

THE 2013 PARENTS' GUIDE TO SOCCER

CANADA'S PREMIER SOCCER MAGAZINE | WWW.INSIDESOCCER.CA

ISSUE #102 | JUNE/JULY 2013 | \$5.95

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THE 2013 PARENTS' GUIDE TO SOCCER

FIT FACTS



THE RIGHT TRAINING ENVIRONMENT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

BY RICHARD BUCCIARELLI

If there was one thing that was obvious during my first four months working as Fitness Coach for the Toronto FC Academy, it's that proper "fitness" training is not the only factor affecting players' fitness in soccer. The specific difference I noticed right away at the TFC Academy was that the intensity of training and games seemed higher. The players were all hungry and worked very hard in every aspect of training – not just during the "fitness" components of training. The majority of the games the Academy teams played were played against teams one or two years older and thus were very challenging – both technically and physically – for the players. Over time it has become clear to me that when you take a group of talented players, put them in a competitive environment with four training sessions per week, and also play challenging, meaningful games (often against teams 1-2 years older), the overall intensity of the environment is noticeably higher than in other environments.

The results of our fitness tests – specifically the Yo-Yo Intermittent Recovery tests – have made the importance of an intense training environment all the more evident. The first tests we conducted were in January of 2013 (after a one-month off-season and Holiday break). The periodization I prepared for the teams' physical training entailed a six-week aerobic training cycle, with each of the five

Academy teams training two days per week on the field, and doing one day per week of a home training program. The three oldest teams ('98s, '97/'96s, and '95/'94s) also did one extra 30-minute strength workout per week in the Academy fitness facility.

The aerobic training component to the periodization was designed to elicit improvements in the players' aerobic fitness and high intensity running ability, which should also be accompanied by improvements in their Yo-Yo Intermittent Recovery Test scores. To give some perspective, over the past three years at my facility, the Soccer Fitness Training Centre, we have seen modest but significant

improvements in players' Yo-Yo Test scores after 6-8 weeks of high intensity aerobic endurance training done 2 days per week. On average, we have seen improvements ranging from 5-22%, which corresponds to an average increase of 15% and an increase in total high intensity running ability of between 120-320 metres (See Figure 1). During a similar six-week training period with the TFC Academy, however, where the total volume and load of aerobic training was kept very consistent with what we do in the Soccer Fitness Training Centre, I saw significantly greater improvements in aerobic endurance and Yo-Yo Test Scores than I have ever seen in the

LEVEL	AVERAGE YO-YO SCORE IMPROVEMENT - 6 WEEKS/2 DAYS/ WEEK AEROBIC TRAINING (DISTANCE)	AVERAGE YO-YO SCORE IMPROVEMENT - 6 WEEKS/2 DAYS/ WEEK AEROBIC TRAINING (PERCENT)
SFTC U12	120m	22%
SFTC U14	160m	20%
SFTC U16	240m	21%
SFTC U18	320m	8%
SFTC 18+	240m	5%
TFC Academy U12 (2000's)	440m	40%
TFC Academy U14 (1999's)	320m	24%
TFC Academy U16 (1998's)	440m	25%
TFC Academy U18 (1996/97's)	320m	11%
TFC Academy 18+ (1995/94's)	360m	13%

Soccer Fitness Training Centre (Figure 1). Among the five Academy teams, ranging in age from 2000s to 1994s, the range of improvement in Yo-Yo score was 11-40%, with an average improvement 23%, and one team (the 2000s) improving its score by 40%. Needless to say, these results are very impressive and show a greater improvement in high intensity running ability than seen with athletes following a similar aerobic training protocol at the Soccer Fitness Training Centre. The question I then had to ask myself is why? - Why did the players in the TFC Academy show such greater improvements over the same six-week time span? It was only when I looked into all the other aspects of their training (outside of their "fitness" training) that things became clearer to me.

Comprising some of the most talented and best soccer players in the province of Ontario, the TFC Academy teams train four days per week, every week from the beginning of January to the end of November. The coaches are knowledgeable, qualified and experienced at higher levels of the game, and the training sessions they run are very intense and competitive. Because players do not pay, and must be scouted/

selected to be involved in the Academy, and because there is a clear pathway for them to progress from the Academy into the first team and professional soccer, they are determined and focused and these attributes only add to and increase the overall intensity of training. I believe this intense, competitive training environment may be the one aspect that sets the TFC Academy apart. This seems to me to be the best way to explain the rapid improvements in players' aerobic fitness within such a short (six-week) timeframe, as the only real difference between the training load with the athletes in the Soccer Fitness Training Centre and those at the TFC Academy is what they do outside of their specific "fitness" training. It remains an interesting topic that may require further research in coming years before conclusive arguments can be made.

The challenge for coaches, parents, and players in the club "rep" and academy environments must be to try to replicate the same intensity in their own training sessions and games. Below are some suggestions:

- Conduct regular fitness assessments (at least three times per year), including a measure of aerobic fitness such as the Yo-Yo Intermittent Recovery Test

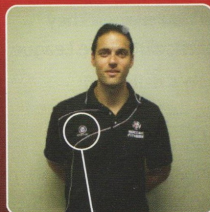
- Consult/work with a Fitness Coach to help plan and administer appropriate training volume and intensity in practice (for example – how hard, and for how long, will players work within a specific drill or small-sided game?)
- Make sure everything about the training environment is challenging (minimize time players spend standing idle; group players together according to their skill level and speed of play; if there are players who are developmentally ahead of their peers, put them with a group of older/faster players to increase challenge and intensity)
- Play in as many "meaningful" games as possible; for a game to be "meaningful" it must be challenging technically/tactically, physically, and mentally. A faster speed of play will directly make a game more "meaningful"



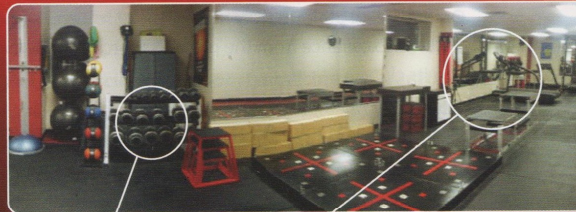
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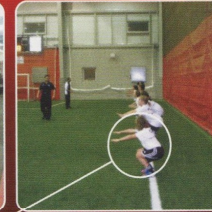


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Science-Based, Soccer-Specific Fitness Training

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