

Can't We All Just Get Along?

The case for why club and high school soccer can peacefully co-exist

By Frank Pace

"Schools find new rival in club teams" blared a recent Page 1 headline in the *San Jose Mercury-News*.

What caused this rivalry, I wondered. Does it really exist? If so, why do I coach a girls high school soccer team in Southern California?

I am not a professional coach, but I don't think I lack credentials. I played four years of Division 1 soccer. I played in the highly competitive semi-pro Greater Los Angeles League following college, and last season I coached in the USASA Women's National Select Team Program. I have been an NSCAA member for seven years.

So, what about this rivalry for players? I know it exists between clubs, who routinely vie for each other's players, but does the rivalry extend to high schools as well? It doesn't in my mind, because I have no say in who attends our school. But it sure does in the mind of Mike Saif, a club coach who wrote the following in the March-April edition of *Soccer Journal* magazine:

"Unfortunately the culture of our country has been that high school sports are an important part of the high school experience and soccer is a part of that mix."

Saif goes on to beat to death the idea that elite players should only play in elite programs, and high school soccer programs do not fall in that category.

Saif is not alone in his misdirected thinking. Many club coaches share his thoughts. But come on! Those coaches are so myopic in their self-importance that they miss the big picture.

Club soccer always will be the ultimate training ground for developing players who can play at higher levels of competition. This is true for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact

that the kids train with their club teams for nine months a year as opposed to three months for their high school teams. Still, there is no reason why club soccer and high school soccer cannot peacefully co-exist. High school soccer is not club soccer, but it can play a vital role in developing players who desire to play in college and beyond.

Competitive opportunities

Our varsity and junior varsity teams at Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy in La Cañada, Calif., are primarily composed of club players ranging in ability from bronze to premier level. We encourage all our girls to play club, but it is not a prerequisite. We compete in a high school league where many other teams are similar in composition.

Last season, each of our league's all-league seniors went on to play Division I soccer. Our league's top three senior players graduated to become 2004 Soccer Buzz Division I Freshman All-Americans. Our high school team, along with many other high school teams in our area, is competitive against all but the U-19 premier level club teams in Southern California. On its website, the Coast Soccer League boasts "over 1,700 teams, over 160 clubs and over 24,000 players." Twelve teams play U-19 premier. Twelve teams from eleven clubs! That makes our level of soccer very good, to say the least, but don't just take my word for it.

Randy Dodge coaches the highly successful Southern California Blues U-19 premier team. He also coaches the Aliso Niguel High School girls team. Of Dodge's Blues players, virtually all will play collegiate soccer next year, and nearly all of his Blues players played for their high school teams. This is what Dodge has to say on the competitive

level of high school soccer:

"While the top high school teams in Southern California would finish at the bottom of the U-19 premier division, I would say those same high school teams could finish in the top half to top third in the U-17 and U-16 Premier Divisions. Considering the top U-16 teams in the CSL currently rank 1, 2 and 3 in the nation, that's saying a lot."

Seeking scholarships

A recurring theme of the well-balanced series by Mark Emmons in the *San Jose Mercury-News* was that players are shunning high school soccer to increase their chances of winning scholarships. The truth is, as is the case of the Southern California Blues players, if you can play, you can play. If you can't play in college, don't blame it on high school soccer. Three more months of club training wouldn't have gotten you into the University of North Carolina. And let's examine that scholarship you crave – is it what you think it is?

Look at the facts. NCAA legislation provides a maximum equivalency of 12 full scholarships for women's soccer (9.9 for men). The Division II scholarship equivalency is 9.9 for women. Division III does not provide any athletic-based aid at all. To illustrate a point, let's say each college team carries 24 players on its roster. The money allocated to the 12 scholarships (or 9.9 in Division II) will be divided among the entire team. And those funds diminish if the schools don't fund their full scholarship allotment; most don't.

The days of the full soccer scholarship are long gone. Partial scholarships are the rule. Let's look at the actual cash value of many of those partial scholarships. Suppose your daughter lives in California and is fortunate enough to be recruited

by UC-Berkeley, San Jose State, UCLA or UC-Santa Barbara, and she qualifies academically. Tuition, room, board, books and fees for an in-state student rarely exceed \$12,000 a year in California.

The same goes for state schools like North Carolina, Florida, Michigan, Virginia and Penn State. If your daughter earns a 40 percent scholarship to a state school, she may realize a \$4,000 to \$5,000 scholarship per year. Over four years that is nothing to sneeze at, but it's

players (or even U-15 and U-16 Gold players) is going to learn to play smarter and quicker. She can no longer rely on pure athletic ability to run past lesser-skilled U-14's. She's going to learn to become more physical and she is going to improve.

In his article, Saif lauded the European model, but he failed to mention that the European teams allow their better players to "play up." Kids here do not "play up" because it would weaken

has to be a leader. A player can comfortably lay back in a support role, just do his/her job and let a more vocal team member assume a leadership role.

As one of the top players on his/her high school team, that same player has to step up to become an impact player and a leader if the team is to succeed. He/she needs to embrace the underclassmen like he/she had been embraced as a freshman. He/she needs to quickly bring the team together.

By forcing our elite players to step up into leadership roles, we amplify their quiet character and they grow as players. They become more confident. Never underestimate the role confidence plays in winning.

Our players learn how to play in an academic environment where soccer is a privilege earned in the classroom.

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barely the pot of gold you thought you were looking at. Furthermore, if your daughter or son aspires to play at Harvard, Yale, Princeton or any Ivy League school, you can forget about athletic scholarships. They are prohibited in the Ivy League.

What colleges are looking for are really good players who qualify for academic scholarships. An excellent player with 1,250 on her SATs will play in college. Conversely, I don't care if you're the next Mia Hamm, post a 780 on your SATs and you're sitting at home.

Keep this in mind: 895 colleges fielded women's teams in the NCAA last year (306 in Division I). If each team maxes out on its equivalency limits, there would be 5,622 scholarships available for about 21,500 players, and 75 percent of those funds would be allocated to players already in college. That doesn't leave much, does it? There is scholarship money available, but go in with your eyes open.

Playing up "playing up"

How can high school soccer benefit a player? Its programs allow younger players to "play up" and experience competitive play against older, stronger players.

Randy Dodge already has quantified the level of top high school teams in our area. A U-14 Gold Club player in a high school game or training session on the field with U-17 and U-19 premier

the club's ability to win in their age group, where winning is paramount. Winning draws other players to the club. Players generate money. It is a wonder that Freddy Adu is not locked in some U-16 club program somewhere.

Former LA Galaxy captain Dan Calichman was the MLS Defender of the Year in 1996. Today he not only coaches the men's team at Claremont-McKenna College, he also is the Technical Director for Crown City United Soccer Club in Pasadena, Calif. This year, he changed his philosophy at Crown City, implementing a premier program concept for all club players aged 16 or older.

"We are responding to the demand from our best players to play at the highest level according to ability," says Calichman. "Each year we could see our younger players come back from their high school seasons as different players. They'd be faster, more aggressive and more confident. Watching our players play in high school definitely influenced our decision to group our older players by ability rather than by age."

Built-in leadership opportunities

What about those elite U-17 and U-19 club players – how can high school soccer improve their game? Easy. I have always said that high school and college teams assume the personality of their senior class. In club, surrounded by elite players of the same age, not every player

Learning academic discipline

Even for the majority of the elite players, college soccer is the end of the competitive road in our sport. The best any player should expect to do is play at the college level. Anything beyond that is gravy. Still, players can succeed at the college level only if they have been as diligent in practicing their academic discipline as they have with their soccer discipline. Our girls understand the importance of getting to school on time and fulfilling their academic obligations – they will need those skills in college, that's for sure.

Fourteen of our 16 varsity players at Sacred Heart were named Academic All-League this past winter. They are primed to succeed in the college classroom, which is the first step to succeeding on the college playing field. I recently asked a top club coach where one of his girls went to high school. His answer: "I don't pay attention to stuff like that."

Who's serving who?

Our programs serve the player as opposed to the club, where players serve the club.

Let's be honest. Club soccer is a business, a big business in the United States. The success of a club is predicated on drawing players into the club, and the attractiveness of a club is based on its ability to win, especially at the older ages. If a club team has a losing

season, it often will jettison up to a third of the roster in favor of "better" players recruited from rival clubs. Loyalty in club soccer, like most sports run by professionals, is a one-way street.

In high school soccer, we play the hand dealt us, understanding that talent is cyclical. Some years the talent level is up, some years it's down. Saif laments the fact that he "has to bend over backwards and develop players in spite of the system." A system that he says "doesn't differentiate between coaches of top teams and players and coaches of other teams."

The great John Wooden gave me a lesson in perspective when he told me, "It's been my experience that the teams with the best players are the ones that usually win." Maybe some coaches should take a page out of Wooden's book and give themselves a little less credit.

There are good coaches and not-so-good coaches on every level. I don't rely on a coaching salary to feed my family. In fact, I donate it back to our school. I coach as a way to stay involved with the game and its young players. I'm not motivated by money, nor do I have to answer to a board of directors about the composition of our team or the amount of playing time given to a board member's child.

Because our program is not driven by finances, we can have more than one coach for 18 players, unlike most club teams. Last year our varsity team had four coaches for 16 players. Our co-head coach, Kathy Desmond, was named NSCAA All-Region while playing at Sonoma State. Assistant coach Annie Beltran captained the Loyola Marymount women's team to a top 25 finish in 2002 and a berth in the NCAA Division I tournament. Assistant coach Jenna Johnson played for the 2004 U.S. Women's National Select Team.

That's one coach for every four players and three very positive female role models for our girls. Four coaches mean a lot of personal attention and a lot of instruction. In fact, my guess is that if the clubs were really honest, they would admit that their biggest problem with high school soccer is not the quality of play or instruction as much as

it is the loss of club revenue and coaching income during the quarter of the year, when *their* players are playing high school soccer.

More media-friendly

High school soccer keeps the game and its players alive in the public eye, spurring growth for the sport at the grassroots level.

The local newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Daily News*, do a terrific job covering high school soccer. They pay almost no attention to club soccer. Erik Boal, the high school soccer beat writer for the *Los Angeles Daily News*, says there is a reason.

"We cover stories that impact our communities," he said, "and that is the essence of high school sports. When two local schools renew a rivalry that has endured for years, that's something people can relate to. That's news. There are 77 high school teams in our coverage area, but there are hundreds of club teams. We could never cover the club game with the same level of insight, consistency, accuracy and drama that we can with the high school game."

I see a lot of young girls at our high school games drawn to see the players whose picture they saw in the newspaper, hoping some day that picture will be of them.

So maybe high school soccer is not, as Saif says, "an unfortunate part of our culture." Aleks Mihailovic is one of the top coaches in America. He's one of those guys who can beat you with his players in the morning, then turn around and beat you with your players in the afternoon. Mihailovic currently is the Illinois State Director of Coaching, a U.S. National Select Team assistant coach and founder of the Chicago Blast Soccer Club.

"It is very unfortunate any time any coach denigrates another level of soccer," says Mihailovic. "AYSO will most likely never send teams to compete at the Dallas Cup; however, they do a great job in providing organization for players at younger ages. High school soccer has its place. Using Saif's rationale, should we acknowledge college Division I soccer as the only real college game and look down on Division II, III, NAIA and junior

college soccer? I don't think so."

Jenni Tanaka is an NSCAA Advanced National Coach with numerous national and state club championships to her credit. Her Chadwick High School team recently won the CIF Division IV Championship in Southern California. It was a first for both the school and Tanaka.

"When you win on the club level mostly just your teammates and families are excited for you," says Tanaka. "When you win in high school you have hundreds of peers, parents, teachers, alums and others excited for you as a player. This creates a lasting impression on the player."

Look, I couldn't coach club. I couldn't run practices for eight to nine months, coach 60 to 70 games a year and retain my enthusiasm for each game, each practice and each player. I don't know how to prepare my team or myself physically or mentally for four games in one weekend. I focus and prepare 12 months a year for 22 to 25 games. I give credit to club coaches who provide their time, energy and expertise year-round. You are invaluable. But so are the many high school coaches who have dedicated their lives to their game and their community.

I'm lucky. Our local club teams, led by the likes of Calichman, Hannes Sheen, Keri Sanchez, Reggie Rivas, Cherif Zein and James Mitroff understand the value of high school soccer. They embrace the role it plays in the growth and development of the game and its players, whether those kids are going to play in college or not. We all work hand in hand, parents included, to make the future of the sport brighter.

For any club coach to suggest anything else is self-aggrandizing arrogance. ☹

Editor's note:
Frank Pace is co-head coach of the girls team at Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy, which closed last season with a 16-6-1 record and a 6-4 conference mark, good for second place in the Mission League.



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