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# The case for high school soccer

By Mike Barr

The U.S. Soccer Developmental Academy league will soon be telling its players to not play high school soccer or any other high school sports. Most parents of these elite players will buy into the decision, much in the same way they believe it costs thousands of dollars to assure their child becomes a strong player and receives that \$2,000 partial scholarship. Not surprisingly, the developmental academies will now be forced to charge more for training and travel.

It seems within youth soccer ideas are implemented with little thought, time, trials or research. We have become a soccer country that relies on the innovations of other countries without coming up with ideas of our own that reflect our society and culture.

The claims that high school soccer is detrimental to development seem to resonate from coaches and administrators who are involved with the Academy programs at the national level. In my opinion high school soccer should remain an important part of our youth sports landscape and parents should examine the pros and cons before making such a decision that could impact their child's future. I will attempt to unravel the facts for parents:

*1) Playing with the academy team and with elite players will enhance my son's soccer skills.*

Yes, and could possibly inhibit his growth, if he is now a substitute or locked into a position that limits touches on the ball and erodes at confidence. He could go from the player to play through or target in high school, to relinquishing roles on the field because the strength of other players on his academy team are seen to be stronger.

*2) The quality of coaching at the Academy level is stronger than at the high school level.*

This may be the case in some instances but there are many high school coaches who are more capable and more qualified than many academy coaches and many high school coaches have a vast amount of experience at club and ODP.

*3) Quality of competition is stronger at the academy level.*

Again, it may be the case in some matches but many high school games are much more competitive than Academy play, especially when teams are competing for a league, district or state title.

*4) He will enjoy Academy play more.*

Talk to almost any elite or high level player within the last fifteen years and almost every player will tell you that playing for their high school team was more enjoyable than club or their college

playing experience. High School soccer still replicates the neighborhood club teams of years ago and the entire community still identifies with high school soccer as their own. Playing with your close peers and representing your community is something special.

Attendance at high school soccer matches always attracts more fans than any academy matches, because a community cannot get behind a program that has kids from up to 50 miles away associated with a team.

*5) Playing high school will impede development.*

An elite high school player begins play against players who may be four years older who are faster and stronger. Young players are forced to develop fast and develop a strong first touch. As they move into their junior and senior years they assume a role as leader and carry more responsibility to their team and themselves. Playing within the academy structure very few players assume or are introduced to the role of leader.

*6) Playing Academy will provide up to four nights of training and matches on the weekend for 10 months.*

Try to imagine the difficulty of maintaining quality grades if every day you are in a car for two hours, in addition to training for two hours. When will a player be able to experience the after school experiences we all enjoyed as high school students?

There will be little or no time to attend social functions, participate in music or theatre, clubs and play other sports. During the college interview many colleges and universities are looking for a well-rounded student. Will playing in the Academy actually hurt my chances to get your child in the school of his choice?

Since we have adopted the academy philosophy of European clubs; possibly U.S. Soccer should replicate these programs and have only developmental academies directed by each MLS Club. All training, travel and expenses would be covered by the club. Each player brought into an MLS academy would realize they have the potential to play professionally.

There still is something special to playing with friends in front of parents and peers and experiencing the thrill and social aspects of high school sports. Quite possibly we could see a resurgence of players staying with their own local clubs and make soccer a reasonably priced sport to play once again.

*(Mike Barr is the Director of Coaching of the [Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer Association](#). He coached the boys team at Strath Haven High School in 1984-2005, winning five PIAA state titles, six PIAA District One titles and 16 Central League titles.)*

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