

Club Soccer

By Renato Capobianco

Soccer has come a very long way in the last 15 years. In 1994, the U.S. had just finished staging arguably the most successful World Cup ever. Back then most of us over 40 can still remember heading to a sports bar and begging the owner to change the satellite coordinates on one measly TV so we could watch a live soccer match from some faraway place. Since 1994, we have seen the birth of Major League Soccer, we have witnessed the Men's National Team beat such traditional soccer powers as Brazil, Argentina, Portugal, and most recently Spain. On the women's side, we have celebrated the Women's National Team garner their second World Cup title in 1999 as well as their second Olympic Gold Medal in 2008.

All these results are proof positive that soccer players can be successfully developed in a country where soccer is, at best, the fourth major sport. These results also point to the positive developments and advancements in the youth soccer scene as it relates to player development.

Fifteen years ago, a good portion of youth soccer players were still being coached by mom and dads that were "volunteered" by other parents. Today, we see more youth soccer coaches with playing backgrounds ranging from professional to the high school level. This is a major reason why soccer development has come so far so quickly. Another reason is the growth of club soccer.

Club soccer across the country has exploded into a major force in the U.S. soccer scene. So much so that any club that entertains being taken seriously must also take seriously the following – club soccer *is and must* be run like any other business if it wants to be successful. This statement sounds like a contradiction if you consider that the mission statement of most successful club start involve the mention of "player development". How can a club run like a business and still have the best interest of player growth in mind? It is not easy. Many clubs struggle to stick to their mission statement as soon as too many of their teams start to accumulate too many loses.

We conducted a series of interviews with club soccer coaches, directors of coaching, and club presidents to get a better idea of the challenges that face youth soccer clubs in Massachusetts.

In the beginning

The common theme that came up with our interviewees was that a club must have a strong mission statement that is followed by all its administrators and coaches. *"The mission statement should not only be clear as it relates to the players, but it must also be clear as to the*

financial expectations it will expect to operate under. The first year is key to establishing your club's philosophy. A club must have clarity as to what it wants to achieve – and it must be player development.” said one DOC.

Another challenge new clubs face is how to attract quality players and coaches to their new club. I'm sure we have all heard stories of how coaches promise a full scholarship to parents of a U-12 player just to secure that player joining the club. The fact is player recruitment is a fierce yearlong battle amongst clubs. *“As a club, we have to be constantly involved in player recruitment – that never stops.”* commented a former club president. *Not only does a club need to recruit players to fill roster spots, but it has to start with hiring quality coaches which, in turn, will hopefully draw the interest of more players. “What attracts most players to a club? Good coaching and winning. Good coaches will join your club if they believe it is well run and has a chance to grow. When considering joining your club, players and parents will take into consideration how successful the teams are and how many players from your club have been chosen for ODP, regional and national team pools.”* said another DOC.

Hiring and holding on to good coaches is easier said than done. Most coaches are part timers and are not averse to joining another club for a few extra dollars – it's an unfortunate reality. This is where a strong mission statement, that values quality coaching through coaching education, will play a vital role in the year to year operational consistency of a club.

Biggest Challenges: Finances, Fields & Parent Expectations

Finances

We are all aware of one of the biggest concerns facing organized soccer – it is only available to those who have the money – “pay to play”. Many times I've heard soccer folk erroneously claim that this phenomenon does not exist in any other part of the soccer world. That is not necessarily true. In any country, good youth coaching costs money. Structured, organized youth systems cost money – the cost is simply not incurred by the parents. In the rest of the soccer playing world, these costs are picked up by the professional clubs of which the youth system is a part of. Those youth coaches are paid a salary and are, for the most part, full time employees. It is doubtful that you will find a qualified soccer coach in any of these aforementioned parts of the world coaching just for the love of the game. Player development is a serious business and revenue stream at all major clubs worldwide. The simple fact is that in order to develop players through quality instruction in an organized system, there is going to be a cost associated with providing this environment to youth players.

Currently, there are a few academy programs associated with MLS clubs that are subsidizing the entire cost of club participation at the U-16 and U-18 age groups. But this is the rarest of

exceptions to the rule that most clubs face – the collection of fees. *“The collection of fees is a huge issue. It is important that you anticipate expenses and then be able to sell it to the membership.”* said a former DOC. *“The budget is a very real issue that must be dealt with in the most professional and businesslike manner possible. Collecting tuition is not enough. A club needs to create other revenue streams such as hosting clinics, tournaments, summer camps, forming a partnership with an indoor facility, and of course, holding fundraisers. Monitoring your cash flow is crucial. We chose to front load payments made by parents – this is uncomfortable but we need money upfront to insure that our basic operating cost gets covered.”* added a former club president. *“We are very sensitive to the economics of many of our parents and so we offer payment plans in an effort to ease the cost. I would estimate that approximately 15% of our players receive some form of financial assistance from the club.”*

Living in this part of the country also brings on the added cost of renting space during the winter months in order to continue training during the winter months. Time on a viable indoor surface, whether it be proper turf or just a basketball court is expensive. *“The economics of trying to keep up your winter programs gets more expensive every year – there are only so many fundraisers you can hold.”* commented a current coach. There are many showcase tournaments during the winter and northeast teams must continue to practice and develop in order to be competitive with warm weather opponents. It is here where youth soccer starts to run into an obvious contradiction – does winning the showcase tournament become the goal over player development? The answer is no. *“Being able to compete at a healthy level at these tournaments does go a long way in the player development process. Good competition is a key ingredient to the development of any player, at any age.”* said one club coach.

Fields

I have spoken to a few club presidents and they would all agree – field space is a never ending headache. One, good fields are scarce. Second, many quality fields are protected from overuse by town recreation departments and, as a result, become off limits to club soccer. It is not uncommon for a club not to know from one season to the next if they will have access to their “regular field times and space”. *“Because of the year round high demand for fields, the people that control the fields are in a position to shop around and wait for best financial offer to present itself.”* was the comment made by a current coach. In the spring, unlike other part of the country, not only do you have to deal with baseball but you have the added pressure of competing for field space with a third sport - lacrosse.

“This is the biggest ongoing issue in Massachusetts. They are scarce and are getting more expensive to rent every year. Every club would love to have its own fields – however, as we all know, land is not so cheap in this state. With the addition of more turf fields, our playing

surfaces have gotten better, but the cost of these fields has been passed on to the clubs in the form of high rental fees.” stated a former club president.

“In order to grow your club, you need your own fields. Facility development is the next big thing. Fiscally, it is the safest way to grow and to be able to control and develop revenue streams. Sponsorships have a legitimate hope to increase as now, there is some prestige attached with the investment – a facility of a successful growing club has the ability to attract companies and services that are interested in cross marketing to children and adults.” added a former DOC.

Parents

The issue of parents is not reserved for just soccer. This is an issue that all sports have been dealing with for decades. It has become more prevalent in the last ten years as the availability of college scholarships (especially on the girl’s side) has become more sought after. Managing the expectations of parents is a very serious aspect of club soccer that must be dealt with in the most professional manner possible. After all, they are the ones paying the fees, driving the kids to practice and using up all their vacation time to take their kids to games and tournaments. *“A club must listen to what parents have to say – all the time. A club must make the effort to properly educate parents as to what the club is doing, especially as to how it relates to their kid(s). For this, the personality of a clubs director of coaching is key...he or she will be the main person that will be dealing with club politics, coaching changes, parent expectations (and complaints or concerns...you need to have a DOC that is very diplomatic.”* stated a former club president.

“Parents are the ones paying for this service so you must have a huge line of communication open at all times. Of course, the biggest challenge is managing the expectations of each parent. Parents of U8-14 are more concerned with playing time and development so you have to spend more time educating parents about the various stages of player development. Some parents have a hard time understanding why their son or daughter went from being the best player to one of the weakest in a matter of 6-8 months. AT the U-14 level and above, the hope of being on the “scholarship track” starts to become the chief concern. Parents also become more concerned about winning and losing at this stage.” said a current club coach.

Listening and educating parents is a must if you are to going to successfully manage the expectation of parents. Remember that today’s parent is probably different than the one clubs dealt with 10-15 years ago. Today, about 30-40% of parents may have played in high school or college soccer. That simply wasn’t the case a decade ago. Clubs should view this as a plus and take the time to speak to parents about club procedures and address all parental concerns. It

may lead to the occasional uncomfortable discussion, but it will serve your club well in the long run.

Coaches

There can be many issues when it comes to the topic of club coaches: how to get them, how to keep them, and how to best develop them as they continue in your club. Many club DOC's will hire college coaches in hopes that will lure the areas better players. But not all college coaches have the ability to coach 11-14 year olds. Picking the right coach for the right age group is very important. Some coaches are very good at player development...others are better at managing wins and losses. *"Coaches must me on the same page as the club's mission statement."* said once former DOC. *"College coaches can't all necessarily coach young players. You need to manage your coaches closely and pay attention as to how they interact with their assigned age group."* added the former club president. With new clubs sprouting up every year – some coaches will leave for the simplest of reasons – more money. So how does a club keep its coaches? *"A club must work to offer continuing education (within the club) for their coaches in order help keep them in the club. The club should also help differ the cost of outside continuing education seminars, clinics and licensing opportunities. As a club we will reimburse a coach the complete fee of a national license if he or she is still with the club 12 months after completing the course."* added the former DOC.

"Coaching development is another key element in grow your club. You can't expect any consistency if you are changing 50% of you coaches every year. Hopefully, you can acquire coaches that see coaching as a profession and not just a way to make some extra cash on the side." commented a current DOC.

Town Programs

Another topic of discussion was the relationship club teams can have with a town soccer program. It is not uncommon for a relationship to emerge as a result of sharing town fields or because a club has a large percentage of kids from one particular town. *"Sharing fields can be a great way of starting a new relationship. Coaches as well as parents from each team can get to know each other in passing. Of course, sharing fields can lead to an adversarial situation if all coaches involved don't operate in the spirit of cooperation."* said a current coach. Having a large concentration of kids come from one town is an ideal way to show a town that what they are doing, soccer wise, is effective. Then, if a town is open to a partnership in the form of say coaching clinics, you now can really establish a positive relationship that ends up benefitting everyone, especially the kids. *Relationships with towns programs have, in my experience, gotten better they were ten years ago. "Town soccer is getting more educated as to the true value of club soccer...however, we must continue to foster more cooperation with towns*

programs.” stated a former club president. The town/club relationship must not be adversarial. Both sides must understand the services each provide and find a way to work in unison in the interest of the kids and of player development.

Future Challenges – New clubs, Money & Raising the Bar.

One cannot argue that there has been a huge growth of new soccer clubs in the last ten years in this state. Some see this growth as a challenge to improve its own club operations while other see the addition of too many clubs as a watering down of the club experience. *“I really believe there are too many clubs – I believe that we would better serve soccer if we had less clubs that all operated at the highest of professional standards. Right now, there is no real quality control and club operations can vary greatly from one club to the next. You need very good professional minded person to run a club properly. We are seeing too many clubs that only field 4 or 5 teams...I don’t believe this is healthy.”* said a club president. Others see the growth of clubs quite differently. *“When new clubs com on the scene, they force established clubs to take a closer look at their own method of operating...it avoids goods clubs from getting lazy. Competition can make you better if you chose to respond to it in a positive manner.”* commented a club coach. Any way you choose to look at this issue, one needs to accept that it is not going away anytime soon. Most new clubs emerge from coaches wanting to branch off and do their own thing – this is very common in any field. Employees think they can do better than their boss and or want to go work for themselves. The key element to club growth will be whether or not there are enough good coaches to go around. On the surface, one would say considering that every year there are more and more ex college and high school playing *“soccer moms and dads”* willing to venture into coaching. *“Whether or not they can become good coaches? That is up to the individual club and the standard at which they want to run their club – it all comes back to a strong mission statement.”* added the coach.

Money

As one might imagine, this recent economic turn as also affected youth soccer. And like all other business, youth soccer will have to adapt, make changes and operate very differently moving towards the future. Clubs may have to be more selective about how many tournaments they enter or travel to. They may have to find different ways to generate funds as sponsor decide not to renew previous agreements. *“Like all business, we are entering a different era – we will definitely have to rethink how we chose to spend money. Hopefully, we can continue to provide the same level of coaching and development for the kids.”* stated a DOC.

“It may seem crazy, but now is the time to try and build your own centralized facility complete with field house and outdoor fields. In the end, it will prove to be the most effective way to

control and predict future revenue streams. Having a home base gives everyone, including the parents, a sense of stability in what can be a very changing environment.” added another DOC.

Raising the Bar

“From US Soccer on down, we must clean up the landscape and redefine what youth soccer in the U.S. must be. State should have more control and or say as to what standards a club must operate under. We must raise the bar as to what a club should look like so that parents have a clear picture when making very important choices for their children.” declared a DOC.

“The powers to be must make it very clear – player development must be embraced as the top priority of all clubs.” added a former club president. *“I’m not sure that is the case as we speak.”*

“One of my biggest concerns with the “pay as you go” system that is currently in place is where does the late bloomer go to stay in order to continue in a competitive environment?” Clubs need to provide quality programs in the older age groups to address this issue...not all players will show their potential as a player at say 14 or 15...we still get some gets coming into their own at 17 and 18...we cannot afford to abandon a U18 or U17 team just because it loses too much.” commented a club coach.

Conclusion

One thing is for sure, soccer does not seem to be in the hands of persons that don’t care. While some may have different priorities than others, there is no questioning that overall; soccer is headed in the right direction with a bright future. The recently added academy program from U.S. will force clubs, coaches, administrators, players and parents to pay more attention as to the choices they make. Clubs need to be constantly evolving with the changes of the times. As long as the competition for players leads to all clubs trying to raise their own standards, specifically, improving player development, youth soccer will end up better for this evolution