

High school soccer and its role in the American soccer development

In the aftermath of the USA men's soccer team elimination from the 2018 World Cup in Russia, much has been said about factors that led to the elimination as well as the possible collapse of the American soccer development system. The various analysis seem to circumvent around the topics of the aging of this generation of USA soccer players, poor leadership in the federation, predomination of a "pay to play system" in the grassroots, failure of the collegiate soccer system as a means of development for 17-22 age players, and failure of the Major Soccer League (and lower leagues as well) to promote young domestic talent and instill in them a more competitive mindset (in the absence of a promotion/relegation system). Those are all major and legitimate topics of discussion. However, very seldom high school soccer (or school soccer as a whole – middle school and junior high included) are included in any discussion about soccer development in this country. It is time for school ball to stop being treated as the step red-headed child of American soccer. Here are some numbers that suggest that ignoring its importance is a waste of an incredible resource.

There are over 4 million American youths (2.4 million boys and 1.7 million girls) registered with US Soccer according to recent surveys (FIFA Magazine). This makes USA the #1 country in the world in youth soccer participation. But how many of these players also play high school soccer? According to the National Federation of State High School Associations there were over 800,000 high school soccer players in the US system in the 2016-2017 season (450,234 boys and 388,339 girls). Likely only a fraction of these players are registered with US Soccer through their club teams, which actually increases the number of youth soccer players in the US system. This number is quite telling though as it shows the dimension of high school soccer in the American youth soccer pie. Approximately nearly 20% of this pie is a very significant number of players, which absolutely makes the case that high school soccer cannot

be ignored in any discussion revolving soccer development in America. Ultimately, it's undeniable that pure soccer talent is among this high contingency of soccer players.

Given the current calendar structure of high school soccer, this sea of footballers practice and play the game for nearly one-third of the year, as high school seasons are generally played over a 3.5 month span. Quite sizeable portion of the year, especially if you consider the challenges the winter season presents in some regions of the country, when playing outside is very difficult or impossible, and indoor soccer facilities are scarce. During the high school season, these players tend to be involved in soccer related activities at least 5 days a week, which amounts to over 70 days of soccer activities (including training sessions and games). Many (legitimately) question the workload players are submitted to in such a short time span, claiming there's an unhealthy balance between the number of training sessions versus games. This is certainly an important issue that absolutely needs to be addressed; however, it escapes the scope of this discussion. The substantial number of players playing high school soccer and the significant amount of training sessions/games they participate in over the course of the season are undisputable facts though, not speculations. Being aware of these facts then, it seems reasonable that we, as an aspiring soccer nation, use this wisely and make high school soccer into a viable means of soccer development. Are we there yet? Not even close...

The natural question then is why? Why is high school soccer left out of the soccer development spectrum? Why is its potential not explored and maximized? Why is high school soccer arguably not taken seriously by many coaches, soccer pundits, and even the soccer federation in America? There is an array of elements that contribute to create this status quo of high school soccer. Let's look at the central ones and their ramifications. In general, the level of play tends to be substantially lower at the high school soccer when compared to club soccer. Two main factors determine the accuracy of this statement. 1- Clubs can recruit players regardless where they live whereas high schools (except private)

are restricted to roster players that go to their given schools and belong to their given school districts. High school programs, in many cases, cannot even run tryouts as, for the sake of inclusion (or sometimes lack of numbers), coaches must take every student who desires to join the team, whether or not the student possesses any athletic or technical ability. Because of this dynamic, the best high school soccer talents are scattered among different high school programs. 2- Another major challenge high school soccer faces is its inability to have access to a higher number of qualified coaches. It is common in several states and counties that school rules mandate that soccer coaches (and sports coaches in general) must work within the school system, or at a minimum, employees of the school system must be given hiring priority, which absolutely shrinks the pool of candidates for coaching positions. The problem is magnified in schools located in remote areas, where the pool of qualified coaches is already small. These two factors combined immensely limit the capacity of high school soccer programs to create a more competitive environment. This is the reality of the situation, and one would think that improving the level of play would necessarily involve taking into account these two factors. There's a third factor though that tends to aggravate the situation even more. There's a palpable conflict between high school and club soccer representatives, who for the most part don't speak the same language and don't see eye to eye. This conflict does not emerge from competition on the field of play evidently, as high school and club are played in different seasons (also by rule a high school team will never play against a club team), but rather, competition for status, attention, and purpose. For the factors mentioned before, club soccer is more likely to create a better environment for soccer development. With that said, a more conducive environment for a higher level of play in club soccer does not change the fact that a legion of players will spend a significant time of the year playing high school soccer. The fact that these two groups share the same players makes this cold war between them even more difficult to understand. Instead of working together to align/converge their playing philosophies, training methods, and tactical strategies, club soccer makes a point to complete separate from high school. It's common to hear

comments from club representatives along the lines of “high school is a waste of time”, “all they do is playing kick ball”, and “it takes us at least a month to break players from bad habits they pick up at high school”. High school representatives don’t help the case either by isolating themselves with rules that make the system impenetrable to outside influences. It’s illogical and borderline insane though that most people simply ignore this situation and seem to exclude high school soccer of the development calendar rather than take measures to improve it and bridge the disputes and differences with club soccer. Changing the rules on recruiting players in high school is not practical and likely detrimental to the balance of the system. Allowing high schools to hire coaches outside of the school system workforce would certainly alleviate the problem but not quite solve it. After all, there are already several high schools that do not face that hiring restriction and that seems not to have a significant impact in the overall level of play. Improving the relationship between high school soccer and club soccer by creating an environment of collaboration and mutual respect between them at the community level, would definitely be a welcoming alternative to raise the level of high school soccer.

In an ideal world (if it was only possible to leave egos aside), it’d seem quite feasible for high schools and club teams on any given area to create alliances. What would keep a club director to reach out to the high school coach in his/her community and invite him/her to become part of the club’s coaching staff? Or else if availability, qualification, or different circumstances, would prevent that from happening, what about still making an effort to bring that coach in as a partner, “advisor”, or observer, in an attempt to draw the programs closer. As these programs share the same commodities, creating synergy between them would benefit all parties, and more importantly impact players’ performance in the long run. These partnerships at the local level could have a profound and everlasting effect in creating a better playing environment, more conducive to technical/tactical development. This is a holistic approach though. In reality this is nothing more than utopia. With exceptions here and there, the current situation has been going on for decades, and if anything, the two sides grow apart as the years go by. I believe

only the United States Soccer Federation and its affiliates can ultimately be the driving force in dramatically improving the level of high school soccer and turn it into a vital means of developing and nurturing soccer in America. Let's look at what happened in Europe in recent years, where the circumstances were not the same but the challenges alike.

Soccer nations like Germany and Belgium, concerned with the efficiency of their developmental systems, went through a complete overhaul of the modus operandi of their soccer federation youth development structure and professional youth academies. Upon realizing that a lack of specialized, competent coaching was proving detrimental to the nation's talents, the German football association implemented severe changes in the system, which included close cooperation with local schools. 121 regional development centers were initially set up in remote areas, where otherwise overlooked youngsters were able to participate in one weekly session under a highly-qualified coach and so, perhaps, had a chance to be spotted by a big club. Later in the reformulation process, every Bundesliga club agreed to revamp their youth academies. At present there are 366 regional centers and 54 certified professional youth academies. But it's not just the big clubs who are taking part in the revamping of the youth structure. There are over 31,000 clubs spread across Germany that make up over 2,200 divisions, and the German federation is diligent in reaching out to these clubs and providing lessons to the coaches of these thousands of amateur teams. The logic behind it is that there are only so many children who can join the youth academies of the professional and semi-professional clubs that make up less than 0.01% of the nation's clubs. If these small clubs can provide an acceptable level of training and development to its younger players, they stand a real chance to one day move to a bigger team and, if they are extremely good, the German National Team system. World Cup and UEFA Champions League winner Tony Kroos is a product of this newly improved system.

Being a continental country, the USA faces geographical and logistical challenges that European nations like Germany don't have to deal with. With that said, I believe a similar structure can be created in the USA, one that includes school soccer in the developmental model. Tracing a parallel between the German's situation and the reality we face in America, there's another fundamental difference in the soccer landscape other than the geography. Unlike in Germany (and most of the soccer nations in the world), in the USA competitive club soccer tends to be an expensive venture. Even at the entrance level players need to pay for club registration, coaches' fees, travel fees, uniforms, etc. And it gets more expensive as a player climbs up the ladder. The vast majority of the reported 30,000 plus German clubs are community clubs. They are competitive clubs, where players are selected based on their qualities and are expected to perform. Similar to our American situation with one massive difference: players don't pay to play. On the contrary, some even receive help to cover their basic expenses with food and transportation. After all, soccer is a sport of masses and historically the best soccer players have come from poor beginnings. USA seems to be the only country in the world where this dynamic has been inverted. This is precisely where school soccer (high school included but not limited to - the process must start at younger age groups so talent can be spotted and develop at an optimum physical/cognitive stage) can arise as a potential solution for the federation and its affiliates to reach out to a huge portion of the population, where undoubtedly, soccer talent is present, but cannot afford to be part of the competitive club system. School sports are free and accessible to all. High schools in America tend to have very good facilities. Some are quite incredible actually. In many instances, soccer benefits from sharing fields and field houses with football, which represents a tremendous advantage. Football is king in most of the country and so tends to attract/demand not only attention but also investment in facilities. So you have the players, the optimum system (free participation), and the facilities. What are you waiting for??? It'd be flat out stupid not to explore the possibilities. USSF can be the catalyst for such a transformation! For starters, taking the initiative in creating partnerships with the national and

state high school athletic associations, which can have a multiplier effect (it is common practice for the state high school athletic associations to oversee middle school soccer as well). As mentioned, individual efforts at the local level would be honorable and welcome (informal partnerships between local clubs and school teams in their area) but establishing those partnerships at the corporate level and enforcing it downwards would be overwhelmingly more efficient and lasting. Federation can take advantage of this huge infrastructure to introduce its curriculum and training programs. At the same time, it can create special programs to raise the level of coaching: specific license, mentoring system, etc. That'd be a noble destination for the part of the reported \$130-140 million financial surplus US Soccer has accumulated (Sports Illustrated). In that regard, credit must be given to the United Soccer Coaches (former National Soccer Coaches Association of America) for putting together a special license for high school coaches (divided in two modules – involves classroom and field sessions), which is a commendable foresight and a monumental step in the right direction. The challenge is to make this resource newsworthy, available and affordable to school coaches on a large scale. That'd be not another step but a leap in the right direction.

Clearly, the objective here is not to forgo the club system and/or the additional soccer programs that have been created over the years. Many efforts have been made to design programs that identify and develop the best soccer talent in the country. The Olympic Development Program has given its contribution for over 40 years, both at the state and regional level. The introduction of the USSDA system in 2007, and its continuous evolvement, has also laid a hand in creating an elite program where the ultimate goal is to set the standard for a more conducive environment for development where quality training takes precedent over quantity of games and the obsessive pursuit of trophies. Given the size of the country and the number of players in the system, these different programs can and should coexist without risking their purpose. Let's make it clear though they are not reaching out to a considerable portion of the soccer population, in particular those whose financial resources are not

being putting into soccer but rather food, shelter and clothing. High school soccer is not going away, and it absolutely shouldn't given its value, tradition, and massive potential. So you might as well make it better, and turn it into a viable means of soccer development.