

# THE UNHEALTHY STATE OF COMPETITIVE YOUTH SOCCER

Re-printed with the permission of Peter Horvath, a member of the NSCAA since 1985 and a former president (1989-1991) of the Colorado High School Soccer Coaches Association. This was a members letter sent to the editor of the Soccer Journal and appeared in the May/June 2002 issue.

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Mr. Tim Schum,

It has taken me some time to get my thoughts together so that I could respond to your article "Winning at All Costs", in the November/December Soccer Journal. My entire life, up to this point has been spent supporting, playing, promoting and coaching the beautiful game of soccer. As a player I have played recreational soccer, competitive, high school, ODP, semi-pro, and two years of pro soccer in the MISL. As a coach I have coached girls competitive, both girls and boys ODP at several age levels, and I am currently the head men and women's coach at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, and have been for the past twenty years.

In your article you pose the question, "If true, what message does the Newsweek article send to the public about the state of competitive youth soccer"?

The occurrences depicted in the article do not surprise me with the exception that they forgot to mention the amount of pornography being watched in the hotel rooms, and the occasional promiscuous tendencies involving coaches and their players. Let's be honest, the state of youth competitive soccer in a lot of cases throughout the US is in bad shape and deteriorating daily. Not only coaches, but also parents and players alike have lost complete perspective on what the game is about and why they are playing. I believe that soccer at the youth competitive level has become a very egotistical and self-serving sport. Coaches, parents and players have become greedy and are playing soccer for selfish reasons. In the movie "Remember the Titans", Julius, the linebacker, says to Bertier, "I am supposed to wear myself out for the team? What team? No. What I am going to do is lookout for myself and I'm going to get mine." This statement would make a great motto for youth competitive soccer right now.

For coaches, I believe, it is not about adding another trophy to the shelf, but being able to look at parents in the face and say, "I can get your son or daughter a scholarship", or say "Look at how successful I am, come and play for me". It is easy to be successful after going out and recruiting, never mind their immediate surrounding area, but making promises to all the best players in the entire state. It is about ego. By the way, what has happened to college recruiting anyway? The football coach at Columbine H.S., who's desk is next to mine, spends a month after their season talking to college coaches on the phone, or having them come to the school to watch football videos. I guess it must be pretty easy to recruit in soccer when the players just come to you now, since there is a tournament in everybody's back yard. Football and basketball are way ahead of us on this one.

Mr. Schum, do you ever stop to think that these parents realize that if they saved all the money, or invested the money they spend jetting their sons and daughters around the country and world, to all these tournaments in search of that illusive scholarship, they could probably just pay outright for their college education? Another question I have is, how healthy is it for our future society and family dynamics to have these players continue to miss Thanksgiving and Christmas every year to spend them in hotel rooms away from their families doing the things that we know are going on? It is time we stop pretending!

I know that at this point in time you must think that I am a bitter and angry high school soccer coach, who maybe might have missed out on something, but I hope you continue to keep reading. You are right, I am very frustrated and disappointed more than anything. As a teacher and coach, I have dedicated and committed my life to the education and emotional growth of young adults between the ages of thirteen and eighteen; during what I think is one of the most impressionable and important times in their lives as far as developing who they may become and the kinds of decisions

they may make in the future. How many competitive coaches today care about grades, social behavior, and about choices that are being made by these young people? I suppose that as long as they show up for the game on the weekend, it doesn't matter.

Another concern I have for you Mr. Schum is, what has happened to the words loyalty and commitment in the vocabulary of our youth competitive coaches, parents and players? It seems to me that somewhere along the line, these people have forgotten what it means to stay loyal or committed to a club or program. I guess if you don't like it, or thing don't quite go your way, you simply switch clubs or go to another school. I guess it probably doesn't make any sense to just work a little bit harder. I would also like to know when it became common practice, or why parents and players think it is acceptable to miss games during a high school season. Oh, that's right I forgot, whatever the ODP coach says is gospel. I don't understand what is wrong with telling the ODP coach, "I don't want to practice on Sunday because I need to rest, do homework or spend the day with my family". Why can't a player tell the ODP coach or Western Regional coach, "I can't go to Houston or Europe because I am in my high school season and I do not want to miss five games", (out of fifteen)? Oh yeah, those two words again, loyalty and commitment. High school only comes around once in a players life, and you and me both know that the players in the ODP and Regional programs are misled so that competition remains at a high enough level to only help and train the handful of players who MIGHT get selected to move on. Would you not agree with me that it is wrong for the club coaches and ODP coaches to tell their players NOT to play high school soccer? To tell them that it is NOT important? I have to admit, I commend the young lady in the article who told her father to get her to airport because she had a try-out for the U19 world cup team the next day. At least she stayed and played in the game.

The last point of the article I would like to address is your reference to September 11, and the events that occurred on that day. I would like, in turn, to refer to April 20, 1999, and the events that occurred at Columbine H.S. You make mention to the fact that as coaches, (let's also include parents and players) "we may benefit from a moment of reflection on the values we portray and project and to our athletes (sons, daughters, friends and teammates) on the field (at home and in school) each day". You are right, there are more important things than winning games, making unrealistic promises, unethical recruiting, being selfish and greedy. Unfortunately, someone forgot to tell the youth competitive soccer community. In comparison to September 11, and in no way am I making light of what happened, competitive soccer makes me think of being on one of those planes. It has just been taken over by competitive and ODP coaches, all the passengers (parents and players) have no idea where it is going. As a matter of fact it really has no distinct destination at all at this point in time (what a scary thought).

As a member of the NSCAA and recipient of the Soccer Journal for the past fifteen years, I would applaud a lot more articles and opinions on the real state of youth competitive soccer in our country and what needs to be done to rectify it. It is time the youth competitive soccer society bring themselves back to reality. By the way, the last time I looked, soccer was a team game. I thought there was no "I" in the word team. Thank you for your time and the commitment you have made to the beautiful game of soccer.

From a frustrated, loyal and committed coach,

Peter S. Horvath