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## U.S. Soccer overhauls its youth programs

Jeff Carlisle, ESPNSoccernet

*Editor's note: This is Part 1 of a five-part series examining the structure and organization of the U.S. Soccer Federation and its youth programs. Coming in Part 2 on Sunday is a look at the coaching set-up of the Development Academy.*

After watching his U.S. U-17 side lose 3-0 to Brazil in a December exhibition game, head coach Wilmer Cabrera was a man of mixed emotions. On the plus side, his team had just been exposed by the South Americans, giving him plenty of information on his team's weaknesses. The negative was, well, his team had been exposed, especially in the technical areas of the game.

"Today, I think [Brazil] realized we weren't too comfortable with the ball," said Cabrera. "And if you're not comfortable with the ball against the top teams, they're going to punish you. When we have the ball, we need to have more personality, and relieve that kind of nervousness and just play."

A conversation that same weekend with Cabrera's U-20 colleague, Thomas Rongen, revealed similar worries about his own side. The only difference was that his concerns weren't limited to the team's passing, trapping and dribbling.

"Tactically, most foreign teams are a little more astute than us," said Rongen. "Physically, you talk about American athletes being very good athletes, but I don't think that is necessarily soccer-related. I look at us against Portugal and France, and initially you think, 'We're as big and as fast as them.' But in specific, soccer-related physical components relating to positions, their center backs are a little more cunning, use their bodies better. Their forwards, they know exactly how to peel away from a defender by using their bodies and separating themselves. We're still a little naive in that way."

Such assessments, even as the U.S. slowly makes progress on the world stage, normally wouldn't bode well for the future of the senior side. After all, these are concerns that have long plagued the U.S. program from top to bottom. Yet there is reason for hope, and it has everything to do with what else was going on that same weekend in the southern California town of Lancaster, namely, the Winter Showcase for the U.S. Soccer Federation's Development Academy.

Now in its second season, the Development Academy represents the USSF's latest stab at a comprehensive player development program, using 75 clubs from across the nation to field boys' teams at the U-16 and U-18 levels. The academy's league is broken up into regional conferences with the top three teams, and possibly a fourth, progressing to the national playoffs. A network of scouts, headed by Tony Lepore,



John Hackworth says the Development Academy's focus is on more challenging games. (Andy Mead/Icon SMI)

### U.S. men's schedule

U.S. vs. Mexico

**Feb. 11**Columbus Crew Stadium;  
Columbus, Ohio

also views every academy game, with their player evaluations eventually **7 p.m. ET, ESPN2 HD** reaching the staffs of the various U.S. national teams.

By itself, such a setup isn't that revolutionary. The United Soccer League has had a similar system in place since 2002 with its Super Y-League, and its games are also scouted by USSF coaches. But the academy goes well beyond just creating a national youth league. It also aims to correct many of the ills that have plagued youth soccer in this country for decades.

The temptation, of course, is to think that if only American youths played more small-sided games or more street soccer, then the problems relating to technical ability would be solved. But there are deeper issues involved, among them a compressed calendar packed with meaningless games that have not only proved a fertile breeding ground for bad habits, but cut significantly into practice time.

A USSF survey in 2005 of the U-15 national team player pool found that the players were participating in upwards of 100 games per year, only 10 percent of which they found challenging. In some cases, the players participated in more games than practices. For U.S. men's national team assistant John Hackworth, who also doubles as the Development Academy's technical director, this was something that had to change if player development in the U.S. was to move forward.

"On the national staff, we would talk about some habits, or talk about reactions, and where those habits and reactions get instilled," said Hackworth. "They get instilled in young players when the game doesn't really meet the demands. What it basically means is that we needed to have these players not only play less games, but we needed them to play meaningful games, so the competition would hold them accountable, and make them play out of their comfort zone."

To that end, the USSF insists that academy teams have a minimum practice to game ratio of 3-to-1, the better to hone skills and address weaknesses in a non-game setting. Playing multiple games in a day, a staple of youth tournaments across the country, is prohibited. Having players participate in outside competitions, like a State Cup or the Olympic Development Program (ODP), is also forbidden.

"What we wanted to try and do was say, 'Look, the training is where you do all your work, and the games should make you play at a level that is consistent, and not allow some of those opportunities for you not to play your best,'" said Hackworth. "The reason for [the ban] is the demands we have put on these players. It's not like it's an easier system. In fact, it's the reverse. We recommend four or five [sessions] a week, which is a major change for most of those clubs. Spreading the calendar out, so that it's a 9-10 month competitive program; there isn't any time for outside competition."

Another change that's bound to test players is the abandonment of free substitution in academy games. Whereas before, players could be shuttled in and out with regularity, players can't re-enter a game once they've been replaced, and substitutions are limited to seven per match. This means that players must now fight through parts of the game where fatigue or a period of poor play might have been reason to take them out.

"We still find players that have a very tough time getting through 90 minutes at the highest level because their bodies, physically and emotionally, are not accustomed to that," said Rongen. "So [no re-entry] has been a great change, obviously, and a change we're trying to push more and more."

Dieter Ficken, coach of the U-16 side for Queens, N.Y.-based Blau Weiss Gottschee, is even more enthusiastic about the change in the substitution rule, calling it "heaven-sent."

"There's no mercy rule in this game anymore," added Ficken. "It's over. Produce or you're off the field, and that's what the international game is all about."

Creating this training environment, while also competing against the best players in the country, has resulted in near-universal praise from players and coaches, especially for teams located away from traditional soccer hotbeds. Carmel United, a club based just outside of Indianapolis, surprised everyone by claiming the academy's U-16 crown last year. For Harrison Petts, a forward with that team and now a member of its U-18 side, the opportunity to play against top-level opponents has given him and his teammates a significant boost.

"Especially for us in Indiana, you're not going to find too many great teams," said Petts. "There is usually one powerhouse, and then in State Cup, you would get one good game and that doesn't really prepare you to go into regionals. ... That's part of the reason why Indiana teams hadn't really been successful to this point. But now that we're in the academy, we're getting good games and good training day in and day out, and it really shows in the quality of our play."

Yet those connected with traditional powers are just as enthusiastic. For Ficken, the Development Academy is "probably the best idea since I've been involved in the game of soccer."

Ficken is in a position to know. He was a youth player in the U.S. during the 1960s and has been a youth coach for more than three decades. Ficken said he has seen improvement in his players "overnight," and this was just minutes after watching his side fall 2-0 to their counterparts from the Chicago Fire.

"Today's game was, for want of a better word, a culture shock," said Ficken. "We met a Chicago Fire team that played modern, collective soccer, that was one- or two-touch, at a level and a speed that we've never experienced or seen in the New York high school environment that our kids come from. ... The whole idea is to prepare our kids to play at a speed conducive to beating international opponents."

When all of these aspects are considered, the Development Academy represents a major step forward compared to prior player development efforts, including the much-maligned ODP, which was one of the primary mechanisms for identifying potential youth national team players.

Prior to the Academy's introduction in 2007, elite players were forced to play for a hodgepodge of teams that included their local club side as well as a smattering of district, state and regional ODP teams. To find competitive games, teams often had to travel to far-away tournaments or head overseas. In addition to the costs being prohibitive (a topic that will be covered in greater detail later in this series), the ODP selection process was fraught with accusations that participating coaches favored players they were already familiar with. It was also implied that such partiality had the result of shutting out players from minority communities.

Of course, the player evaluation process is by its very nature subjective, and there always will be biases of some sort. But academy players now can be seen playing for their home clubs by numerous USSF scouts, and with greater frequency, instead of with thrown-together teams that often characterized ODP sides. This not only has the effect of casting a wider net, but it adds a greater level of objectivity to the process, increasing the odds of catching players at their best.

"What I'm trying to do is have a much simpler process for the players, the parents and the coaches," said Hackworth. "To have a place where [the players] could truly develop to the best of their ability and not have to go to these different organizations, or wear four different jerseys over the course of the year. They wear one jersey, they play for one club, and now they have every opportunity to reach the level

they are capable of playing."

Granted, the academy is a long-term effort, the benefits of which won't be fully realized for several years, and the proof will come in seeing its players excel with the senior side. But already there are signs that the program is increasing the pool of potential national team players. Cabrera used last year's Development Academy to identify 18 players now with the U-17s, including last year's U-16 Development Academy MVP, Soony Saad of Michigan-based Vardar SC. Rongen has also tested the academy pool, having brought in 20 academy products to camp in the last year, although none have been able to stick yet.

"The U-20s, the jump right now is still a little bit too steep for most [academy] players," said Rongen. "But it's better than it has been in the past where I had to rely solely on the U-17 or U-18 national teams to bring players up to the next level. But eventually we will create the really exceptional player out of the Development Academy, I'm convinced of that."

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Sunday, February 1, 2009

## Development Academy is also an educational tool for coaches

Jeff Carlisle, ESPNsoccer.net

*Editor's note: This is Part 2 of a five-part series examining the structure and organization of the U.S. Soccer Federation and its youth programs. Coming in Part 3 on Thursday is a look at the coaching set-up of the Development Academy.*

Soccer might be a players' game, but behind every great performer is a coach -- in many cases more than one -- who helped them get to the top. And while the primary goal of the U.S. Soccer Federation's Development Academy is to aid the players, it's also proving to be an important and much-needed educational tool for coaches.

In the first part of this series, I explained how a network of scouts, headed by Tony Lepore, watches every Development Academy game, the better to evaluate players and ultimately increase the player pool for the various U.S. national teams. But a second responsibility of the scouts is to evaluate, and in some cases challenge coaches on the in-game decisions they make. They also listen to the coaches' halftime and postgame talks, after which an analysis of the game takes place, the better to map out future practice sessions in which weaknesses can be addressed.

"We're reaching out to the coaches more, because those are the ones who reach most players directly," said U.S. U-20 head coach Thomas Rongen, who is among those who scout Development Academy games. "And although we do our scouting here, we're not in an everyday environment with the club, so it's hard to influence their coaching philosophy and their structure day-to-day, and we're trying to do that slowly as best as we can. That's going to take years, not weeks or months."

David Dir -- a former MLS head coach with Dallas, and now Rongen's assistant with the U-20s -- scouts games in the Dallas area, and he states that for the most part coaches have been receptive to his suggestions. He admitted, however, the process of questioning their decisions can create a bit of tension, at least initially.

"There's cautious intake, is the best way I can look at it," said Dir with a chuckle. "It's also a new concept, so a lot of these coaches aren't sure what to expect when a scout comes in and gives information. But usually they're very excited to get somebody that they know has been at different levels and get that information from that person. So I've found it a very positive experience so far."

Another potential flashpoint is the scouts' assessment of players, because a coach's ego can often be wrapped up in how his best performers are perceived by others.



U-20 coach Thomas Rongen says that there's an increased emphasis on interaction with youth club coaches. (Scott Bales/Ikon SMI)

### U.S. men's schedule

U.S. vs. Mexico  
**Feb. 11**

"The most difficult part for coaches that we run into is they don't really have an understanding of the difference between the [playing] levels," Dir said. "They're seeing consistently their level. A good example is a player that we brought into the last camp. Because at his level the speed is slower, he can look like his technical abilities are fantastic, but when you get him with players who are playing at the professional level, that's a huge jump."

Columbus Crew Stadium;  
Columbus, Ohio  
**7 p.m. ET, ESPN2 HD**

"I had that problem when I started in MLS, judging an indoor player from a professional player, a player in college from a guy in the national pool from a guy overseas. It's really the same concept now, only at a much different level."

The feedback process does have its limitations. Each scout has his own biases regarding what kinds of players he prefers, although with different scouts watching games, the chances of the cream rising to the top are enhanced. There's also no rule that says coaches have to listen to the advice that is given, but Dave Costa, head coach of the Carmel United's U-18 team, is among those eager to receive any help they can get.

"It's like a lot of things; it's what you want to get out of it," Costa said. "I try to make a point of going up to [the scout] after the game to get feedback, in terms of what our team can be doing better, and also individual players that they are interested in, as far as what kind of information I can give those kids. But I always try to get that feedback."

While scouts can only make suggestions, a rule change that applies to Development Academy games is forcing coaches to rethink their approach to games, and that is the removal of free substitution. In the past, if a game wasn't going to a coach's liking, he or she could resort to substitutions as a way of getting better matchups on the field, breaking up the flow of the game or giving their best players a break. Not anymore. Coaches must write out their lineups with an eye toward their players lasting the entire game.

"Instead of being a 'joystick coach' -- a coach that can just maneuver his players around during the game -- the coach really has to spend time during the week now preparing his players, and then on Saturday he's got to let those guys play," said John Hackworth, the Academy's technical director. "The coach has limited time to make adjustments during the game, so it really makes him be a better coach during the week, and that's a great thing. It gives the players the game back a little more, rather than the coach making constant subs or changes, or coaching from the sideline."

The educational process doesn't end there. At the Development Academy's Winter Showcase, held in Lancaster, Calif., in December, seminars were held on Nike's SPARQ program, a fitness approach championed by Toronto FC strength and conditioning coach Paul Winsper. Advice is given on when and what kind of workouts should be utilized, whether for speed, strength or endurance. The rate at which players lose fluids was also monitored, giving coaches an idea about which players need to be most concerned with hydration.

Add it all up and you have what amounts to a finishing school for coaches, one in which their improvement as teachers of the game will hopefully be reflected in their players.

"U.S. Soccer has really put the structure in there to teach the players [and coaches] how to manage games, how to manage a season, and how to be incredibly professional in all the things we do," Costa said. "Whether it's our preparation, our training, our recovery, they make it so that all of the little things matter here."

In Part 3, we'll go into more detail about the genesis of the Development Academy and how the approach compares to other countries.

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Thursday, February 5, 2009

## USSF models youth development on a mix of foreign concepts

Jeff Carlisle, ESPNsoccernet

*Editor's note: This is Part 3 of a five-part series examining the structure and organization of the U.S. Soccer Federation and its youth programs. Coming in Part 4 is a look at the costs associated with the Development Academy.*

It's tempting to think the U.S. Soccer Federation's Development Academy was born out of the early elimination of the men's national team at the 2006 World Cup. The reality is that the USSF has been working for years to find ways to bridge the obvious gap between U.S. players and many of their foreign counterparts.

In 1999, the USSF began the residency program in Bradenton, Fla., for the U-17 national team, and while the program has qualified for every U-17 World Cup -- and turned out some excellent players, including Landon Donovan and DaMarcus Beasley -- it's clear that its impact was focused on too small a group to impact player development in a country as large as the United States.

The Olympic Development Program (ODP), while more expansive than the residency program, was also viewed as not casting a wide enough net, and it didn't really address how players were developed in this country.

So in 2005, the USSF decided it needed to take a fresh approach.

"We said, 'Look, we don't think we're good enough right now,'" said current U.S. men's assistant John Hackworth. "How can we increase our player pool? How can we, long-term, have a profound effect on player development in this country, because we feel like on the men's side of the game, from the youth to the full national team, we're not good enough."

A task force set up by USSF President Sunil Gulati, and chaired by D.C. United President and CEO Kevin Payne, embarked on a study of how other countries from across the soccer spectrum approached player development. It included many of the usual suspects like Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Holland and France.

"What we did in general is we studied the basic concepts that these nations were already implementing in their player development program," Hackworth said. "Each had their own little twist on it, and each had their own challenges."

"What we find in the U.S. is that we have a different set of unique challenges, not only in terms of geography, but in our culture, some of the values that we as a nation have. We couldn't take just one model and say, 'OK, we're going to copy the France model,' because it wouldn't really work here."



Thierry Henry is one of many graduates from France's famed Clairefontaine Academy. (Hamish Blair/GettyImages)

Indeed, the French model involves elite players, from the U-10 age group on up, traveling to one of nine regional centers to train during the week, with the best players going to the national training center in Clarefontaine. The players then return to their clubs to play games on the weekend.

While this sounds good in practice, in a country the size of the U.S. such an approach would be impractical. The cost of duplicating the U-17 residency program eight times (or more) all over the country would be prohibitive.

In South American countries like Brazil and Argentina, the responsibility for player development is placed even more on professional clubs. Players become affiliated with these organizations starting at around age 10. After several years in this environment, and after the player ranks have been culled numerous times, the best are identified to form the basis of their youth national teams.

While this decentralized approach is in large part what was eventually adopted by the USSF with their Development Academy, it's by no means a carbon copy. In Brazil and Argentina, some players emerge from crushing poverty, meaning issues like a player's nutrition and their education ultimately become the responsibility of the club. Those factors aren't issues in this country.

The clubs' motivations aren't entirely altruistic, either. Youth players are a massive source of potential revenue, in that once a player signs a professional contract, they may eventually be sold to a bigger club, be it domestic or overseas.

Such a profit motive doesn't exist in the U.S., at least to the same degree. This is due to the tortured history the professional game has endured here, one where soccer at the highest level barely existed beyond semi-professional status for much of the 20th century. With few professional opportunities available, youth soccer has been the primary driver of the game in this country. This has led to some idiosyncrasies in terms of how players have been developed, which in Payne's view have become deeply ingrained, and problematic.

One issue is that kids rarely play soccer outside of a structured setting, meaning the kind of improvisation and experimentation that players develop organically in other countries is tougher to come by in the United States. But that is a cultural obstacle too large for the USSF to influence with one program. For Payne, the focus was placed on problems that were no less significant, but could be more easily solved.

"I think the biggest thing we found, something that was very consistent [across countries], was that we had the ratio of training time to game time exactly reversed," Payne said. "In those countries that are so good at developing great players, for every hour of playing time, they sometimes have five or more hours of training time. We were doing the opposite."

Payne's statements are borne out by a recent UEFA study, shown to ESPNSoccernet, that examined the amount of practice and game time at some of the biggest clubs in the world. At places like Real Madrid, Barcelona, Ajax and Bayern Munich, even at the earliest age groups, the practice-to-game ratio was a minimum of 6-to-1. The number of games at the oldest age groups was no more than 40 in a given year, with younger players maxing out at 25. Contrast this with the 80-100 games Americans were playing in the same span and it's clear where the U.S. system was falling short.

Another impediment is Americans' tendency, in all sports, to look at won-loss records as a way of measuring success at even the youngest levels of youth sports, rather than looking at whether players are developing the proper techniques. This emphasis on results encourages coaches to rely on athleticism to

win games, or to be content with playing ugly soccer.

That's not the case in other countries. By point of example, Payne related the story of how a youth team from Brazilian club Atletico Mineiro was dominating its league. But rather than being enthusiastic, the club's directors became suspicious.

"[Atletico Mineiro] sent their technical director out to watch that team play to make sure the coach wasn't taking shortcuts in development simply to win games," Payne said.

To address these issues, the USSF ultimately went for the decentralized model of engaging clubs to do the vast majority of player development. It had the advantage of utilizing an infrastructure that was already in place, and it made clear the Federation's desire to engage in a partnership with the clubs, as opposed to encroaching on their turf.

"We started with clubs that had already done a really good job developing players, despite the environment, despite the challenges," Hackworth said. "When we talked to some of the coaches, they wanted change.

"The clubs didn't want to be playing 80-100 games a year. They didn't want to go to six tournaments all over the country just to seek out one or two good games here and there. They wanted a place where they could consolidate everything they were doing for their own players, their own coaches, and then have a better environment to play in. There was a need out there, and when we touched base with the directors of coaching and the coaches, they were enthusiastic about the opportunity."

With that kind of buy-in at the club level, what has emerged is something Payne calls "an intervention," namely a nationwide youth league that increases the ratio of practices to games and eliminates re-entry of players into games once substituted, while also bringing together some of the best youth players in the country.

So all is well, right? All that remains to be done is to sit back and let the U.S. soccer factory begin to crank out elite-level players, correct? Not quite. The pro game's lack of influence, historically, has led to another big difference when compared to other countries, and that has to do with the costs of player development being borne mostly by the families of the players. In Part 4 we'll look in greater detail at the huge obstacle that is pay-to-play.

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Thursday, February 19, 2009

## Pay-to-play aspect still permeates youth soccer

Jeff Carlisle, ESPNsoccernet

*Editor's note: This is Part 4 of a five-part series examining the structure and organization of the U.S. Soccer Federation and its youth programs. Coming in Part 5 is a look at the longer-term goals and challenges of the Development Academy.*

The U.S. Soccer Federation's Development Academy has, in its brief existence, enjoyed some successes. National team coaches like U.S. U-20 manager Thomas Rongen have hailed the approach, with its emphasis on more practice time and better competition, as a huge step forward in player development, and the increased player pool for youth national teams is among the benefits. But one problem the Academy has not been able to solve is the steep cost of playing elite-level club soccer.

An informal poll of 16 non-MLS clubs participating in the Development Academy revealed that the total outlay for each player can be as high as \$6,000 a year, with the average coming out to around \$4,000. That's a hefty sum in any economy, never mind the depressed times that the U.S. is currently enduring. Such fees not only place an economic burden on families, but they also run the risk of shutting out kids who lack the financial means to pay such amounts, thus reducing the pool of available players.

That flies in the face of the Development Academy's stated goal of casting a wider net for future national team players. The USSF charges only \$1 for player registration while also picking up the tab for referees. However, the fees for coaches, fields and equipment all add up, and the travel costs associated with playing in a national league remain a giant hurdle for some clubs.

"The travel in this program is a big issue," concedes the Academy's technical director, John Hackworth. "And we're making sure that we're minimizing the travel costs that will ultimately be passed on to the players and the parents. That is hard to do in a country as big as ours, especially with the standards and structure of our program."

To this end, the Development Academy has reduced the number of national showcases from three to two, thus removing one trip -- and for some clubs, one cross-country flight -- from the calendar. Yet the primary way costs have been reduced is by creating conferences based on geography, and in places like Southern California or North Carolina, most if not all games are within driving distance. But in a country as big as the U.S., there are places like Colorado where the concentration of clubs isn't as heavy, meaning teams often must fly to their games, significantly increasing the cost of fielding an Academy team.

These expenses have forced teams to get very creative in finding outside streams of revenue, with sponsorship an increasingly key source. In the case of the Colorado Rush, a partnership with French club A.S. Monaco



A reduction in the costs of playing youth soccer could enable the U.S. to produce more players like Jozy Altidore. (Jamie Sabau/GettyImages)

### U.S. men's schedule

U.S. vs. El Salvador

has helped reduce -- but not eliminate -- fees. In many cases, Development Academy players are also expected to help run clinics and assist coaches at younger age groups as a way of essentially "working off" money that has been spent on them. Clubs are also looking to local businesses to sponsor individual players.

**March 28**  
San Salvador, El Salvador  
**9 p.m. ET, ESPN2**

U.S. vs. Trinidad & Tobago  
**April 1**

But there are still instances in which even these efforts aren't enough to make playing on a Development Academy team affordable for kids from low-income families. In cases such as these, clubs will often make financial accommodations to keep a player in the fold. The USSF, in conjunction with the U.S. Soccer Foundation and Nike, has also started a scholarship program to help players from disadvantaged backgrounds cope with the cost. While every little bit helps, the challenge of accommodating these players is still immense.

Nashville, Tenn.  
**7:30 p.m. ET, ESPN2**

"We have to work very hard to assist some of the more hardship-level cases," said Colorado Rush CEO Tim Schulz. "Right now, we haven't had anybody say 'no' because of finances. We've worked with them in some capacity."

For almost all of the clubs participating in the Development Academy, these challenges are nothing new. And the feeling is that the program's benefits have given players more bang for their buck.

"[The cost] is less than it would be to play on a team that travels to major showcases like Disney and Final Four," said Dave Costa, the head coach with Carmel United's U-18 side. "Basically we're getting so much more in terms of training. There's three extra months to your season, and with the exposure to the number of college coaches and national team scouts, it's less than it would be to play on those other teams."

Yet Schulz admits that by the time players reach the U-15 age group that currently comprises the first tier of the Development Academy, the costs have already proved to be too great for some families, at which point a case of out of sight, out of mind takes over. Given the stiff competition for athletes that soccer faces from other sports in this country, as well as the fact that the U.S. still resides well below the elite soccer nations in terms of producing great players, it isn't in a position where it can be turning kids away. Simply put, this is an impediment that needs to be removed.

So will the day ever come when a Development Academy team will be fully funded? With nine MLS teams already participating in the program, that day has already arrived for some. A professional club, with its significantly greater resources, has the financial means to make this happen, and MLS teams are keen to tout the fact that they don't charge players to be on their teams. In addition to Monaco, foreign clubs like Chelsea have also gotten into the act, providing significant subsidies to several participating teams. While some clubs decry the presence of professional teams as creating an uneven playing field, their involvement has had the effect of motivating neighboring clubs to find ways to reduce their fees.

"Without a professional affiliation, eliminating the cost for players is difficult," said Schulz, who competes for players with the Colorado Rapids of MLS. "But it is a challenge that is put in front of us because if in fact a youth club has a professional team in their backyard, they're going to have to work very hard to make the cost zero, or at least equivalent to what the professional team is offering. Otherwise they'll lose the kids."

But even if one assumes that every MLS and USL-1 side fields fully funded Development Academy teams, that still won't provide the depth of coverage needed to blanket the entire country with a zero-cost

option. It leaves dozens of other clubs nationwide scrambling to cover their expenses, meaning that pay-to-play is here to stay, at least for a while.

That said, Hackworth and the rest of his colleagues at the USSF aren't giving up in their quest to eliminate fees.

"As our governing body, we still want to try and tackle those challenges so that cost is not an issue," said Hackworth. "Is it still out there? Absolutely, but we are focused on continually trying to figure out ways to change our own administration of what we do here with this program so that we can continue to help the players and the clubs decrease their costs."

Fans of the U.S. national team can only hope that the Federation is successful in its quest to eliminate pay-to-play. The future success of the U.S. program may well depend on it.

*Jeff Carlisle covers MLS and the U.S. national team for ESPNSoccernet. He also writes for Center Line soccer and can be reached at [eljefe1@yahoo.com](mailto:eljefe1@yahoo.com).*

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Thursday, March 26, 2009

ESPNSoccernet: March 28, 8:54 AM US

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Jeff Carlisle, ESPNSoccernet

*Editor's note: This is Part 5 of a five-part series examining the structure and organization of the U.S. Soccer Federation and its youth programs.*

Of all the words that can be used to describe John Hackworth, "revolutionary" isn't one that immediately comes to mind. The current U.S. national team assistant is as easygoing as they come. Bring up the state of youth soccer in the United States, however, and it doesn't take long for Hackworth to go all Patrick Henry on you, although in his case, he's more inclined to say, "Give me more practice time or give me death."

In his additional role as the technical director of the U.S. Soccer Federation's Development Academy, Hackworth's main job is to make sure the program continues to serve its players and coaches well. But the former head coach of the U.S. U-17 national team isn't content to stop there. His intention is to revamp youth soccer at all levels.

Simply put, the basic tenets of the Development Academy -- the 3:1 practice to game ratio, no multiple games in a day, limited substitution rules -- are all things Hackworth would like to see applied to younger age groups.

"We want to change youth soccer in America because it's so important that the kid who is 8 or 9 or 12 be in the same kind of environment that we've set up here," said Hackworth. "And we want the soccer to be the same. We use this as a platform to trickle down.

"We ask all of the clubs who are in this program to run all of their [teams] much differently than they have in the past. That's our biggest goal. Can we really affect this change, not only for the players that are in this program, but for the players, parents and coaches that go all the way down [to younger age groups]?"

One obvious near-term step is creating a companion program for girls; yet in a peculiar move, the USSF is opting to take a go-slow approach. Much like they did on the boys' side, the federation has set up a panel to examine how girls' player development can be improved, with an examination of foreign development programs just one part of the process. It is comprised of former U.S. women's national team coaches Anson Dorrance, Tony DiCicco and April Heinrichs, as well as Carin Jennings-Gabarra, who is currently the head coach at the U.S. Naval Academy and was a member of the U.S. team that won the 1991 World Cup.

Given the immense amount of legwork that went into setting up the boys' program, as well as its initial success, it would seem to make sense to just copy what the boys have done and apply it to girls. DiCicco insists that it's not that simple. And while the Olympic Development Program (ODP) has been derided



The USSF hopes to produce more young stars of the caliber of Jozy Altidore (pictured here playing for the U-17s in 2005). (Andy Mead/Icon SMI)

on the boys' side as being hopelessly inadequate, DiCicco thinks it benefits girls.

"I like a lot of [the Development Academy's] merits, but we still like a lot of things that ODP does," said DiCicco. "Then I think [the USSF], from a financial standpoint -- and this isn't something they've said to me, it's just my guess -- has spent a lot of human resources getting the boys' academy as good as it is. And it's pretty good. They've done a real good job of it, but not without cost."

The desire not to mess up a good thing is perhaps the biggest reason DiCicco and his colleagues are treading lightly. In 2008, not only did the senior women's side claim an Olympic gold medal, but the U-20s won a world championship, while the U-17s reached the final of the U-17 World Cup.

That said, it's clear that other women's national teams, most notably Brazil, have surpassed the U.S. in terms of technical ability. DiCicco also admitted that many of the ills plaguing the boys' game are present on the girls' side, with the practice-to-game ratio still a huge problem. Implementing a girls' Development Academy will not only help close the technical gap, but also enable the U.S. to maintain its standing as the pre-eminent women's national team in the world.

DiCicco is mindful of the need to move girls' player development forward, and he expects that something similar to the Development Academy will eventually be implemented; he's just not sure when.

"I think ODP on the girls side has been a very good program over the years," said DiCicco. "Now, it's still good, but I think it needs a bit of a face-lift. It's probably better now at identifying players than developing them, and the clubs are probably better at developing them, so we have to find the right mix there. At the same time, we have to get a calendar for these players. They play too many games, going from team to team to team, event to event. Eventually U.S. Soccer has to take control of player development, as they have done on the boys' side."

Another possible area of expansion is extending the program to include a U-14 age group. Hackworth is quick to emphasize that while the plans for such an extension are very preliminary, it would likely be more regional in nature and not involve the kind of cross-country travel that exists at older age groups. There are also questions about whether the USSF's infrastructure could withstand such an expansion. For that reason, Hackworth said the existing age groups would grow only by a handful of clubs next season.

Finding enough qualified coaches is also an issue. Hackworth feels that the perception that Americans are incapable of teaching the game is misplaced, especially since more and more former pros are bringing their experiences to the youth coaching ranks. But he agrees that there is a lot of room for improvement.

"It's not so much are the coaches good enough, but do they have a true understanding of player development, and the process?" said Hackworth. "We are trying to implement things so they get that. It's more how you manage a larger pool of players. How you look at what's valuable for an individual versus a team. And in that regard, we need to improve. And we need to hold our coaches who aren't doing such a good job accountable for it."

But beyond the boundaries of the Development Academy proper, Hackworth sees plenty of obstacles to duplicating the program's concepts at younger age groups. Some are political, while others are more cultural in nature.

For Hackworth, the solution begins with educating people who are new to the game as early as possible. Despite the game's immense growth in the U.S. over the last 40 years, soccer remains a niche sport residing largely outside the spectator sport mainstream. For that reason, the tendency to apply norms from other sports to soccer ends up creating a warped view of the game.

Hackworth said, "You have an uneducated group of parents and players who, when they are first exposed to this game, they think 'Soccer, it's just like any other sport. You can run players in and out, they need a water break.' All of these kinds of things mix up the initial educational process for parents and players."

The emphasis on results at even the earliest age groups is another chasm to be crossed. Hackworth goes to great lengths to emphasize that he's not advocating a system free of competition. It's a matter of applying such a concept at the appropriate age.

"We introduce competitive levels right from the get-go," said Hackworth. "So whether you're a 6-year-old or a 12-year-old kid, if you are competing, you are expected to get some results. That's how most people look at whether you've done a good job or not. We don't look at whether this player has learned the fundamentals of the game and has the ability now to be really good going forward.

"That is a major shift when we look at other countries around the world, especially in their own player development programs. When that initial introduction to the game happens, we found that most of the time, at young ages, they don't even care about results. They care about the kids developing the basic fundamentals so that they can [succeed] when it actually does become competitive and results do matter."

Hackworth recommends that competitive levels be introduced at around age 10. Not only will that create an environment where kids are freer to learn and make mistakes, but coaches won't feel pressured into taking shortcuts just for the sake of winning games.

Another topic that raises Hackworth's ire is the tendency of local leagues, and especially tournaments, to play multiple games in a day. The typical youth tournament often sees teams play three and sometimes four games in a given weekend. The concern is that cramming that many games into one weekend invites fatigue which begets bad habits, which ultimately stunts the player's development.

The problem is that these tournaments are huge moneymakers for the organizations -- usually clubs themselves -- that put them on. Additionally, the buzz of traveling to a tournament, and going up against different teams from outside the area, is something kids enjoy participating in.

"We have to make [parents] understand that it's more important for you to go play that great competition, but play that game all out, leave it all on the field, so that you're playing one game a day," said Hackworth. "That's a big change. We have to teach them that these tournaments, while kids love going to them, they're really not the best thing for them."

Hackworth adds that there is some evidence that his message is getting through. Some tournament organizers are looking at spreading their competitions out over multiple weekends to avoid fixture congestion. U.S. Club Soccer, a national youth soccer organization, has begun creating what they call pre-Academy leagues that apply the concepts of the Development Academy to the U-13 and U-15 age groups. Yet Hackworth knows the battle has only just begun.

"The more that message gets out, the more people will start to look at things a little differently," he said.

"That is a huge challenge for us, but one we are trying to tackle in every possible way."

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