

Youth Tournaments,  
Good Or Bad?

Crew's New Boss,  
Robert Warzycha

World Cup 2010  
Sneak Preview

# Soccer America

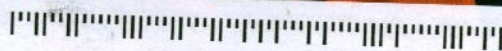
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## South Africa, Here We Come!

Soccer America evaluates  
the USA's chances at the  
2010 World Cup.



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**Mike  
Voitalla**

If you've been wondering why tournament play has become such a major part of the youth soccer experience, follow the money.

## A nation gone tournament mad

**CHILDREN MIGHT CONSIDER YOUTH SOCCER** tournaments just a matter of playing different teams in new places, hanging out with their teammates for a few days, and maybe getting a shiny trophy.

Little do they know they're involved in a much grander cause: giving the economy a boost. At least that's how youth tournaments are described in the business press.

The *Central Penn Business Journal*, for example, headlined an article, "Youth soccer provides a kick for economy." The *Dayton Business Journal* announced, "Soccer tournament to pump millions into economy." *Business North Carolina* led an article with, "Does your city need to fill hotel rooms, pack restaurants and attract shoppers? Hold a soccer tournament."

Last year, the state of Maryland created a sports marketing office. Its director, Terry Haseltine, in a *Baltimore Business Journal* article headlined, "Not kids play: Youth sports eyed to boost Maryland tourism," said that youth tournaments "are feeding our economy" as much as other tourist attractions in the state.

Tournaments are also cash cows for youth soccer clubs. If children wonder why their league takes a break one weekend every month so their team can travel somewhere and play three or four games in two days, it's because they're taking a ride on the youth soccer money-go-round.

Host clubs use tournament revenue to pay their coaches, pay for their fields, and to fund travel for their own teams to *other* tournaments.

This isn't to say that tournaments cannot benefit a child's soccer experience. I've interviewed plenty of soccer players who look back fondly on trips with their soccer teams as high-



One reason the U.S. Soccer Federation launched its Development Academy league was because the American tournament culture forced young players to play too many games.

lights of their childhood. But at the same time it's clear that there's been a tremendous increase in the number of tournaments and the amount parents spend on travel — while the age at which players travel to tournaments has gotten younger and younger.

"There's probably more tournaments out

there than there need to be, but it's obviously a way for the [host] clubs to generate revenue," says Mike Matkovich, the U.S. U-18 boys national team coach and formerly the longtime Director of Coaching of the Chicago Magic SC. "At the other younger ages, it's something that needs to be tackled. Lord knows we need to

be getting more technical play. I'm not so sure tournaments are how to get it done."

The tournament travel for young children makes little sense in soccer terms. The arguments encouraging travel by older players — seeking out better competition or getting discovered by college coaches — simply don't apply to the younger kids.

As Ian Barker, a Region II ODP coach for more than 15 years and formerly the Minnesota Youth Soccer Association's Director of Coaching for more than a decade, puts it:

"If you're in Northern or Southern California, and you have an 8- or 9-year-old, and you have to travel more than 40 minutes to get your

## Youth soccer for American children now means riding on the tournament money-go-round.

point of view. More teams mean more fees. Let's start a U-10 division!

"Tournaments have become a huge business and there are a lot of people, clubs and others benefitting greatly," says Alfonso Mondelo, MLS's Director of Player Programs, "but I really question where they rank in the development of players. In my opinion they probably have a negative effect."

Two decades ago, U.S. national team coach Bob Gansler warned that America was "suffering from a huge case of tournamentitis." And that was when the tournament industry was still in its infancy.

Mondelo, who notes that some clubs play eight to 10 tournaments a year, says the common tournament format — several games over a few days with an emphasis on taking the title — takes the focus off fine-tuning the skills that help prepare players for the higher levels.

"If you have a good level of competition in league play," says Mondelo, "and then you add to that one or two tournaments a year where you're facing different styles of play or international competition, that could be beneficial and you could come back enriched."

"But if every time there's a three-day weekend you're traveling somewhere to play a tournament, then you're really missing the boat."

Moreover, Mondelo points out that an overemphasis on tournament play adds to parents' financial burden and can lead to player burnout.

While Barker says youth tournaments will continue to proliferate because of their financial implications, he says they can better serve young players when they use a "festival" or "showcase" format — instead of crowning champions. (That concept is advocated by both the U.S. Soccer Federation and U.S. Youth Soccer.)

"They're here to stay," he says. "The issue is what is wrong with tournaments. The typical youth tournament, it's an act of attrition. You have group games. You have to win them to get

to playoff games. And every playoff game is more and more important.

"The whole thing ramps up over the course of maybe 48 hours and as the kids get physically broken down, the refereeing gets worse, the fields get worse, everybody's mental and psychological energy gets worse, so the crowds start to misbehave, the kids can't play as well. So it degrades down."

If the format simply schedules a set number of games for each team and forgoes the knockout stage, it makes travel plans simpler and allows coaches to focus more on player development.

"Now I can use my bench," says Barker. "Now I can experiment with my lineup. I can use my backup keeper. I can use a tournament setting without the holy grail of a little plastic soccer player. I can use it in so many more developmentally appropriate ways."

One impetus for the USSF launching its Development Academy league for boys, in which 77 clubs compete in U-15/16 and U-17/18 divisions, two years ago was because national team coaches felt that elite players were playing too many games — as many as 100 per year — thanks to the American tournament culture.

The USSF — an organization whose interest in youth soccer lies in developing national team players — recommends youth players be limited to about 30 competitive games per calendar year and for the younger ages advocates a limited amount of travel and tournament play.

U.S. Youth Soccer states that, "We believe that excessive play at competitive tournaments is detrimental to individual growth and development, and can serve to reduce long-term motivation."

Both organizations frown on the prevalent tournament format that has teams play multiple games the same day.

But there's a free market out there that doesn't always concern itself so much with what's best for soccer-playing children. Nor might coaches be eager to tell parents that a tournament trip really isn't necessary.

"If you're a young guy coaching a team," says Barker, "you're in the Midwest, you fly them out to Vegas. You train the players, you play games, the parents give you a rental car, the parents do the laundry, the parents feed them, and the rest of the time, you're having a great time. It's a pretty good gig."

Tournaments can be a fun experience for children and their parents. But when children's play becomes a big business it's especially crucial that the buyer beware. ■



MICHAEL JANOSZ/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

child a competitive game, then you should send him to Real Madrid or Barcelona now because they're really too good. In Greater Minneapolis or St. Paul, there's absolutely no need for a 9- or 10-year-old to get on a plane to travel."

But adding younger age groups to tournament play makes perfect sense from a business