

Have We Killed Our Golden Goose?

By Bob Graham

To the American Soccer Community,

The soccer fields in my city are being taken over by lacrosse players; few American kids are kicking a ball around or playing a pickup game for fun. And when I see how many high school varsity soccer teams have been decimated by club soccer, the question has arisen in my mind: "Did we kill the Golden Goose?"

It was the spring of 1972 or 1973 when I got a call one Friday evening from my coach, Jerry Fajkus, a legend of Chicago-area soccer. I was in my early 20s, had just graduated from Wheaton College, where with no previous experience I played for their new coach, Joe Bean, on two NCAA regional championship teams. I was playing for a legendary Chicago men's team, Sparta A.B.A.

Jerry said in his thick Bohemian accent, "Bobby, tomorrow morning we go down to Naperville. I am starting soccer there." As usual, I had no choice in the matter, and the next morning, Jerry and I met a group of eager children and a park district coordinator, MaryLou Sonefeld, at the "barn." We ran the kids through the obligatory cones and ball exercises on a soggy field. It was very anticlimactic. Of course, within a few years, the Naperville Park District soccer program was bursting at the seams with more than 3,000 children registered annually. The story repeated itself in suburban communities all over America as eventually the term "Soccer Mom" became a part of the political lexicon of our times.

With the growth of park-district-level

soccer, however, came the profiteers. I watched my beloved sport slowly become an "industry," and with the advent of first the clubs and then the super clubs, the industrialization of our sport had begun. I, too, was a willing participant. In the '70s and '80s, I ran or managed many soccer camps that took thousands of children off the open playground and put them into adult-organized instructional groups. I also managed the Chicago-area's first indoor soccer club (Glen Ayre), where I sold 45-minute time slots and offered adult-managed competitive and instructional leagues to children of all ages.

This industrialization of our sport has had positive effects in terms of our nation's ability to compete on the international stage and certainly in financial terms for the profiteers. But who among us in the high school coaching ranks hasn't seen the other result? In the early 1990s, when I was the varsity boys' coach at Downers Grove North High School, my boys all wanted to play club soccer – they wanted to make themselves better players so that our varsity team could become better. By the time my wife became the varsity girls' coach at Downers Grove North in 2004, she met a very different scenario. The club coaches have denigrated the high school experience to such an extent that players now look down their noses at their own high school teams and may or may not grace them with their presence. The industrialization of the sport has not been lost on the players.

I wouldn't be writing this letter if I thought this way was better for kids. But it's not, and all you have to do to be con-

vinced is see the numbers of burned-out, tired 16-year-olds who have had about all they can stomach from our sport. They admit they just don't enjoy playing soccer anymore, but they are driven, perhaps by their parents, but surely by the culture, by that all-consuming pursuit of a Division I scholarship. Why would these kids want to go out and kick a ball around? Why would they want to play on a team of their inferiors? They are physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted by the time they reach high school – tapped out.

Maybe this explains what's happening in Naperville. Have entry-level players seen how little fun their older siblings had in soccer and want to try the "new thing" (at least new here in Chicago's west suburbs)?

So when I ride past Nike Park three blocks from my house and see fields that were once crowded every day with soccer players now lined for lacrosse, and see crowds of young men and women with wicker baskets playing on them, I want to get out of my car, walk over to the coaches and tell them, "Don't kill your Golden Goose."

Sincerely,
Bob Graham

Editor's note: A former collegiate player at Wheaton (Ill.) College, Bob Graham played for Sparta ABA from 1972-80. During that time he was the coach at the College of DuPage (1978) and Lewis University (1979-80). His coaching resume also includes stints at Aurora University (1984-85) and Downers Grove North High School (1991-94) in addition to coaching at lower-level high schools from 1989 to 2005. An Illinois High School Association certified official from 1975-92, he worked state championship games in 1979 and 1991.

Have you kept us in the loop?

In order for the NSCAA to serve you better, we need to know more about you. If you haven't updated your member profile lately, now would be a good time to do so.

It's easy to do online - simply go to the Members Only area of NSCAA.com and log in, then update your information.

If you have trouble logging in, email Membership Manager Sandy Williamson-Smith at swilliamson@nscaa.com