



Collegiate Development

The U.S. offers more to players than other countries' development systems

It's September. The summer is over. That means high school, club and college soccer gear up again. Every team in the country is undefeated. The high school teams look forward to competing for a league championship and maybe a state title. College teams anticipate an NCAA/NAIA/NCCAA berth and winning the national championship. No one knows what will happen in November and December -- which college team will win the College Cup? We just don't know.

What we do know, regardless of who wins, is that Paul Gardner won't like it at all. We will read his annual rant about college soccer in *Soccer America* in January. He will, no doubt, tell us that college soccer (and by extension high school soccer) has no place in the development of the game in this country. He will compare the Division I finalists with the Brazilian and Italian U-20's and tell us how we, once again, come up short. If this is the future of American soccer then there is no future, he will argue. The college game lacks the very skills that are necessary to compete at the highest level. College soccer is over-coached, college soccer lacks subtlety, lacks cleverness -- college soccer is, well, awful!

Why is college soccer connected to the success of soccer in the U.S. in the first place? Who suggested that professional players should come from college? Or not? Is it assumed that the college model that feeds basketball and football should do the same for soccer? Do NBA or NFL coaches think the NCAA championship game holds the key to the future of those sports? I don't think so.

Then why soccer? Why are there people in this country who believe that the only solution to U.S. soccer success is some type of Academy program? Why are there some who insist that the American soccer culture must change to make all things soccer right? Why do some continue to criticize everything about soccer in the United States?

College soccer has been around for a long time, well before the NASL or MLS. It has survived and it continues to grow and get better. In fact, soccer at all levels in the U.S. is getting better. This grassroots improvement has helped MLS on the field (and off) by providing both players and interested people in the stands.

What the critics of college soccer fail to accept or understand is that college athletics in this country are unique and deeply embedded in our culture. Few countries offer the collegiate experience to such large numbers of their populace. In most countries young men and women do not get the chance to go to college at all and, as a result, do not play college athletics. The combination of academics and athletics in the U.S. is special. College coaches are teachers who use the soccer field as their classroom. I don't know one college coach who has a contract based

on the number of professional athletes produced from the program -- in any sport.

The vast majority of college soccer players -- past, present and future -- never will play professional soccer (or basketball, football, baseball or ice hockey), but they will receive an education with which they can become useful members of our society. And every student who plays a sport in college has a special experience. Not a professional experience perhaps, but they are part of something special. Very few go on to play professionally, but perhaps the college athletic experience is more important for those who don't go on to play professionally.

In fact, a year or two in college could help young players like Freddy Adu and Danny Szetela. And four years in college would ensure that they have a degree to use after their soccer careers are over. College is not only about academics and soccer. College offers a four-year window in which students can make some mistakes but grow socially and morally and have a chance to mature. The U-20 players in other countries can't say that and don't have that opportunity. If they are not one of the few who make the Manchester United first team, they are left with playing in lower leagues or changing careers. If this is the case, these players have failed by the time they are 20.

Bobby Clark, men's coach at the University of Notre Dame, said, "I feel we have got a great thing in this country and we just do not know it. I had many opportunities to work in the professional game but I was intrigued by the college game. This allowed me to develop my two passions -- soccer and teaching. Nowhere else in the world offered the opportunity to work with talented athletes in an academic environment. I don't think the sole job of a college coach is to produce professional athletes. We have so many different and wonderful hats to wear but, like any good teacher, it is important that we help all of our students reach their full potential. In some few cases, that will be making it in the professional league."

Not long ago at the Notre Dame Coaches Clinic, Craig Brown, former coach of the Scottish National Team, and Brian McClair, the Manchester United reserve team coach, made a presentation. What struck them immediately was the standard of the college players. When asked by an attendee how the college players compared to his Manchester United team, McClair replied, "They are every bit as good and in some cases better." And he meant it. McClair went on to point out that most professional clubs are really only looking for one or two players from a youth team of about 18 players. The rest simply make up the numbers to allow the "special players" to have a team.

But are college players and teams really that bad? In 2006 Major League Soccer drafted 104 players. The

majority of these players attended college for a period of time and many graduated. In that same year the NCAA had 19,793 male college soccer players playing on 752 teams. Assuming for sake of argument that the four classes were equally distributed in this total, there were 4,948 players who were seniors. That means that less than one percent were drafted. These numbers compare favorably to football (61,252 participants and fewer than 300 drafted) and basketball (16,571 and fewer than 200 drafted). That means that college soccer is holding up its end by providing players for the country's professional league. MLS should appreciate this fact, but it doesn't.

What about the quality of ex-college players? About 17 of the players on the men's 2002 U.S. World Cup squad that reached the quarterfinal game played in college. The majority of the U-20s who played in Holland a year ago played in college. And can we talk about the quality of some individual players from college? How about Brian McBride, Claudio Reyna, Simon Elliot, Ryan Nelson, Brad Freidel, David Weir and Carlos Bocanegra, to name a few? The college game has made significant contributions to soccer in many countries and at all levels. The impact of college soccer should not be judged on the championship game. That doesn't happen with any other sport in this country. Why soccer?

College soccer gives the MLS and the national teams many quality players. The college game has also given us many of today's MLS coaches and our last two national team coaches. Both Bruce Arena and Bob Bradley were successful college coaches and successful national team coaches. In addition to high profile coaches, the college game has given this country many of the leaders of soccer at all levels. Coaches like Sigi Schmid, April Heinrichs, John Ellinger, John Hackworth, Bob Gansler, Steve Sampson, Tony DiCicco and Anson Dorrance all have offered a great deal to the game on the national level and all played and coached in college.

The college game is not perfect. There are problems. Budgets, facilities, not enough time for games and training and NCAA restrictions come to mind. But the truth is that college soccer provides a highly competitive environment for talented young men and women. College soccer is a wonderful and unique system that only the U.S. has to offer. College soccer can develop players at the highest level and provide an academic, social and moral environment for all the players.

Bobby Clark likes to say, "Ignore the dominant paradigm." The dominant paradigm today is that college soccer does not produce players for the professional game. The dominant paradigm is wrong and should be ignored. 