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## U.S. Youth Soccer Undergoes Overhaul and Impacts on College Soccer

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NEWARK, DE -- This year, the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) has initiated a major overhaul of youth soccer in the United States. The impact will be felt at all levels of the game.

University of Delaware men's soccer head coach Ian Hennessy (at right), who will begin his third season at the helm of the Blue Hen program in 2008, talks about some of these changes and how they will affect the game, recruiting and philosophy of the sport in the next few years.

**Question: You have been a very strong advocate of youth development here in the United States. Can you tell us about the most recent developments?**

**Answer (Ian Hennessy):** There are tens of millions of players that play soccer on a regular basis, and it is a sport that has grown exponentially in the last 20 years in this country. At the youth level there are over 4 million registered youth players that participate in the game on a weekly basis. However, the youth landscape is littered with different league associations, organizations and clubs with their own agenda and interpretation of how things should be run. This has led to a fractured culture lacking clarity and cohesiveness. It has impacted on the proper development of our younger players and the USSF has stayed clear of things until now. This year the USSF has started the "Development Academy" to address what it perceives as stumbling blocks in the youth game.



**Q. What are those stumbling blocks and what are the changes?**

**A.** The main thrust of the program is to get the better players in the country to practice more, play fewer games and have those games be meaningful games. The USSF are encouraging clubs to practice 3-4 times per week and to play only 30-40 games per year. They also want those games to be against opposition that value player development over a result driven mentality, so they hand selected 64 clubs around the nation and started the USSF Development Academy.

**Q. What are your thoughts on this?**

**A.** I believe it is a monumental step forward for the game, if not only practically then philosophically. Some of our better players can play close to 100 games a year in the present culture. Physically and mentally these kids are exhausted, and the games lose significance for them as they move through the youth ranks. The quality of soccer can also suffer. There is an old saying in education that "too many exams and not enough studying do not the student

make". The USSF proposal of fewer games and more practices will, in the long term, raise the level of players and the overall state of the game in the future.

**Q. Who are the 64 teams and how are they selected?**

**A.** Major League Soccer (MLS) youth teams, The USA national youth teams (U15-U17), and clubs that have a history of producing national team players and national caliber teams who share a common developmental philosophy.

**Q. Will the new Development Academy's influence your recruiting at the University of Delaware?**

**A.** It already has, and with over 2,000 players in this new league it will provide the main source of future recruiting opportunities in the U.S. The League is run very well, and allows us to go and watch quality games every weekend for months on end. In the past we had to wait for ODP events, college showcase events or State Cup finals to see some of the better players play against each other. The league also has information on-line about all the players and it videotapes games so we can see players that we may otherwise have missed on a more regular basis. We also know that these players are in good training environments more often than not, which is ideal preparation for the college ranks. All in all it is a major step forward for the game and welcomed by us as a college staff.

**Q. The Academy teams are mainly composed of 15-18 year old players. Will this change in the future?**

**A.** Without question these clubs will eventually encourage a similar philosophy at the younger age groups and that might be the most exciting part for me. It is the philosophy of the USSF that I find most endearing, and it should be in all clubs from top to bottom.

**Q. Is that why you are working with the 9 & 10 year olds at Kirkwood?**

**A.** In part yes. The Kirkwood program is a little more than having more practices and fewer games. It is also about getting quality people to work with the kids at the "golden age of learning" between 9 and 12 in a small sided and small player/coach ratio setting. It is my hope that the USSF clubs will also begin to do this if they have not already.

**Q. Do you think the State of Delaware will eventually get a USSF slot?**

**A.** Unfortunately, not in the near future. I believe that Philadelphia will get an MLS franchise this year and with DELCO and the Baltimore Bays being so close I believe the USSF will not want too many Academy teams vying for the same players in the same geographical region. What I do hope though is that clubs in the State re-think the current landscape in the State and start some meaningful dialogue to change things. We have good resources in the State but they are spread too thin for any single club to attempt to compete at the Academy level. I would encourage clubs in the State to develop a better development model at the younger ages, one that better prepares our kids to be able to play at the higher levels as they progress through their careers. This is where we can make an immediate impact. Unfortunately, I do not see that at the moment, but we are working to change. We must change and I believe we can.

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