

SoccerAmerica

October 2009
Vol. 64, No. 10
Issue 1646

\$4.95
Canada \$5.95

socceramerica.com

WORLD CUP 2010

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celebrate after Clark's goal gave the USA a vital three points against Trinidad & Tobago.

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Paul Gardner

Can 'legal kidnapping' be stopped?

NEW YORK — So you're operating a nice mom-and-pop sort of youth club. Neighborhood stuff, no great ambitions, but plenty of good, clean fun and exercise for everyone involved. You also happen to know a thing or two about soccer, so your teams have a winning reputation.

You've noticed this kid, skinny little tyke, but with skill. One of your best players in fact. Unusual skills. He wins games for you. The word starts to get around and suddenly — it will seem like suddenly, but the process has been going on for maybe a year — you're hearing unwelcome rumors.

The boy's parents have been approached. By whom? Well now, there's a question. It could be another local club — but one with a lot more money. Or, these days, it could be the academy from the local MLS club. Or it could be a foreign club — quite possibly one of the big foreign clubs, and now we're talking real wealth.

The kid, it seems, is really that good. He's only 16, but clubs are lining up to "sign" him. You're going to lose him — anything you can do about

it? Not really. You can talk to the parents, emphasize loyalty and so on — but the kid's family is poor, and they have various enticing offers from rich clubs in front of them. They'll probably also have had approaches from agents by now. It really has become a matter of money.

Or has it? The big clubs would deny that, of course. How could anyone make such a suggestion?

The real issue, they will assure everyone, is making sure that the kid gets the best possible training with the best possible coaches and facilities and plays games at the highest possible level.

So, come on, how can your little club compete? One look at the photographs of some of these professional academies is enough to turn the heads of most parents. And all those serious-looking coachy-types with their diplomas and badges ... that's what it's all about.

I'll pause for a minute, and take that argument seriously. It's fine as far as it goes. It sounds great, it certainly *ought* to be convincing — but to anyone who has been around youth soccer for a few years, it is not.

For this perverse reason (and this is just one of the many perversities that thrive in soccer): there is no way of telling what, exactly, is the best training for a young player. This coach, the one with all those coaching licenses, he may be quite wrong for this kid. This club, this world-famous club, may have quite the wrong approach for this kid — may, indeed, want



PHOTO BY NATT WEST / BRISPHOTOS.COM

him to play in a style that is completely alien to his nature.

In short, the development of young soccer players — especially around the sensitive, vulnerable age of 16 — is a tricky business. I would suggest that as many promising players have been messed up by high-powered coaching and lush facilities as have been trained into stardom.

Also to be considered is the oft-quoted argument that joining a top club is not the best idea for a talented youngster; he should join a less-famous club, where he will have more chance to play. An interesting argument this — well, it intrigues me — because it clearly implies that *playing* in competitive games is the vital factor, more important than the coaching.

There are some even more convincing hard facts that make it pretty plain that a boy's chances of making it to soccer stardom are remote indeed. There are stats from England showing that 75 percent of the boys training with pro clubs at the age of 14 are not even involved in pro soccer of any sort by the time they are 21.

Obviously, judgment comes into this. Is it really possible to say, with any degree of certainty, that a talented 16-year-old will be an even-more-talented 18-year-old? It is not. I can give you the names of five young players who were specifically singled out for me as youngsters likely to make the big-time. Singled out by their youth coaches at Arsenal, Lazio, Boca Juniors, Lazio, Queens Park Rangers and AC Milan. All of them are now over 35 years of age — none of them ever made it.

Those are strong arguments — they are arguments that are on *your* side, on the side of a small, caring club. But they will not carry the day. Not against the glamour and excitement of joining a fashionable club, they won't. And I suppose that is right — a boy's ambitions and dreams

"I would suggest that as many promising players have been messed up by high-powered coaching and lush facilities as have been trained into stardom."

must be built on the conviction that he is going to be good enough, even better than everyone.



FIFA has banned English Premier League club Chelsea from signing new players for the next year for allegedly poaching a teenager from French club Lens.

The talented boy will make the move to the bigger, possibly to a super-big, club. At which point we can forget all about the soccer arguments and concentrate on one thing. The money. You have spent time and money — quite possibly some of your own money — to help your starlet develop. And now you're going to lose him.

Should you not be entitled to some compensation? You should, but you probably won't get any. Because you have no legal hold over the boy.

You may have seen the uproar that FIFA has recently created by slapping a ban on the English club Chelsea — a ban that prevents the club from signing any new players, of any age, for the next year.

This is a pretty serious step to take — in my memory, it is probably the heaviest punishment that FIFA has ever inflicted on a top club — and at the center of it is the question mentioned above. What rights does a youth club have over its players? At what age can a boy sign a contract binding him to a youth club?

Chelsea is alleged to have moved in on a French 16-year-old and whisked him away from his club, Lens. Without paying anything to Lens. Easing the boy's decision, according to Lens, with financial offers. Chelsea denies everything, saying that the boy, at 16, had amateur status, and was therefore a free agent.

A high-profile case, of course, and one that is likely to drag on for years in the various tribunals, maybe even in the law courts. But the basic issue is the same one that harshly confronts your youth club. The question of compensation.

Even if Chelsea is right, and that Lens had no legally binding contractual agreement with the player, there are not many people around who would judge Chelsea's actions to be proper.

Nine years ago the English club Arsenal was bitterly attacked by another French club, Olympique Nimes, for the same maneuver — signing one of Nimes' teenagers. The Nimes soccer director Pierre Mosca accused Arsenal with "This is not a transfer, it's a kidnapping."

This is an area in which FIFA has set up its own regulations (which all its members must, theoretically, obey) guaranteeing compensation for the developing club, the amount depending on the period of training. FIFA does, in fact, have a tariff for the amount to be paid (stating that a player's "training and education" occurs between the ages of 12 and 23). But this applies to players under pro contracts.

It is unlikely that FIFA's authority can be stretched to have power within the American youth setup. Maybe a partial solution — say a gentleman's agreement between youth clubs and MLS academies — can be worked out. If not, we shall continue to have the highly unsatisfactory situation under which promising soccer teenagers can be legally kidnapped. ■

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