

Rule or Be Ruled

How much training is too much? Well, the whole question in itself is subjective as one person's threshold might be the next person's training zone. The term "over-training" is thrown around weight rooms like discarded bumper plates and it's avoided in soccer circles because most people are too scared to push their limits.

The world is full of different types of athletes. Most athletes are average, some are tough, and fewer are elite. The smallest group are those who are elite *and* tough. Part of what halts young players in their development is true physical injury. I used to have a real mean bastard for a coach who'd ask players who went down in pain, "Are you hurt or are you injured?" Predictably, players would look at him perplexed before he sent them on their way out of his training sessions.

This post isn't about the science behind soft tissue damage and overuse injuries. Most injuries for soccer players are the exacerbation of an ignored ailment or deficiency that's been exposed through use. This is about the mentality to break the chains of doubt plaguing young players. Soccer is largely seen as a "soft sport" and those who've played or been around this game from somewhere other than their couch or armchair know this to be true. Most young players are mentally injured. Excuses become realities. Shortcuts become habits. False views of reality become truth. And the truth of the matter is soccer deserves its criticism. American players are as soft as baby shit.

For every suburban player there's a parent with a duffle bag full of excuses that little Timmy can't push himself. Coaches have to cave under the pressure of parent wussification because 1). Nobody wants to hear a soccer parent nag and moan like a rented mule and 2). There's no time for coddling in true development environments.

One of my best friends is a competitive power lifter and his training regimen revolves around a few basic principles.

1). Real athletes dedicated to their craft are *always* carrying some type of injury, ailment, or discomfort

2). Competition exists before, during, and after training sessions

3). Toughness is less about *maschimo* displays of arrogant stupidity, mistreatment of others, showing off, and general trash talk. Toughness is learning how far and for how long you are willing to push your mind and body beyond what you previously thought you could.

4). There are no trophies for the mundane. Training is the entry fee to success and going through the motions is a waste of time.

When I first published my article about players getting upwards of 10,000 touches a day on a ball, people approached me with doubts, trepidation, and curiosity. The first person to call me was my power lifter friend who said, "Jon, I think you're onto something that my sport depends upon. Repetition and the myth of over-training."

Over the course of the next few weeks, he and I discussed the difference between dedicated power lifters and gym rats we're all used to seeing in the weight room. I went to his gym where the voice

of well-known power lifter, [CT Fletcher](#) barked motivational phrases laden with profanity on loop through the speakers as the industrial-strength fans droned in the background. These athletes sought self-improvement above all else. These athletes redefined intensity. Most had given up something to take up this type of training. Early mornings, time with their families, extra money went to training and competition expenses — their primal caveman was constantly beating their rib cage, begging to come out and destroy something. But, through all the intensity, there was a humility to these Goliath's. On average, these athletes spent close to 10-15 hours a week in the gym smashing through training sessions without a coach or the promise of reward. Their own self-improvement is the ultimate reward.

So, what the hell does this have to do with soccer? Everything. It has everything to do with how players view their personal investment into the game. Most American players think dedicating between three-to-five hours a week plus a game at the weekend will take them somewhere exceptional. That will take you to the same place it takes everyone else doing the bare minimum. Nowhere. This is the ethos of the casual American player: do the bare minimum and expect optimal results. It's easy to trace the genesis of such a faulty approach. American players who choose soccer are very rarely playing as if the game is the difference maker, the tool that will better their circumstance. The culture is casual for most players. It's suburban and "safe".

Juxtapose the fluffy environment with the way players train in Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia and we begin to see why American players fall behind around age 12. The way I see it, we all have an ability to persevere. Your ability to endure pain and discomfort is like a muscle. It's either conditioned to resist pain or it's extremely weak. The only way to improve it is to log the minutes that turn to hours and build up the reps to make yourself stronger. Discomfort is *NOT* pain. It's irritation and weakness. Players who can perform for sustained periods of time in this uncomfortable zone are better for it and learn to play tougher and maintain their performance longer than the average player.

Working on technique, fitness, or anything *you* can control for hours on end is not over-training. It is real training. Is 10,000 functional touches a day excessive? Yes. In fact, it's designed to filter out the weak players. But the goal should not be 10,000 from the start. Hit 1,000 the first week. Up it to 2,000 touches the next week. Don't stop. Don't quit. Don't be like everyone else.

The call to action is simple.

Players: Put the video games down, the excuses aside, figure out what it is you need to work on (don't go out and train what you're proficient at) and work hard *on your own*. The people who blow smoke up your ass have no idea what's best for you. They are enablers; avoid these people. You aren't good enough and without steadfast dedication, you can bet your bottom dollar you'll never be good enough. "Good enough" is for average people. Be better than those people.

Coaches: Give your players homework and hold them accountable. Failure to do this makes you a poor coach and a pretender. Don't enable weakness. If a player has a crap first touch, that player shouldn't see the field until they improve. It's a simple game. Don't complicate it. Don't discuss playing time, tactics, excuses, or manipulations from and with parents. They aim to sway your attention to their child, not for the good of the team. It's not personal, it's soccer.

Parents: Shut up. Seriously, shut your mouths. Let the coach do their job. You do yours. Get your mind around every excuse and stop the kitchen table coaching session. If you knew better than the

coach, it would translate in your child's play. Your child is not special. They aren't a prodigy. If they were, you'd understand what I'm talking about. When you badmouth a coach, guess who thinks that's acceptable? That's right, your self-entitled child. Take away the video games, smartphones, and quit taking their ego to the buffet line of bullshit and be real with your child. If they're not improving, figure out why and help them. Don't drill them to death. That's up to them to do for themselves. If they believe it's what *you* want, they've already lost.

The takeaway: Train harder, longer, and better. Don't exist to appease the status quo. Most if not all of you *will not be professional players*. Just because that's the reality doesn't mean you have to shortchange yourself and everyone who's invested in your journey as a player. And quit being so damn soft.

I recently spoke to a former player so full of delusions and cop-outs that I had a hard time listening to his excuses. "My coach isn't nice," and "My team keeps screwing up," and similar types of verbal vomit polluted our conversation. I asked him, "So, what's the problem?" He looked at me as though I didn't "get it" and rolled his eyes.

This young man clearly needed a dose of reality. So I shared my own story. It's not glamorous. I'm not superhuman. I just went through the meat grinder of life at an early age. Many have and many will in the future. At 17, I was stopped at traffic light. The light turned green and I entered the intersection. So did a semi-truck who blew the red light.

The accident left me with a broken rib cage, broken neck, fractured skull, and a concussion. The doctors wanted to intentionally sever my spinal cord so I wouldn't sever it myself by trying to move. Luckily, my parents opted for a second, less evasive opinion. Taking the better part of a year to learn to walk again and the intestinal fortitude to step on a field again took a lot. I missed my window as a talent. High level universities rescinded their scholarship offers and rightly so. I wasn't supposed to walk again, let alone play the game competitively. But I still played Division I ball. I still got up for headers and learned to control my fear and accept the troubles life threw at me. I didn't die. I still get to kick a ball. Life goes on.