

## American Youth Soccer Status

For years Sunil Gulati has chased Jurgen Klinsmann to fill the USMNT position, but through endless negotiations Klinsmann resisted. His resistance always comes down to one thing: control and restructuring of the American youth soccer system. Now, Klinsmann has the reigns, so now the question must be asked: what is the state of youth soccer in America and what needs to be fixed?

It is no secret that the US youth system has struggled to produce genuine global superstars in the sport and a team that can truly compete for the World Cup. Sure, we've had the recent emergences of Donovan and Dempsey. While they are great American players, they aren't the type that can go to a top European team and dictate the game regardless of who the opponent may be. In a country of 300 million people where soccer is the fastest growing youth sport, you would think that we could produce at least one player that can bend a game to his will and dazzle audiences with style and flare. What Klinsmann, and maybe finally Gulati, realize is that this won't happen until the youth system is overhauled. The biggest aspiration USMNT fans should have is not for the immediate results on the pitch, but for the long-term results that Klinsmann can bring about if he is successful in changing the youth system much like he did in Germany.

With that in mind, let's take a look at the **top 6 issues Klinsmann needs to address with American youth soccer.**

To help examine these issues, I interviewed [Roberto Beall](#). Beall grew up playing soccer in Brazil before moving to the States. He was an All-American at the University of Vermont, a former member of the US National Select Team, and a player for professional teams in Uruguay, Sweden, and in the old USISL. Since his playing career, he has moved on to coaching where he has a Brazilian ABTF "A" License. With that, he has coached at the Division 1 level, served as a staff coach for the Olympic Development Program, and was also a staff coach for Real Salt Lake's Youth Development Program. He is now the Director of Coaching for the Arizona Hammers and an assistant coach at Phoenix College.

### **1. The United States Lacks a Soccer Culture**

This is the biggest obstacle facing the growth of American soccer. In other countries, soccer is as important as family and religion. It is the sport that every kid growing up plays first, and a major part of this is how relatively inexpensive the game is to play. In poorer countries, kids need nothing but a ball and some space. They're not playing twice a week at practice. They're playing seven days a week just for fun. And this is where many of the great soccer nations stand out from the United States. As Beall puts it, "Many diversions exist here in the US that are not available to people in other countries." Here, because there is greater wealth than in other countries, some of our gifted athletes that could succeed in soccer play sports like football, basketball, or hockey in organized settings where the cost is greater because there is not that cultural tie. Those costs are often reduced by high schools and college funds to aid in allowing more kids to play the game as costs grow. On top of that, these are the sports that are most widely televised in the US. Kids are able to see the game played at the highest level, pick up new techniques or tactical observations, and then go out and practice these skills. They are driven to play more because the sport is easy to access. Soccer, on the other hand, is much more difficult to find on TV on a consistent basis. As a result, this education and push for technical mastery of skills is lost, and true development falls to youth clubs, where the kids may only be for 3-4 hours a week. Development is stunted because the sport is not engrained into American culture yet. Klinsmann acknowledged this same issue being the biggest difference between American players and players from global soccer powers:

"One thing is certain: The American kids need hundreds and even thousands more hours to play. That is a really crucial thing. If it's through their club team, if it's through themselves, whatever it is. The difference between the top 10 in the world and where we are right now is the technical capabilities and the higher pace. In a high-pace, high-speed environment, to keep calm on the ball, to sharpen your minds so you know what to do with the ball before you get the ball. That's the difference right now. You might have technically gifted players here, but once you set the pace two levels higher, they lose that technical ability because they're getting out of breath or their mental thought process isn't fast enough." – Jurgen Klinsmann (courtesy of Grant Wahl and SI)

What will change?

## **2. No Uniform, Identifiable Style of Play**

This issue becomes a problem with integrating youth into the national system. The US has yet to develop an identity as a soccer country. Sure, the USMNT is usually one of the fittest on the pitch and never stops fighting until the final whistle, but they are usually reacting to other teams in the flow of play instead of forging their own brand of soccer. This hurts US soccer on two levels.

First, imagine being a kid growing up in Brazil and watching the Samba boys. Their style of play is embedded in your mind, and as you strive to get better in the sport, you are emulating the same skills and techniques as those at the highest level in the country. The same could be said about kids growing up in Mexico, Italy, England, the Netherlands, Spain, etc. There is an identifiable style of play that children can see and try to imitate. If you are a kid watching Mexico play now, they rely on close ball touches, quick passes, a bit of flair, and an unrelenting attack. Spain: they build up the pitch with quick efficient passing where the ball for the most part stays on the deck.

That's not to say that the style is something that doesn't change from time to time, but they have long periods of time where they stick to a certain set of tactics and techniques long enough that the style can become identifiable. Can you see the same thing happening with young kids in America watching the USMNT right now? Probably not. It's evident every time the US plays against countries like Guadeloupe and Panama. The Yanks should dominate these teams, but they don't know how to control games because they are usually reacting to the other side, relying on their fitness and will to get them through the game. In the past few years, the style changes not from one World Cup cycle to the next but from game to game. It is easier for kids to pick up specific skills, techniques, and tactics if they are seeing consistency watching their national team. This brings us back to creating a soccer culture. US Soccer's vision and youth soccer must become more intertwined in order to achieve success.

Second, now imagine tactically assimilating teenagers into national programs. Not only is there no identifiable style of play, but now you're bringing in kids to the national level who have played under 20 different coaches emulating 20 different theories on how teams should operate. When you compare this to other countries, this puts the US far behind. "Reyna is starting to promote his vision...and we need a buy in from our coaches at the youth level to see that these ideas get implemented. We are starting to use the examples of other federations (Brazil and Spain) as we recognized that they have a formula for success that we can copy," said Beall. If there were national principles of play, the youth coaches could incorporate it at young ages, making the transition to national programs for the more gifted players seamless. Does this mean that every youth team should be playing the same formations and focusing on the exact same skills? No, a system that inflexible would do more harm than good. Players would be clones of one another, and there would be no room for freedom of expression and growth. Exceptional talents that transcend their team's style would be overlooked. But should certain national principles of play be taught at every level? Absolutely.

## **3. Pay for Play**

Right now, the way the youth system is set up, you have to pay in order to play organized soccer with quality coaches. As you get better, the more expensive it gets. If you're just starting off in soccer as an American youth, you're probably going to join a rec. league. Here, you're only paying a minimal fee to play, which covers uniforms and field maintenance. Let's say you end up developing at an accelerated rate and you are invited to play for the local club team. You can expect to pay registration fees, training fees, tournament entry fees, and another sum for equipment. If you're really good, you may end up playing for the state team or the regional team. Now, on top of all your club fees, you're going to have to cover travel costs as well. In other countries, once you reach a certain technical level, the academies pick up the tab. There is incentive to get better and the process is more inclusive and accessible to more players.

This difference leads to a lot of players getting overlooked, and is what Beall sees as being a huge problem, "So many talented players never get seen because they do not get the chance for exposure at higher levels...they cannot afford it. There are a number of outstanding players here in Phoenix who have grown up playing 'street soccer' and are better than anyone we see competing for state cups!" There are several possible solutions to this. First, much like what was discussed earlier, some sort of subsidies from the college or professional level could be introduced to offset costs for these players. Another solution would be sponsorships from businesses. This should become easier as most people commit to sponsorships for two reasons: advertising and some sort of emotional tie to a sport or team. With more and more kids playing soccer and more young parents having played soccer now in their youth, these potential pairings could start to happen more often,

that is if it is allowed by state soccer bodies. The easiest thing to do would be to offer to have the name of the sponsoring company put on the jersey. Some states like Illinois actually prohibit this to ensure financial parity, but states like California allow this and it has benefited the clubs, allowing them to bring in more players and provide better experiences for current players.

#### **4. Misplaced Focus on Winning Instead of Player Development**

The Pay for Play model also has other consequences, one of which is the misguided focus on winning rather than player development. Why is a focus on winning such a big deal? Well, for starters, it leads teams down the road of playing poor soccer. I've watched many youth games where one team will play great soccer, demonstrate the skills necessary to exceed at higher levels, and lose 4-1 because the other team just kicks the ball forward without any thought to passing and the more athletic kid wins the foot race. However, that tactic does nothing to teach the skills necessary to succeed in soccer at the next level, but it is encouraged because it produces a result. The result is overvalued and limits the potential young players could reach. So how does this stem from Pay for Play? Beall said, "This stems from the Pay for Play Club Soccer environment where the parents have too much influence on the direction a club takes." Because you are asking families to make large financial commitments, the parents would like a say in what happens at the club. If they are going to pay that money, they want their child to have winning experience, as that is what is most equated with a quality product in America. However, this has a negative impact when it forces coaches to move away from teaching the game for player growth and toward appeasing parents, most of whom don't necessarily understand what the game is like at a higher level and what type of development is necessary. One solution to this would be keeping parents and kids separate on game days and training sessions, sitting on opposite sidelines. "Winning is important to be sure, but the players enjoying the process and the journey while they improve with the life lessons and soccer lessons is vastly more important," Beall concluded. Another solution is offering parent education and becoming increasingly transparent in explaining the club philosophy. Until clubs are able to achieve some sort of financial stability outside of registration and training fees, winning will have to be a priority for clubs to remain solvent, unless there is buy-in from parents, players are enjoying the experience, and there are visible development results with players getting college scholarships.

#### **5. US Lack opportunities or Self-actualization**

First, let's define what is meant by self-actualization: the ability for each player to reach his or her ultimate potential, whether that is making the high school varsity team or playing for the national program. The US lacks opportunities for players to take their game to the next level. First, we group kids solely on the basis of age and not ability. Beall says this critique is spot on, "Our professional teams are not investing as many resources as they could be (US Soccer should step in here) to build talent at Academy levels. Believe me, Leo Messi was not playing with his age group very long before he moved up because of his ability level." Can you imagine if Messi was told at age 13, "Hey I know you're better than everyone here, but you have to play with them because you're the same age." By doing this, we're stunting the development of some of our most talented players. That's not to say we should be creating Freddy Adu situations where 14 year olds are signing with the MLS, but in practice, if a 12 year old is significantly better than everyone around him, he should have the opportunity to play with the 14 year olds for a bit. In education, they call it enrichment to help gifted students push their development to reach their maximum potential. In soccer, well...we don't call it anything because it does not happen consistently at the youth level.

Second, there is a lack of opportunities in smaller states for kids to move to higher-level clubs. Big states like California have larger player pools and as a result, more elite teams that kids can go to. If you're developing at a higher level at a smaller local club, you can join an elite regional club to keep advancing your game. There are enough players in a state like that where these regional clubs can then fill an entire league and provide a higher level of competition for those gifted players. There are also several tiers below the premier level so kids can decide what experience is right for them now or set goals as to what level they want to work towards. Smaller states simply do not have enough players to provide that environment. They will have to find a way to give kids those experiences, whether it is traveling to tougher tournaments, partnering with a local college to have the team play with the kids, or creating the opportunity within the club to advance based on ability rather than age. Otherwise, development is stunted and players cannot reach their full potential.

#### **6. Too Much Red Tape in a Flawed System**

Ultimately, US Soccer needs to come to the realization that at the youth level, administrative rules are making it harder for kids to play now. These regulations are now beyond establishing an effective system, which is covered in red tape. For example, in some states, kids are not allowed to remain involved with their club team while playing for their high school. College soccer players are limited in the amount of time they can practice and train in certain seasons. If players switch clubs during certain parts of the season, they have to sit out games. In some states, players that register for one team in a league are ineligible to play with another age group within the same club to offer those players enrichment opportunities. These are just some examples where instead of making the game easier for kids to enjoy, it becomes more difficult and affects the level of play.

The system in place also creates a problem by encouraging tournament after tournament. Beall went into more depth on how this is starting to change and the progress that still needs to be made, "The US Club Soccer model that is starting to take hold in other states incorporates playing league games for promotion and relegation, just like Europe. We would play less games but they would be more meaningful. In addition, they have a 'Cup' competition, which is played during the season, which also provides a platform for excellent competition. Easier to play under their system in terms of travel documents from state to state. That's just the tip of the iceberg...less games and more training, less cost to play soccer, putting money into the infrastructure so that there are more quality places to play, midweek games at night instead of packing games in on the weekends (4 games in 48 hours at these silly tournaments that you pay hundreds and thousands of dollars to be a part of)."

US Youth Soccer moves forward from here...

## Conclusions

Until the six issues above are addressed, it is going to be very difficult for US Soccer to generate global superstars and compete for the elusive World Cup trophy. We're destined for group stage flameouts, round of 16 disappointments, and maybe the occasional taste of the quarterfinals if we head down the same path. Changes have to be made, and this is where the Klinsmann hire has this writer giddy with excitement. Klinsmann was the leader in the transformation of the German youth system, and now they have developed young talent that is some of the best in the world. There's no reason to think that can't happen here, but it's going to take some work.

To create a soccer culture here, practices need to be less about drills, winning, and X's and O's, especially at the younger ages. The game itself is the greatest teacher, and kids should be encouraged in practice to take risks and try new things. They're more likely to get more touches on the ball away from practice if they are having fun at competitive practices. In order to keep the stronger athletes from switching to a sport more ingrained in the American mainstream is to keep the enjoyment level high until soccer gets a firm footing. The USSF could easily provide a short training manual to rec league and club youth coaches to follow, or even mandate an entry level coaching class. US Soccer and the MLS need to start investing more and take a more active role in youth development. This is starting to happen with academy teams, but more can be done, especially in lowering the financial burden. Pay for Play could be turned around if the professional level invests more at the youth level, modeling the system after countries like England and Spain. There needs to be an investment in infrastructure as well so that kids have more places to play. Clubs could be more open to sharing their philosophies with parents so that those who didn't grow up playing understand the end goal. Along with reducing costs, this would pull the focus away from winning and put it more on teaching the skills of soccer. It will also increase their enjoyment level of the game, thus moving towards soccer having a stronger position in the American mainstream.

Klinsmann has made some shifts like this before in his stint as the German coach, but the US is in a much different situation. Given the time and the resources though, Klinsmann could transform US Soccer into what we all dream it could be. We won't see it immediately on the scoreboard, but in ten years from now we may just look back at this hiring as the moment the US became a player on the global pitch.