

soccer journal



**In This Issue:
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See Page 7**



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The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

A critical look at US Soccer's Academy program

US Soccer started the U.S. Developmental Academy in 2007. This was the result of an extensive review on soccer development in the United States and around the world. The idea was to identify elite male athletes, put them in a positive training environment and enable them to reach full potential. The objective as written in the USSDA overview:

The Developmental Academy's primary focus is player development. Academy players are provided with the best opportunity to achieve their potential as elite players.

So how are we doing? Everyone associated with US Soccer knows that we are behind the rest of the world and that our system needs an overhaul. Is this latest overhaul working?

In a typical, very unscientific poll, SJ asked a variety of people involved with USSDA to list the good, the bad and the ugly about the program. The respondents (37 total) included college coaches, club administrators, USSDA coaches and players in the program. The results may surprise you.

THE GOOD

- The Academy Program has unified US Soccer and has been a step in the right direction. Resources have been devoted to the program in an attempt to improve youth soccer in this country.
- The program provides access to new resources such as high-level fitness testing, ProZone analysis that enhance the playing experience.
- It brings together more elite players than at any other time in US Soccer history. Some suggested that the program has created a mini-Champions League for the elite youth players in this country.
- The program has improved and streamlined the process of scouting for the national team program.
- The level of play for this group is higher than the traditional club level.
- The ratio of training sessions to matches is much better; more meaningful games are played, and fewer of the games are against lower competition.
- US Soccer has infused a level of accountability about facilities, coaches, administrative issues, officials and the competition.
- Some suggested that the program leads to more efficient recruiting by college coaches because they can see the best at selected academy tournaments and games. Some don't agree – see the comments below.

THE BAD

- The first and most often mentioned concern deals with the problems associated with geography and the size of the United States. How can we schedule better? Why aren't all states included? Fifteen states have no academy team, but some cities have two or three teams. As a result, the academy system is not accessible to all players. That means the national team is made up of players from the academy system and not the entire nation. And who are these scouts?

Are they trained?

- Although some coaches felt that the USSDA Program was a positive step for college coaches, some disagreed. Some coaches believed there was a total disregard for college soccer. Most academies will not promote college to their players; the emphasis on placing players in the national team system and not college is a problem. The vast majority of these players eventually will go to play college soccer and not play on the national team! At some games, college coaches aren't even allowed on the sideline. This issue must be addressed. If there is one lesson from the past 50 years of youth soccer, it is that all factions must work together!
- How are the clubs selected? Some teams and players are not very good and have "Academy Status." How did they get that status? How do new clubs get into the Academy Program? Is it an "old boys club," or do new clubs really have a chance?
- The MLS connection is a concern. How can other academy clubs compete against fully funded MLS clubs? Is it good for MLS teams to sign "home grown" players? Some believe the MLS is signing players just to sign them and validate that the system works. Many think these players are not ready for college, never mind the pros. And if a player signs with an MLS team, playing in college is no longer possible.
- In the clubs where the players must pay, they are at a disadvantage against the MLS teams and therefore players who participate are ones that can afford it, not necessarily academy-level players. This has been a longtime problem in youth soccer and one that must be fixed.
- Some coaches contend that the academy system has diluted youth soccer. They believe that not all good players are on an academy team and not all academy teams are very good. How will this system handle the player who is overlooked or the late bloomer?
- More than a few college coaches suggested that the Academy Program fosters an "entitlement" mentality. Coaches suggest that the families expect a "return on investment" from the colleges after their son plays in the academy system. In spite of the fact that these players are the elite in the country, scholarship money has not changed. Statistically fewer than 2 percent of all male college soccer players receive athletic-related aid! A related problem with parents is that every parent wants their kid to be on an academy team! This is causing pressure in many of the clubs.

THE UGLY

The biggest issue by far is the concern over player development. The stated goal of the USSDA is to provide players the opportunity to achieve their potential as elite players. Is it happening?

Are the players really developing? What changes are made when a team becomes an "Academy Club?" What are the differences between a club before it is named

an Academy and after it is named an Academy? Are the coaches the same? What is the curriculum? What are the coaching progressions? Are the players the same?

So there is really no change. The emphasis on winning – improving your standing in your division, making the playoffs and winning the national championship – fosters a "learning how to win" mentality at the expense of "learning how to play." There is nothing about winning in the stated objective.

Many respondents believe that some "teams are getting closer, but the issue that remains is 'what is being taught, how is it being taught and by whom is it being taught?'" The coaches believe that the product of the Academy Program is not any better than the earlier product.

As one coach wrote, "...these players still don't even know how to spin with their man on defense, or why they shouldn't play a square ball, or when to press and how to press or even know the difference between different types of counterattacks!" It is frustrating.

So it all comes back to coaching. Are academy team coaches automatically better than other coaches? Do they understand pedagogy? Do they understand progressions? Can they identify the right and wrong way to perform a skill? Do they prepare for a session, or just show up and coach? Does US Soccer have a curriculum, or a way they want the teams to play? The coaching hasn't changed. That is the biggest problem with the USSDA Program and the biggest problem with youth soccer in this country.

In the January issue of *Soccer Coaching International*, Frank de Boer of Ajax Amsterdam talks about the youth training in the club. "The trainers here don't all have the same exercises, but they have the same intention, the same purpose and the same message." All the players are taught the same thing at the same time and in a logical progression.

Much of the coaching in the United States is what I call "random sessions." A coach decides on the way to training what the players will do that day, and they do it. There is little thought about the playing style, the goals and objectives of the team, or where they are in the season. Random coaching!

And there is not a lot of repetition in our soccer coaching. Our young players must repeat technique, skill and tactic to learn it. Many soccer coaches here believe they don't want to bore the players with repetition, so they must provide something fresh each session. DeBoer says of Dutch coach Louis van Gaal: "Under van Gaal we did a lot of small-sided games like 5 or 6 versus 3. These are situations you will see in matches over and over. We would practice it a thousand times. It would become automatic."

US Soccer leaders have taken a big step forward and are trying to make meaningful changes. They should not think that they are done. Instead of rejecting criticism, they should invite it. They should want to get better. Just like the players in the Academy Program!