

# High Schools Address the Cruellest Cut

Pressure to Make Team Forces New Methods Upon Imperfect Process

By Eli Saslow  
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He arrived 10 minutes before his fate, so Filip Olsson stood outside Severna Park High School and waited for coaches to post the cut list for the boys' soccer team.

Olsson, a sophomore, wanted desperately to make the junior varsity, but he also wanted justification for a long list of sacrifices. His family had rearranged a trip to Sweden so he could participate in a preparatory soccer camp; he'd crawled out of bed at 5:30 a.m. for two weeks of camp and tryouts and forced down Raisin Bran; he'd sweated off five pounds and pulled his hamstring.

Finally, a coach walked by holding a list, and Olsson followed him into the high school. He walked back out two minutes later, his hands shoved deep into his pockets and his eyes locked on the ground.

"It felt," he said later, "like a punch in the stomach."

Thousands of area teenagers suffered similarly last week during high school sports tryouts, an increasingly high-stakes process both coaches and players abhor. As more families invest money into year-round club sports and intensive summer camps in an effort to propel their kids onto top high school teams, the pressure has increased on what remains a subjective tryout process. Because a spot on a varsity or junior varsity team can dramatically impact a teenager's self-confidence and social status, there is little tolerance of mistakes.

In an effort to better explain cuts to players and parents, coaches have started to record player evaluation grades. Few coaches, though, agree on how to decide which players are cut. Fewer still agree on how to cut those players. Only one thing, coaches said, can be universally agreed upon: Tryouts are as imperfect as their punishing end result.

"The day you have to cut kids is the worst day at the school all year," said Andy Muir, the field hockey coach at W.T. Woodson. "Everybody is trying hard to do the right thing -- the kids to make the team, the coaches to pick the right team -- and everyone ends up devastated. It's heartbreaking."

Olsson, 15, tried hard not to think about that possible endpoint when he arrived at Severna Park at 7:30 a.m. last Monday. He had enough to worry about. As the coaches took attendance for the first time, Olsson stood out awkwardly from the other 48 aspiring junior varsity players. At 6 feet 2 inches, he hovered more than a foot above many of his freshman and sophomore counterparts. His long, wavy hair -- a style that befits his rock-and-roll guitar playing -- stamped him as unique amongst crew-cut soccer players.

Even more unusual, though, were the circumstances of his tryout. Of the 48 players competing for about 22 spots, only Olsson had been cut the previous year and chosen to return. "Kids who get cut as freshmen almost never come back," said Stan Malm, coach of the junior varsity team. "Nobody wants that pain twice."

Severna Park players never touched a soccer ball for the first two hours last Monday, the first day Maryland public schools were allowed to practice. Instead, they ran timed 40-yard dashes and shuttle runs, a result of a

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trend that has overtaken high school tryouts.

Because of increased complaints from parents, many high school coaches now strive to make cuts more scientific. Until she retired last season, longtime Eleanor Roosevelt girls' soccer coach Kathy Lacey made her players run 1.5 miles in less than 12 minutes to make the team. Mike Bossom, the volleyball coach at Centennial, scores players with a number -- 1 through 5 -- for each drill and then logs the scores on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

For the first time this season, Severna Park Athletic Director Wayne Mook required his coaches to record running times and player evaluation grades, then hand in that paperwork to him. It is an arduous process that many coaches find tiresome, but Mook instituted it for a reason: After a player was cut from the girls' lacrosse team last spring, the family hired lawyers to meet with the school.

"In this day and age, you have to cover yourself a little bit," Mook said. "When I meet with a parent whose kid has been cut, I need something to show them. I need proof."

Under those orders, Malm and his volunteer assistant coach, Joe Keough, marched their players to a grassy knoll near the Severna Park High School entrance last Monday for a series of physical tests that hardly qualified as scientific.

Keough and Malm walked off what felt like 40 yards, then timed players with stopwatches. Every player ran twice, and often his time changed by nearly a full second from one sprint to the next. During the shuttle run, a 25-yard sprint that required players to stop and touch the grass every five yards, players slid on the uneven ground so often Keough screamed "Safe!" and signaled like an umpire.

Olsson's times in the 40-yard dash (6.1 seconds), the shuttle run (36 seconds) and the mile (6 minutes 57 seconds) left him near the bottom of the list, but he felt confident about the soccer ahead. He'd played well for a competitive under-19 team during the last year; he'd retouched his skills and gained valuable face time during the World Class Soccer Camp -- run by Severna Park varsity coach Bob Thomas -- during the previous week.

"The only thing that should help you get on the team is soccer," Olsson said. "It's about how well you can play."

It was about a lot of other things, too. One player hurt his chances by wearing lacrosse shorts, a major offense to Severna Park's look-like-a-soccer-player dress code, Keough said. Another had a father who blossomed into a high-level player, so he was hard to cut. Another had a brother who stood 6-2, which made the coaches optimistic about a future growth spurt.

Most of all, though, the coaches wanted players to show leadership and communication, so Olsson, often shy, worked hard to be vocal around a group of kids with whom he didn't usually feel comfortable. After a scrimmage, he suggested gently that a few of his teammates try switching positions. They looked back at him quizzically.

During the first two days of tryouts, players spent a combined five hours actually playing soccer. Coaches gave each player a numbered and colored pinny -- Olson got 30 blue -- which was used in place of names as identification when making cuts. Yellow pinnies, given to returning players, acted like bulletproof jackets; an orange or a blue pinny indicated a new player who could get cut.

Each day, Malm and Keough ran the group through drills and scrimmages meant to reveal both soccer skill and dedication. First there was a dribbling drill, then shooting practice, then four-on-four scrimmages, then a full-field game. On both days, Olsson drank almost a gallon of water and two 32-ounce Gatorades to stay hydrated. "A kid who really wants to make the team will exhaust himself trying," Malm said. "He would eat

poop for you."

The coaches at Severna Park had a particularly difficult task. Almost 90 percent of their players entered tryouts with several years of year-round club soccer behind them. The Falcons' recent success -- they advanced to the Maryland 3A state final last season -- enticed players to train exhaustively for tryouts.

"Most of the players we cut could start on other teams," Keough said. "Cutting the right kids is almost impossible."

Keough and Malm are well equipped for the job. Malm recently retired after 25 years as a police officer, in part so he could spend more time coaching. Keough works for a trucking company from midnight to 8 a.m. -- his regular shift -- before going to the high school. During tryouts, he slept two hours each night, sometimes restlessly. He was cut twice from the Arundel baseball team -- he still won't talk to the coach who cut him -- and he dreaded imposing the same feelings of failure on somebody else.

Since Keough saw his name in bold letters on a list of players cut, though, things have changed significantly. Though neither Maryland nor Virginia tells its schools how to cut players, coaches and athletic directors look for ways to dull the blow. Few high schools post the names of players cut because coaches find that too demoralizing.

At South River High School, a departmental policy requires every coach to inform athletes face to face. Several high schools, including Severna Park, post lists identifying players by assigned number. Bethesda-Chevy Chase field hockey coach Amy Wood posts a list of players who *made* the team, because she thinks numbers are impersonal.

"The way to do it right is to take every kid aside one by one and tell them privately what they did well and didn't do well," said Alan Goldberg, a sports psychologist at Competitive Advantage in Amherst, Mass. "You want to let kids understand that failure is a part of getting better. The big problem is when failure is just presented as failure. That's traumatizing."

At the end of Tuesday's four-hour tryout, Malm gathered his aspiring players and promised to be available for 10 minutes to anybody he cut. The list of players still on the team would be posted on the team's Web site and outside Mook's office at about 4:30 p.m., he said. Olsson nodded and then walked toward his water bottle.

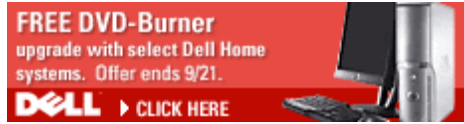
"I think I'll definitely make it past the first cut," he said. "I'm pretty sure about that."

He went home for four hours, ate a sandwich from Subway, took a nap and hydrated to get ready for Wednesday's practice. Then he went back to school -- "It feels more real to see the actual cuts than just seeing it online," he said -- and searched the list for 30 blue.

He never found it.

While his mom, Annica, waited in the car, Olsson walked out to the school track to find Keough and Malm for his 10 minutes. They told him to work on his speed and his foot skills. They suggested he try a personal trainer.

"They think some one-on-one work would help me, so I'll do it," Olsson said. "I'm probably going to come out again next year. Getting cut hurts pretty bad, but that's what it takes. There's nothing harder than making your high school team."



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