

# How we Develop Players in the U.S.: A Critical Assessment

By Robert Ziegler, 10.29.2004.

American soccer faces a series of flaws top to bottom that, if not dealt with decisively, will greatly hinder our ability to develop top players and fulfill our potential to be a world soccer power.

That is the consensus from a number of leading coaches from national, professional, collegiate and club teams across the country, spoken to by Top Drawer Soccer over the past several months. The discussions were for the purpose of writing this report on how “we” develop players as a soccer nation. The article is in part a follow-up from last year’s [Blueprint](#) article which drew heavy response from the elite youth soccer community. This article is accompanied by a [Proposal](#) for Reconstituting Youth Soccer’s Developmental and Competitive Format, that extrapolates on and in some cases revises the recommendations made in last year’s article.

**(A separate article on national girls’ soccer development will come early next year).**

The three most common problems mentioned concerning our national developmental system were:

- 1 – Lack of professional league involvement with the overall system.
- 2 – Overemphasis on winning (over skill development), particularly at the youngest ages.
- 3 – Lack of a system and organizational setup that allows the best of the best to play against each other on a regular basis.

## **Where are the Pros?**

Major League Soccer is near completion of its 9th season. While its level of success shouldn’t be overstated, there are clearly a number of promising signs regarding the league’s financial state, including a recent multi-million dollar sponsorship deal with adidas, the construction or pending construction of soccer-specific stadiums and league expansion. To this point MLS has largely been given a pass when it comes to being involved with youth development, but the absence of a professional league serving as the engine to the national system leaves a huge void, as noted by **U.S. National Team Coach Bruce Arena**.

“Player development happens at the club level, where the players are daily,” Arena told Top Drawer Soccer. “We don’t have any professional affiliation with our youth and until we do there will always be a void. We do that differently than anyone in the world. Our professional league is not fully developed and since we have single entity (players sign with the league, not with individual teams) there’s no built-in incentive for the clubs to develop youth players, because they are not ‘their’ players. That’s the biggest flaw in a nutshell, and it’s a very big flaw.”

Arena notes the current system, in part due to sheer volume, has produced some good players, and also is quick to point out that the robust recreational system in this country is of great value to young people in general, but his concerns remain about the shortcomings of a system where the professional league is not involved with the development of elite youth players.

**Winning Isn’t Everything – It’s Nothing.**

In lieu of the international norm of professional teams driving youth development, the system that has evolved here has featured an interesting mix of competitions and organizations. While much debate goes on regarding who has the best interest of the game and players at heart, it is undeniable that our primary form of competition has been tournaments, with teams playing 3-6 games over a weekend. The tournaments have developed their own caste system, with tiers reflecting the level of interest paid by college coaches recruiting players, and thus teams are eager to qualify for these tournaments.

What has seemingly become the default qualifying criteria for such tournaments is performance in the State Cup competition conducted by one of 55 state associations making up the U.S. Youth Soccer organization, the largest youth soccer body in the U.S.

Leaving aside the difficulties with so much riding on a “one-loss-and-you’re-out” competition, the setup has a rather obvious shortcoming in that it is self-perpetuating, with teams being judged on what they did the season before, beginning as young as the U11 and U12 age groups, making the main goal of teams at those ages to win. Any number of coaches decried the huge emphasis on winning for such young players and teams.

“The biggest drawback we have now is the perception, especially at ages 8 to 14, that you have to win,” said Mike Gartlan, director of coaching at Pateadores. “Winning takes a precedence over development, so you have parents out shopping their kids around to the team they think will win. The criteria are not the reputation or the record of the club in how they develop players, but in the level of competition the club plays at.”

**Brian Monaghan, a top coach with Houston Texans** soccer club and Region III in U.S. Youth Soccer’s Olympic Development Program, agreed that the emphasis on winning hinders player development.”

“Since MLS teams don’t get involved with youth development, and there are no 10-11-12 year olds attached with pro setups, these young players aren’t able to train without the fear of losing games, the fear of making mistakes,” Monaghan said. “You want kids to care about the result, but they need to be able to play without such a fear of failure.”

Eric Yamamoto, an assistant coach at Santa Clara University and also a member of the U.S. U18 National Team staff, said the effects of the “win-first” mentality are visible in the national pool of youth players.

“We need to set the base of technical development for our players at ages 8 to 13,” Yamamoto said. “At this point when we take regional teams to South America and certain places in Europe, we’re technically deficient. This is especially true in the area of finishing. Where they need 1-3 chances to get a goal, we need 10 or 20 chances.”

Gartlan believes that the clubs, as the point of contact between the developmental system and the grass roots soccer public, will have to take the lead in changing the national mindset for players of this age.

“You can’t be afraid to lose a game if you really believe development is what we’re supposed to be doing,” Gartlan said. “I understand there is some attention paid to results. You don’t just make your team pass 5 yards all the time and get blown off the field. Part of development is what happens on the field, but there has to be good balance between that and technical development.”

**All soccer players are NOT created equal**

The other common theme voiced by coaches was the need to group the best players together more often. Alfonso Mondelo, a former MLS Coach and Project 40 director now on the U.S. U18 National Team staff, said the preeminence of the Cup and tournament system can work against the best players.

"In some cases the message is that it's more important for a top player to stay with his team because he's the best one there," Mondelo said. "They don't worry so much what's good for the individual athlete – they just want him to score goals for their team.

"There are too many (travel) leagues and too many teams and the top talent is spread out. If we had 8 or 10 or 12 teams in a region with the best players united, it would be much more conducive for those players to develop."

Monaghan agreed.

There are too many matches and tournaments that don't do anything to help in true development," Monaghan said. There are some events where you get good competition and I guess that's part of why some tournaments are so big, but why not group these players together and let them have a chance to use their skills and soccer intelligence against one another more often?"

### **What's a soccer nation to do?**

So, if lack of professional involvement, emphasis on competition at the expense of development and the lack of suitable competition for the best players are recognized as key parts to the problem (along with any number of other issues perhaps not cited as universal), what can be done to make our system better?

### **Rene Meulenstein, skill development director at the Manchester United Youth Academy in England, said establishment of objective criteria and a plan of action are the first steps.**

"First you cannot just take a guess at what works in developing players. You have to have a standard," Meulenstein said. "To do this you take a good look at what has worked for the very best teams and players. You look at Brazil, you look at Ajax, you look at the great Bayern Munich teams and any others where they have succeeded. Then you adapt that to your own culture and develop a plan so everybody understands what it is we are trying to do. You have to start there."

With the multiple organizational and commercial entities that have competed for preeminence in American youth soccer circles, one may question from where such leadership will come. But on closer examination it should be evident that only the U.S. Soccer Federation, the game's governing body in this country, needs to provide the leadership required to build a system that maximizes our potential.

Yamamoto would like to see a national youth development director charged with such a role.

"You need that spearhead and for someone to have a vision of where we want to go as a country," he said. "I think it needs to be tied in with the full team coach and the direction that the full team is going. I think there is an opportunity to have an impact to our long-term vision of development."

Such a role would be both vital and extremely challenging. With the Wild West motif that has existed in the U.S. regarding club formation, coaching criteria and organizations, there are a good number of people whose living, however healthy or meager, depends on their stake in the youth

soccer market. Making the fundamental changes needed for development would be seen as a threat by and resisted in many corners unless somehow parties can be assuaged or incorporated into the plan. Similarly, however, unclear are the specifics of the reforms which need to be implemented. One thing that is certain is that they will cost big money. It will take very strong leadership to garner the kind of business support needed for such initiatives.

Given the kind of political capital needed to even attempt such a job – there's only one person on the national scene, who comes to mind, that has a chance to succeed, and he's rather busy for the next couple of years trying to win a World Cup.

Arena has been instrumental in getting a long-awaited Reserve-team structure launched in MLS for next year (to allow more young professionals to get regular match competition). While the details of that arrangement, a partnership between MLS and USSF, haven't been announced yet, it's one example of progress being made on the developmental front. So what else can be done?

**Todd Hitt**, a former player of Arena's at Virginia, a candidate for the UEFA Professional coaching license and technical director of Reston FC in Northern Virginia, believes establishment of a setup where the best players regularly compete against one another is vital.

"Once you get that national leadership, you need to have large organizations divided geographically where professional coaches are watching over the best players," Hitt said. "Not a political system but centers of excellence or whatever you want to call them, with directors appointed by USSF based on their professional qualifications and abilities. You can do this in conjunction with professional clubs if you want, but however you put it together, there needs to be an agreement among the professional bodies about how to put the teams together and what training program they are going to be under.

"The centers will need to funnel the players into professional or approved college programs that will continue their development," Hitt continued. "For it to work, you have to take the extra politics out and truly allow the best to rise to the top."

**Editor's Note: Read the accompanying [Proposal](#) for one example of how such a system might work.**

Thomas Rongen, former U20 National Team coach and now at the helm of Chivas USA, also sees such regional centers as the way to go.

"We're a little fragmented in this country. There are good people out there but we're not able to have a unified philosophy from all of our groups about how to train players," Rongen, a product of the vaunted Ajax Youth Academy, said. "We need to establish these centers to provide a clear method of coaching to systematically teach how players and teams should play, so like at Chivas or Ajax the players from U8 on up know what is expected."

John Ellinger is the new coach at Real Salt Lake, and as coach of the U17 National Team directed the only such center in America to this point. Ellinger is all for seeing more versions of the Bradenton Residency.

"We've all said from the beginning that 40 players is just a drop in the bucket," Ellinger said. "It would definitely be a step in the right direction, where you have four facilities or whatever the number is, and then the coaches can determine who is ready to be bumped up a level. My only concern is that US Soccer directs the whole thing so everybody is on the same page, not four organizations each doing things their own way."

This really only scratches the surface about how we develop our players and what can be done better. Along with the accompanying [Proposal](#) article, Top Drawer Soccer will present over the coming weeks additional articles to follow up on this, including:

**The role of college soccer in our developmental system**

**Establishing coaching standards for an improved national developmental setup**

**The proper role of clubs in the national developmental system**

**Identifying our national style of play**

**The state of national girls' soccer development.**

Thanks to all who participated in these discussions. My hope is that the article will not conclude here, but simply be the beginning of much discussion on this subject. Those wishing to respond for publication to this and the accompanying proposal can submit articles of no more than 500 words to [info@topdrawersoccer.com](mailto:info@topdrawersoccer.com)

**I'll close as I did with the Blueprint article last summer: "For U.S. Soccer, the sky truly is the limit. Let's start reaching for it."**