

## Hot-Button Topic - Club vs School Soccer

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Having been simmering on the back burner, the issue of Club vs School soccer is rapidly ebbing to a boiling point, and now is on the front burner. Soccer has been able to co-exist for all the years in a reasonably compatible manner, but that just might be changing, and sooner rather than later. There is currently a major push to force players into a choice between playing soccer for their High School or for their Club team, not both. This is an issue that I feel needs to be addressed from both sides, with all the cards on the table.

My 40 years of coaching experience at Christian Brothers College (CBC) High School in St. Louis, Mo. has given me a certain perspective, an appreciation of the value of High School soccer, and the impact that it can make in a young person's life. I would like to share some of my thoughts.

For many of these athletes, High School sports will be the **pinnacle** experience in their athletic careers. Some will go on and play college soccer, however, for many of them it will not be at the highest school of their choice. For those that continue playing college soccer, many will find that college soccer does not provide them the same energy, satisfaction and dynamism that they experienced in High School. The very, very gifted few will have a chance at professional soccer, but that is such a long shot for most. My point here is that High school soccer can - and in many cases - does, provide those experiences and values that the players carry with them for the rest of their lives.

What is it about High school soccer that makes it so special? Some may disagree and challenge these points, but that is your prerogative. To play for your High school means that you represent the student body, the faculty, the alumni, the community and all that the school stands for in the community. The letters across your chest spell out who you are playing for - and in many cases - that may represent a very strong tradition. In many cases, you may be the next in the line of family members to represent that school - you may be playing with or against some of your best friends, or young people who may later become best friends. There is a camaraderie that exists when you sit together in classes, eat together in the cafeteria and then go to the field together as teammates to represent **your** school. Students in the school can identify you as a member of the soccer team - you have a special identity. High School soccer is inclusive - everyone in the school has an opportunity to participate, if selected by the coach, with no additional financial considerations. Club soccer has become very exclusive - for many it is not even an option. With the financial costs and the transportation issues, it becomes available only to those who can afford it.

The opportunity to develop rivalries, to play in big games, before big crowds, to get newspaper and television coverage are all part of the High School sports scene. There is a tradition, or culture, that exists that people look forward to the season with their own expectations – many times reflecting back to their own experiences when they played. High School soccer fills a void in many communities where there is no live college or professional soccer to watch. There is always a High School game - any day or night of the week. Alumni will get schedules early and mark their calendars for the games they want to attend. Many times, school functions accompany games through the spirit clubs or other student-led clubs at the school, which allows for a sense of belonging to those that, are not athletes.

Even though the High School season is compact – it is also very intense and demanding. It requires student-athletes to balance their time and responsibilities between school, team family and personal life. Granted, a longer season would allow for a more leisurely approach, but that is not what we have to work with, so we do the best we can. The lesson of time-management is extremely important, and one that will carry over into one's life in many other areas. The weekly schedule of games and training sessions is demanding, and each week of the season follows pretty much the same schedule. Mental and physical strength are required to stay at your best at all times – anything less could be costly. Self-discipline demands that you make choices that are in the best interest of your goals and ambitions – staying focused and staying on top of all your responsibilities is a wonderful life lesson

In many schools, if not all, student-athletes must maintain a certain grade or grade point average in order to remain eligible. The State Association sets standards of eligibility that everyone must follow. Schools will suspend a student-athlete from playing if their classwork is below an acceptable level. Standards of conduct are also closely regulated. Many times students and parents will sign an agreement of terms as set by the school to maintain certain standards. Any breach of these could result in temporary to full suspension from the team. Simply stated, between the school administration and the State Association, student-athletes are held to a standard and held accountable for their actions. High School athletics is part of the overall educational learning process. We are in the education business, not just the soccer business. We see these young men in more life situations than any club coach can imagine. That is not a knock on any club coach. It is simply a fact. The goal of High School sports is to allow participation in a sanctioned sport, under the auspices of a controlling body, to help promote physical, mental, emotional and social benefits for the student-athlete, while playing the sport of their choice, to the best of their abilities.

One of the arguments for the Club only approach is to have more time to develop the players as the Clubs see fit. Much of this is a spin-off on higher thinking that the best players will develop in a better and more complete way, and enhance their chances for higher level soccer. Also,

the National Team and Professional teams see this as a way to bring the talented players along more quickly. The reality is that the very best players will **always** be recognized, no matter where they are playing. Also, it is only the very crème of the crop that will reap the maximum benefits that many aspire to – most will fall short. For the rest, the “he’s like every- body else” kind of a player, they will struggle to reap the spoils. There is a misunderstanding about college soccer scholarships – **the maximum allowed by NCAA is 9.9 per team!** The average to above-average player will need to combine assets in order to get a ‘deal’ that works for him. There is not a full scholarship for everyone.

Also, it may be the culture in England and Europe to have players train with their clubs 10-11 months a year, but that is not the culture in America. There is no school sports (soccer) program in England and Europe similar to what we have - the sports (soccer) program are **only** through the clubs. The Club concept in England and Europe is even coming under criticism as they are finding more and more imports taking the top spots, leaving the local kids high and dry. The recent emphasis in world soccer is to explore Africa and South America for the talented players and then bring them to England and Europe.

At the end of the day, if you really analyze what soccer provides for the player, here is what I see. Many players that play High School soccer will find some way and place to play college soccer – maybe not always the team of their dream. For those that don’t, what do they do? After that (college soccer), there is almost nothing available for them. Again, as previously stated, the elite few may get a chance at professional soccer. In St. Louis, there no longer is a Senior League. Players may form a summer team for U23 or U30 Cup competitions, but that’s it. Most will rely on playing indoor soccer. So what does the player have to look back on and where do the memories come from? Maybe it’s the big High School games, against the big rival school? Maybe it’s the big game playing in front of the big crowd? Maybe it’s just the feeling that you did something special for your school.

So my closing statement is that High School soccer is a part of our American culture, as is Club soccer. They have co-existed and I see no reason why they should not continue to do so. We do not share the culture of foreign lands, so we should be true to our own culture. Let the kids enjoy playing as much soccer as they can, for as long as they can. As I stated, their playing days are limited, and once they finish school, that might be it for them. Why should we limit them, when they are already limited by the lack of opportunities? Can we co-exist? Without a doubt! The world of instant gratification that we live in fosters this elite soccer mentality, status, or whatever it is. We have to keep doing what we do because there are too many young men that have benefitted in life from “just” playing high school soccer.