

### **Same Sport, Different Game**

Throughout the course of my experience in youth soccer in the United State I have encountered a hundred opinions on “Youth Soccer Development”. Many of these opinions have been sincere, well thought out theories on what hasn’t been accomplished and what needs to be done to produce world class soccer players. The insight that constructs these hypotheses originate from the experiences of youth soccer organizers who have made their way from recreation soccer to the youth national system either as a coach, administrator or both. Some opinions are derived from those who were fortunate enough to compete at a level higher than the recreational base that serves as the foundation for this topic of youth soccer development in America. There are even those insightful viewpoints from former and present professional players and coaches who have experienced professional youth soccer systems executed in the various countries they either competed in or traveled to. The challenge of the number of applicable theories is that they are constructed to be implemented in a pay-to-play landscape better known as “Elite Recreation”.

The ideas brought forth are borrowed concepts from the professional club youth models. You might ask “why is that a problem, shouldn’t we copy the pro’s?” Yes, but copying a youth development system where a professional team fully finances each player’s equipment training, transportation, education, housing and meals in a “pay-to-play” elite recreation structure creates obvious limitations. Players are developed to the level of the cost. Meaning, absent of a player’s God given physical attributes, which cannot be purchased, the cost of producing a “world class player” falls on the family. Even in a country as prosperous as the United States, there are few families that can afford to finance their child’s development to the professional level. There is also the matter of God given physical attributes or lack thereof that is a part of the equation.

In the professional soccer scene the motivation for financing the production of top youth soccer players is for the use of these players for the pro team. If the professional club provides more top players than they can use in their first team, then they either loan their player to another professional club or sell their player to another professional club. What I have just described does not occur in any of our American professional sports arenas. If we were discussing how to better establish a system by which we train entry level soccer participants universally across the country, then the subject of “Youth Development” might be palpable. In truth, the subject of youth soccer development in America is moot because soccer in the U.S. is about participation. For the majority of youth soccer clubs, if not all, in America the objective is number of participants or plainly quantity. As long as youth soccer clubs identify, entreat, enlist, and retain numbers of participants then their “pay-to-play” model works.

This scenario has no room for youth development, because whether the clubs do or do not produce “world class” soccer players, and they haven’t, their focus is quantity. The operative of youth soccer in America is isolated from all other youth soccer models throughout the world. Everywhere else in the world the motive is to produce “world class” soccer players for the purpose of literally cashing in. These youth soccer models have everything to do with quality and not quantity. Quite simply one is a professional approach (quality) and the other is a recreational approach (quantity). In this context of youth soccer development in America, we are playing the same sport, but engaged in a different game.