportunity to meet the coaches from the various teams. If you have a clear first choice for a team it is important to try and introduce yourself and your child to a coach from that team. This is particularly important if you think a District team is the right fit. Coaches will spend more time looking at your child if they know you're interested in their team. With over 100 players on the field at once, it helps coaches to be able to focus only on interested players. Having said that, all coaches make an effort to rate all players because they don't know who will be available. In some cases, a player starts out thinking a District team is the best fit but they get an offer from ECFC. Even if ECFC is your first choice, meet with District team coaches so you have a clear choice for a back-up team.

During the final tryout session the coaches from the various teams make short presentations explaining their program and answering parent questions. Parents were required to list, in order of preference, the teams their child was most interested in. After the final session the coaches “drafted” players based on their own ratings of the players (they also supposed to receive a “composite” rating from all coaches for each player). Ratings are not shared with players and parents. Just as important as the player's ratings are the player's team preferences. Coaches are more likely to draft a player that ranked their team highly than one that ranked their team 4th or 5th. Still, coaches also understand that many players will put ECFC first and will look to play on a District Select team only if they don't make the ECFC cut.

In general, the most highly-rated players choose and are selected by ECFC. [The addition in 2008 of a third U-11 ECFC team provided more players the opportunity to play with that club.] In some cases, players good enough to qualify for ECFC put a District team as their first choice reflecting a desire to play with a coach and teammates they know (especially for Rec teams moving to Select such as the Blue Arrows) or because of logistical and cost issues. Also, some parents decided not to join the team their child is assigned. This, in turn, creates a few open slots on teams so additional players were offered a spot. Most teams at U-11 take a full roster of 14 players (at this age, teams play 9 a side).

In rough terms, 125 players took part in the 2008 tryout process for both the boy's and the girl's U-11 age groups. Most of these players were 10 year olds, but some 9 year olds took part as well. Some players chose not to attend the final session and were not eligible for selection. Some participants also took part in tryouts for clubs outside of Seattle. They may have been selected by ECFC, but choose to take an offer from another club. Finally, some younger players take part to get a feel for tryouts even though they plan to play one more year of Rec soccer.

These factors combine to make it hard to say what percentage of those attending the tryouts were selected by either ECFC or by a Select team. ECFC selected roughly 42 players (14 on each of their three teams) for both boys and girls at U-11. For boys, there were four District Select teams offered in 2008: FC Shoreline, Blue Arrows, and two teams for Westside. For girls, there were three 2008 District Select teams: two Westside teams and one from Shoreline. Using boys as an example, and assuming 14 slots on each team, there were a total of 98 spots offered. When you take into account the attrition factors mentioned in the above paragraph, it appears that over 90% of the players who wanted to play select soccer were offered a spot on a team.

The factor that has the biggest impact on this figure is the number of teams offered each year. For U-11 boys, 2008 offered more team choices than is normally the case. ECFC's willingness to add teams is determined in part by the quality of the players at tryouts as well as by the number of strong players that are interested in ECFC. The number of District Select teams offered each year has, in the past, varied with a couple of factors. Outside of Shoreline, which has consistently offered one boy's and one girl's team at U-11, new teams are typically formed because a Rec team wants to move to Select. One issue with these teams is that they have a number of existing players which means fewer open slots. And, there is no way to know in advance how many of these teams there will be in 2009 and where they'll be based.

The growth in the Westside organization, and the success of the Blue Arrows teams, suggests that these organizations may become as dependable a source of District Select teams as is Shoreline. In fact, one of the issues SYSA is studying as a part of its review of select soccer is how to make the District Select level more robust in Seattle. A goal is to see if SYSA can provide additional support for this level of play so these teams are more easily formed and supported. As mentioned above, this effort, currently called Seattle United, is unlikely to directly produce additional teams in 2009. But, it may make those considering forming new U-11 select teams more willing to do so because of the prospect of additional support in the future.

Finding the Right Team

District Select can be a good alternative for the player that's not quite talented enough to make ECFC, but is ready to move beyond Rec. Even players skilled enough to make ECFC may not want to play Premier soccer because it is too serious and may conflict with other sports. District Select is lower-key, involves less travel, is less expensive and may provide the right balance between soccer and other interests.

Another factor in choosing a team at any level is how successful a team is going to be. Simply put, it's more fun to be on a team that's competitive than one that loses every game. This is a balancing act; stronger competition is better for your child's development. If the competition is too tough, however, the experience won't be much fun. Your child's personality comes in to play here; not every child is willing to suffer a losing season in exchange for playing at the highest level. In the end, you might decide that playing Rec is the right fit, at least for another year.

The expanded number of PDL leagues, and the Gold and Silver levels for some District leagues, makes it more likely that a select team will face teams of a comparable level. At the U-11 level, it's hard to gauge how strong a team will be because there's no record for the previous year. It can be harder to gauge what sort of a team a District Select (or even an ECFC) team will turn out to be. For U-12 and above you can see a team's record for 2008. For District teams this is found on the District 1 website under the Schedule/Standings link at the bottom of the homepage.

How your child ranks on the team will have a bearing on the experience, too. You may not want to be the weakest player on a team, but being the strongest means too little challenge. Of course, it's hard to know this in advance. You might try and get a sense from your child's play compared to that of the others at tryouts. Strong players are best served, from a level of play standpoint, on a PDL team.

Considerations for Magnolia Families

While the factors Magnolia families take into account when considering Select soccer are shared by families throughout the City, we do have some special considerations:

- MSC offers a strong Rec program with talented coaches.
- The ability to have practices and home games in Magnolia is more of a consideration than it is for families living in more centrally-located neighborhoods.
- MSC's practice of shuffling teams each year is designed to produce balanced teams, not strong teams. Other Seattle clubs allow teams to stay together which allows strong teams to get stronger (and weak teams get weaker). Players on the stronger teams benefit from a higher level of competition in practices allowing them to progress at a faster rate than players on an average Rec team.
- MSC has better-than-average access to good quality fields; though we have no artificial turf fields (Interbay is considered a Queen Anne field). This limits opportunities to train in the winter and spring.

This decision is easiest if you have a talented child who really wants to play on the most competitive team he or she can; ECFC is an obvious choice. For the child who is a strong player, but really enjoys playing on a neighborhood team, it's a tougher call. Some things to consider:

- With Westside United offering 6 teams in 2008, the number of close-to-home District Select openings for Magnolia families was the largest it has been in recent years. Westside hasn't announced how many U-11 teams it will form in 2009.
- Select soccer means you'll be driving outside of Magnolia for practices. Even Westside, reflecting its four-club sponsorship, held practices in Ballard and north Seattle in addition to Magnolia fields.
- Unlike other clubs, Magnolia teams compete only against other Magnolia teams until U-10. While this contributes to the great neighborhood feel of our program, it makes it more difficult for Magnolia parents to gauge how well their child will fare when competing against players from the entire city in select tryouts. Magnolia players have traditionally fared well in the tryout process; a number play on ECFC teams and quite a few play on the Westside teams.
- While Magnolia does not allow players to play up in age, this is an option in select soccer. Parents of a talented 9 year old may look to U-11 Select as a way to give their child a more competitive playing environment (such as the "developmental" teams discussed above). One thing to consider is that the game gets more physical in older age groups and that playing up may make for a rude introduction to select play.

Definitions

- SYSA – Seattle Youth Soccer Association is the parent organization for MSC and the 14 other clubs that serve the cities of Seattle and Shoreline [<http://sysa.bonzidev.com>].
- U-11, U-12 etc. – Short for “under 11”, etc. For 2009, players born after July 31, 1998 will be eligible to play at the U-11 level.
- License – There are a series of licenses with standards set by the United States Soccer Federation. These range from “E” up to “A”. District select teams must have at least one coach with an E license at the start of league play that must attain a “D” license within two years.
- WSYSA – Washington State Youth Soccer Association [www.wsysa.org]. WSYSA is made up of six Districts, SYSA is in District 1. The following District 1 link gives with web addresses of all six WYSYA districts: <http://www.wsysad1.com/aboutus.htm>.
- District – The District 1 website has a “Schedules/Standings” link that shows all of the district select teams, their schedules (click on the age category e.g. ‘GU-11’) and their records for 2007 [<http://www.wsysad1.com>]. This will give you a sense of what the travel commitment is for district select as well as how the SYSA teams have fared in league play.
- PDL – Premier Development League – the state-wide Premier league in which ECFC competes.

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