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Individualism vs. Community

The Globally Strange Relationship
Between the U.S. Soccer System
and the U.S. School System

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When the captains of the U.S. and the English national teams shook hands before the kick-off of their group-stage match at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, the men represented the pinnacle of soccer in each country. Both were established professionals in top European leagues with long records of success playing for club and country. But the English captain that day, Steven Gerrard, had reached the top of his country’s soccer pyramid in a globally familiar way: by devoting virtually his entire life to being a professional soccer player. Gerrard joined a Liverpool FC youth academy team at age 9, spent years as a professional trainee, and officially signed his first professional contract (again with Liverpool) at age 17. Reflecting on his youth, Gerrard himself was blunt in an interview with Liverpool FC’s media published at lfchistory.net: “Football was more important to me than school.” His U.S. counterpart at the World Cup, Carlos Bocanegra, had a much more circuitous—and peculiarly American—path to the game’s biggest stage. At the same age when Gerrard signed his first professional contract, Bocanegra was finishing four years of high school where he had been on three different varsity sports teams: soccer, American football, and track and field. He would spend the next three years playing soccer and studying for a history degree at one of America’s top public universities, the University of California at Los Angeles. Sports may well also have been more important than school to Bocanegra personally—but the cultural oddity that is American soccer has historically made such distinctions
blurry at the community level. The U.S. soccer system has long been intertwined with the U.S. school system in a globally strange way that is best understood as being more about American identity than it is about soccer itself.

The intertwining of soccer and schools in the U.S. is evident across the soccer spectrum: it is embodied by U.S. World Cup teams, and is simultaneously enacted in thousands of neighborhoods across the nation. At the World Cup level, the U.S. starting team on that 2010 day in South Africa included seven players with university-level education: almost certainly the most of any starting team at the 2010 World Cup. In fact, the only competitive international soccer team likely to have more combined years of education than the U.S. men’s team is the U.S. women’s team. Every single one of the starting players on the gold medal winning U.S. women’s team at the 2012 London Olympics had attended four years of university — many at some of the best universities in the world such as Stanford, Notre Dame, and University of California at Berkeley. Further, virtually all of those players (on both the men’s and women’s sides) played for one of the 11,000 plus high schools across all fifty U.S. states that offer boys and/or girls soccer as a competitive interscholastic sport — a number that has been growing consistently for decades according to participation numbers reported by the National Federation of State High School Associations. Curiously, however, high school soccer in the United States is not about producing international class players; the best U.S. players always also play for elite club teams outside of school, and when they do play in high school it is more for the social experience than the soccer experience. But the simple fact that so many do play soccer at schools raises interesting questions about the American system.

The underlying philosophy of American schools has long held that whether a child is destined to be a business executive, a pipe fitter, a nurse, a soldier, or a World Cup player, he or she should be prepared broadly for both individual opportunities and social responsibilities. The way that philosophy is enacted is often deeply flawed, unequal, and contested, but in concept the U.S. school system is premised on balancing meritocracy and community. American schools promote for individuals the idea that anything is possible with hard work and dedication — that every child should be given every opportunity to cultivate their talents and to achieve their dreams — while simultaneously promoting the idea of America as a melting pot — offering shared socialization experiences to a diverse populace and serving as a hub for community interaction and identity. Much of the globally strange positioning of soccer in the United States can be understood as a byproduct of that broader philosophy.

From this perspective, it is useful to think of the peculiar intertwining of the U.S. soccer system and the U.S. school system as related to broader American tensions between individualism and democracy. Of course, formal analyses of these tensions, starting famously with Alexis de Tocqueville and continuing in much contemporary social science, rarely have anything to say about soccer in particular. Yet, sport and leisure more generally do offer useful sites for investigation. In his well-known 1995 essay and 2000 book Bowling Alone, for example, sociologist Robert Putnam took his title from the fact that “between 1980 and 1993 the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10 percent, while league bowling decreased by 40 percent” (70). Putnam saw this shift towards more solitary leisure pursuits as a sign of significant concern for the balance of individualism and community in the U.S. At least one response to Putnam, however, argued that mass participation in youth soccer leagues could be thought of as an evolving substitute for the communal function of bowling leagues: Nicholas Lemann titled his essay in The Atlantic Monthly “Kicking in Groups,” taking heart in the fact that U.S. Youth Soccer “has 2.4 million members, up from 1.2 million ten years ago and from 127,000 twenty years ago” (25).

While the rest of Lemann’s essay is not really about soccer — focusing more broadly on how social science conceptualizes the changing dynamics of social capital in American society — the present chapter will specifically consider the U.S. soccer system and its globally peculiar relationship with the U.S. school system as related to broader American ideologies and experiences. The first part offers a brief social history of sports in American schools, with particular attention to the relatively recent integration of soccer in an era of increasing globalization. The second part examines recent attempts to disentwine elite youth soccer from the school system, and the ensuing controversy from a requirement that elite players not play for high school teams. The third part draws on field research on youth development and sports in two distinct high schools to consider how two particular youth players experience the American soccer system. In the end, the essay will argue that each of these topics illustrates ways the peculiarities of soccer in the U.S. are explained by (and simultaneously help to explain) Americans underlying belief in sport as a space to balance the sometimes conflicting values of individualism and community.

**Soccer vs. Schools: A Brief History of Sports in American Education**

In his sociological overview of sports in American schools, Jay Coakley notes that “the United States is the only nation in the world where it is taken
for granted that high schools and colleges sponsor and fund interschool or varsity sports programs” (472). Though there have long been parallel community-based sport systems in the U.S. with large numbers of participants, school sports have traditionally held sway in the popular imagination and in community life. Soccer, however, has been a relative latecomer to the American school sports tradition. Though a few schools and universities have had versions of soccer programs since the origins of formal school sports in the late nineteenth century, school soccer only became relatively mainstream in the last forty years. Nevertheless, its recent popularity is undergirded by much of the same social history as other games and activities.

Most accounts of the globally distinct school sports system in the U.S. start with the growth of university level sports in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Andrei Markovits and Steven Hellerman, in their book *Offside: Soccer & American Exceptionalism*, argue that the broad popularity of sports at colleges and universities came down to the distinct social role of universities in American culture:

On the European continent, sports never entered the realm of the universities, since these were seen as research institutions, training grounds for state bureaucrats, or domains of the church. In all three cases, they remained strictly in the realm of the mind and had little, if any, tolerance for pursuits of the body. In England, Oxbridge did in fact engage in organized and competitive sports as part of its students’ educational ethos. But this engagement remained confined to amateur, extracurricular, and purely a vocational pursuits, never leaving the realm of the gentlemanly. Not so in the United States. By dint of this country’s meritocratic ethos and the proliferation of its institutions of higher learning—itself a consequence of this meritocratic ethos—sports became an integral part of university life and thus of public identity [43].

This “meritocratic ethos” also helps explain other contributing forces to the inclusion of school sports in early twentieth century American education such as the “high school movement,” which vastly expanded access to secondary education, and the “progressive education movement,” which put an emphasis on educating the whole person—body and mind—through experiences both in and out of the classroom. Primary and secondary schools were also managing a large influx of immigrants, and public education took on an assimilative function that coincided with the growing popularity of sports as a tool for the positive socialization of youth. In fact, the first major interscholastic athletic league for primary and secondary schools in the U.S., the Public Schools Athletic League (PSAL) in New York City, was directed by Luther Gulick—who had been an influential early figure in the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and a prominent American promoter of “muscular Christianity.” In pursuing its mission to socialize and assimilate, according to Elliott

J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, “the PSAL explicitly stressed the values of ‘Duty,’ ‘Thoroughness,’ ‘Patriotism,’ ‘Honor,’ and ‘Obedience’” (176). The league proved extraordinarily popular, and by 1910, 17 other major U.S. cities had created their own interscholastic athletic leagues (Farrey 107).

The association between school sports and values such as “patriotism” also extended to regionalized allegiances. Markovits and Hellerman argue that school teams—particularly at the university level—offered a sense of imagined community within a diverse nation:

Being a Sooner fan in Oklahoma, a Husker fan in Nebraska, a Longhorn fan in Texas, a Wildcat fan in Kentucky, or a Wolverine fan in Michigan has been every bit the iconographic, spiritual, and affective equivalent to being an Arsenal supporter in North London, a Rangers fan in Glasgow, a Rapid supporter in the Hüteldorf district of Vienna, and a Barça fan in Barcelona. As in the case of major European soccer clubs with their clear identities, milieus, and networks, the football and basketball teams of American universities became essential representatives of the identity and culture of their respective regions, states, cities, and towns [43].

Of course, the contrast here between identification with American football or basketball teams and with European soccer teams highlights the distinct sporting foci of U.S. schools. For a variety of historical reasons Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s, despite sampling from global football codes that were still in early gestation, ended up developing their own version of football and marginalizing soccer as an immigrant’s game. Markovits and Hellerman do note, however, that school soccer has always been around in some form (sometimes played by schools as an alternative when American football was perceived as too rough). But soccer really only caught hold at the university level with the broader expansion of American higher education and college sports after World War II. Markovits and Hellerman found that while 86 colleges had varsity soccer programs in 1946, nearly 1,000 had varsity soccer by 1978 (123). That pattern quickly filtered down to the growth of soccer at the high school level.

Between 1972 and 2012 the estimated number of high school soccer players in the United States grew nearly tenfold: from 79,210 to 730,106 (National Federation of State High School Associations). The most dramatic portion of that growth came on the girls’ side. In 1972 the National Federation of State High School Associations documented 700 girls playing high school soccer at 28 schools; in 2012 that number had increased to 370,975 girls at 11,127 schools. Not coincidentally, 1972 is the year Title IX was included as part of the Education Amendments to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, mandating that: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from
participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving financial assistance. The original intention of Title IX had little to do with sports, but the particular history of sports being so closely linked with American education made school sports—primarily those at the high school and collegiate level—an important symbolic site for the application of Title IX. This application has associated with a massive increase in all types of high school sports participation by girls, from just under 300,000 participants in the 1971-1972 school year to over 3,200,000 in the 2011-2012 school year (National Federation of State High School Associations).

In specific regard to soccer, it is worth noting that the significant increase in girls participation in American high schools associated with Title IX—while potentially distinct globally in ensuring participation opportunities—has also corresponded with an increase in boys’ high school soccer that is nearly as dramatic: during the 1971-1972 school year there were almost 80,000 boys playing soccer at 2,290 American high schools; during the 2011-2012 school year there were over 410,000 boys playing soccer at 1,600 high schools. In other words, forces well beyond Title IX have combined to increase the popularity of soccer in American schools.2

One such force is the popularity of soccer in relatively wealthy suburban communities where school sports offer social status and social capital. As Lisa Swanson described in an ethnographic study of suburban “soccer moms,” upper-middle class American parents often devote much time and energy towards soccer “to produce cultural capital in and through their sons. As a result, these well-respected, skillful, team-oriented soccer players could then effectively gain what the mothers believed to be necessary social capital, that is, placement on the high school team” (412). In other words, for a portion of American soccer players, playing soccer is the ultimate goal—in the same way as a professional contract might be the goal for a South American, African, or European youth.

At the same time, however, globalization and immigration have also meant that American schools still serve an assimilative function. But unlike the period of high school expansion in the first half of the twentieth century, when schools focused primarily on “Americanizing” immigrants, recent efforts at integration involve more complex tensions between assimilation and respect for diversity. In this context, school soccer can serve an important mediating function: immigrant children can play a game they know and love from their birthplace, while also engaging in the distinctly American ritual of school sports. One recent journalistic book on a successful American high school team comprised largely of Hispanic immigrants, The Boys from Little Mexico by Steve Wilson, even carried the subtitle A Season Chasing the American Dream. Such a book would be much harder to write about an elite club team detached from the U.S. school soccer system.

Ironically, the relatively inclusive nature of a high school soccer team and its ostensibly educational mission—the very things that can make high school sports emblematic of “the American dream”—often mean that elite athletic performance is secondary. School soccer seasons are short and compartmentalized within the school year. High school teams tend to draw players with a wide range of ability levels. School coaches are often teachers or counselors rather than soccer specialists. In general, the particular history and social positioning of U.S. school soccer makes it incompatible with the increasingly globalized professional game—and has put American school soccer on a collision course with its competition.

Schools vs. Clubs: Debating Models of Youth Development

The U.S. Soccer Federation, in its role as overseer of the U.S. national team program, has long struggled to reconcile the popularity of American school sports with the efficiency of professionalized talent development. In many other parts of the world where community based professional clubs have a vested stake in developing young talent, national federations can rely on extant structures to identify the best players.3 In the U.S. where a limited professional soccer scene has historically put little emphasis on youth programs, the talent development system has traditionally relied on a hodgepodge of schools, youth clubs, and state level select teams (as per the U.S. Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program).4 And while the popularity of school soccer teams offers wide breadth for a talent pool, it does not offer the depth necessitated by global competition. American school sports, as described above, operate with their own history and rules which are founded on the intention (however imperfectly actuated) to integrate sports with education rather than with professionalized talent development.5

In 2007, the U.S. Soccer Federation, in hopes of providing more depth for a relatively narrow segment of elite youth players, organized a group of sixty-four elite youth soccer clubs in twenty-four states and the District of Columbia into a “U.S. Soccer Development Academy.” The stated intention was to intensify training, scouting, and competition for the very best Under-16 and Under-18 players.6 American professional teams in Major League Soccer (MLS), along with some lower level professional teams, soon added “academy”
teams as part of the national program and the season grew to ten months to model a European professional season. While this system caused significant upheaval in the American youth soccer world, which had traditionally organized competition between youth club teams at the state level with time off for the high school season, it was not until 2012 when the program made national headlines by requiring academy club participants to not play high school soccer.

The ensuing controversy was both implicitly and explicitly about American identity in the context of globalization. An article by Tod Palmer in the *Kansas City Star* newspaper, for example, cited U.S. National Team coach Jürgen Klinsmann—himself raised in the German professional system—as an advocate of the exclusive ten month schedule: "This is the model that the best countries around the world use for their programs ... and I think it makes perfect sense that we do, as well." Palmer then immediately juxtaposed that perspective with that of a local high school coach in Kansas City: "We [in the U.S.] are a unique culture and the whole concept of high school soccer and the concept of high school in general is very different here.... It's a very special part of a young person's development. I'm not convinced taking that away from a young player is the best thing."

In explaining their decision through responses on their website to "Frequently Asked Questions" about the 10 month academy season starting in 2012, the U.S. Soccer Federation was quite explicit about trying to adapt to global norms:

> From the start of the Academy program, our goal has been to close the gap with the top footballing nations in the world. The 10-month schedule, from September through June, or July based on postseason play, is what a typical elite soccer player's schedule looks like around the rest of the world. ... We are competing in a global marketplace. We are not just trying to prepare elite players for college and the pro ranks in the United States; we are trying to prepare players to compete against the best clubs and international teams from around the world. Therefore, our standard has to be higher.

Two things are worth noting in this explanation. One is the use of the term "footballing nations" without reference to "soccer"—when the latter is not only the American convention, but is actually in the name of the USSF as an organization. Identifying as a "footballing nation" eschews the notion of American soccer as historically distinct in favor of perceived global integration (though, it is worth noting, other nations ranging from South Africa to Australia also tend to prefer the term "soccer" over "football"). Second, the explanation highlights how U.S. Soccer sees youth development as a matter of "competing in a global marketplace." In this framing youth players are not people learning a game; they are commodities being prepared for competitive exchange—which is particularly significant when elite soccer clubs in the United States have long been an expensive endeavor funded by participation fees (development academy coach Alecko Eskandarian noted in an on-line article for *Sports Illustrated* that "some non-MLS academies charge each player more than $5,000 per year, and that's without the cost of travel"). These clubs support a substantial industry of "professional" youth coaches, and the newer MLS academy teams have an obvious financial interest in finding top talents.

The distinction between youth players as individuals judged by their character and education and youth players as commodities judged by their sporting talents is an embedded tension in the "schools vs. clubs" debate. In the case of the Development Academy decision to ban participants from high school soccer, the National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA) took the position opposite from U.S. Soccer by emphasizing character and education rather than athletic talent. In direct response to the U.S. Soccer Federation and the Development Academy, the NSCAA posted speaking points on its web-site that listed benefits of high school soccer including:

- Experiences & values last a lifetime
- Family environment is incapable of being replicated by clubs and provides unparalleled camaraderie
- Individual player development as extension of the classroom/integral to education of the whole child
- High school sports [are] often the fabric of community identity & pride
- Foreign exchange students from countries lacking high school sports find American high school sports environment exhilarating
- Nations without organized high school sports are envious of American high school experience & opportunities

Though the NSCAA speaking points offer no evidence to support claims such as other nations being "envious" of the American high school system, the organization is clearly drawing on a mythology of that system focused less on the sport itself and more on a distinctively American experience (further evidenced by citing in one word "Tradition" as a benefit of high school soccer). Another high school soccer coach quoted by Tod Palmer in the *Kansas City Star* was even more explicit: "My concern [about the development academy model] is that, at the end of the day, it's going to be only about soccer.... At the high school level, the focus isn't just on soccer but also the development as a student-athlete and human being. That's where the kids will be missing out."
Part of the tension here comes down to a question of defining youth development in the context of soccer—or really in any sport. Is youth development about maximizing specialized talents, or is it about gathering experiences that serve both educational and social functions? Is the goal of the U.S. soccer system to produce the most elite players possible, or is it to give a positive experience to the most possible people? The simple geographic reality is that the 80 current Development Academy clubs reside in less than half of U.S. states, whereas the more than 11,000 high schools that offer boys soccer in the U.S. reside in every state and city in the country.

But the other part of the tension in the “schools vs. clubs” controversy is the sense that in its elite structures the U.S. soccer system is moving closer to global models of professionalized talent development and away from American “traditions” emphasizing education. At the elite level, the U.S. soccer system is actively trying to disentwine from the U.S. school system. Yet, from the time of the founding of the U.S. Soccer Development Academy in 2007 to 2012—when the high school ban was imposed—the number of boys and girls playing soccer in American high schools still went up from 715,631 to 782,732 (National Federation of State High School Associations). Statistics such as these suggest that at the broader societal level, it may be harder to disentwine the U.S. soccer system from the U.S. school system than any de-contextualized analysis would assume. It may be that American soccer players still appreciate ways the U.S. soccer system allows them to meld their individual talents with broader community traditions.

Professional vs. Fun: Individual and Communal Experiences of High School Soccer

So do American soccer players actually appreciate the peculiarities of the U.S. soccer system? I had a chance to think through some such questions during the 2008–2009 school year through a mixed-methods research project undertaken in two distinct high school communities. The project was oriented by broader questions about the role of extracurricular activities ranging from community service and arts activities to sports teams towards youth development in different community contexts. For reasons of personal interest, one particular point of inquiry was with soccer teams—including observing and documenting a full season with a girls’ soccer team at each of the two schools, and undertaking intensive case studies with a representative player on each team. Though these teams and players did not necessarily have explicit per-
spectives on soccer as a global game, many of the tensions in the U.S. soccer system were implicit in their experiences.

The first thing abundantly evident from spending a season at two distinct high schools and talking in-depth with two very different players is that high school soccer is not just one thing. The schools were both Catholic high schools in a large metropolitan area in the western United States, but they were intentionally chosen to learn about the role that social class plays in adolescents’ developmental and educational experiences. So where one school was a reasonably large suburban school (here called SHS) serving a relatively homogenous upper-middle-class community, the other was a smaller and more diverse urban school (here called UHS) with a mission of serving students from lower income families who might not otherwise have access to a college preparatory education. Both were good schools where the staff and families generally worked hard to ensure their children reached their potential—but as with so much of the American education system, the resources and opportunities available towards those ends differed dramatically.

The differences in resources meant that players on the soccer teams at each school sometimes seemed to have little in common besides the shared goal of putting a round ball in the back of a net. SHS was known throughout the region for its prowess in sports, and it had the facilities and staff to support that prowess. At the end of a Fall school day hundreds of students would rush from classrooms to locker-rooms, changing into practice gear provided through a sponsorship from a major national sportswear company, getting treatment in a well-appointed training room, and congregating with teammates to learn which of the school’s four grass or two lighted all-weather turf fields would host their practice for the day. State championships were a tacit expectation at SHS, and the school attracted some of the most talented athletes in the region. UHS, in contrast, had no athletic facilities of its own other than a too-small gym that doubled as a lunch room and the school day was oriented by a workplace internship program designed both to help fund students’ tuition and to give students exposure to professional environments that were often otherwise unfamiliar. Thus, at the end of a UHS school day students dispersed widely, with most of the athletes having to catch a bus to whatever city park was hosting their practice for the day and others having to skip practice entirely for the sake of their jobs. The sports teams were generally quite average; the athletes ranged from rank beginners to competent recreational players with one or two more serious athletes mixed in somewhat randomly.

Underneath these obvious differences, however, lay the shared foundations of American school sports. At SHS, for example, school administrators
and coaches intentionally discussed soccer as one of many "co-curricular" (rather than "extra-curricular") activities in a way that belied the professional seeming environs. Players were encouraged to play other sports, or to participate in other types of activities ranging from choir to community service, and the main sporting challenge was to mesh talented players from different club teams into a cohesive unit that would represent the school proudly. And while UHS teams did not draw from the same talent pool, UHS administrators did explicitly promote sports as a way to generate "school spirit" and build community while simultaneously offering students a chance to engage competitively outside the classroom. Soccer at UHS was just one part of a palette of offerings designed to develop individuals within and through the school community. And at both schools the only potential post-high school goal for most sports endeavors was not a professional career but a college scholarship.

Amy Shorter, the pseudonym of a SHS soccer player, was well on her way to achieving that goal. Amy had excelled at all levels of American youth soccer; she was a regular on the state Olympic Development Program team, a captain for an elite club team, and an important midfielder for her state champion high school team. She had also "verbally committed" as a high school sophomore to attend a university with a highly ranked women's soccer program and would have been within her rights to aspire to more. Yet, she expressed no interest in playing the game beyond the university level either as a professional or as an international; for Amy, as for many elite American players, college soccer was an end of its own.

In some ways, soccer itself was only one of many possible avenues where Amy could have devoted her attentions. Growing up in an upper-middle class suburban family, she and her two siblings were immersed in a variety of activities from piano to dance but had a particular affinity for sports. At one point, Amy's mother explained with both pride and exhaustion, Amy and her two-years-older sister "played six sports, did ballet, tap and jazz and took piano lessons all at the same time!" Where Amy's older sister ended up focusing on volleyball, now playing with a prominent major university team, Amy herself whittled her focus down to soccer after her freshman year of high school—though she thinks she could have just as well continued in volleyball or basketball or several of her other sporting endeavors.

One reason she decided to focus on soccer was how much she enjoyed her club team, which drew elite players from around the region and had a professional coach who had worked with the same core group for nearly six years. When Amy talked about her favorite experiences in any type of activities, she focused first on winning tournaments with her club team—many of which required extensive travel to other states and regions of the country.

Further, when asked to identify people outside her family who have influenced her positively, she immediately endorsed her club soccer coach: "he's been my coach for a long time, like five or six years, and he has been really influential in my life.... I guess he has changed my perspective about soccer and how the world is... he taught us a lot about good leadership, persistence and never giving up and courage and all that stuff. And how to deal with people and how to deal with problems. And it's not just telling us but the way he acts and the way he treats us."

When Amy talked about high school soccer she took on a much less reverential tone: "I mean it's obviously a fun experience. It's different cause you are playing with people from your school, people from other places, but it is kind of fun cause you get together with people you usually play against. And that's kind of cool. And it's also kind of cool to have your whole school come out and watch you and stuff like that. So I mean it's different atmospheres but..." [I] definitely cherish the club moments more. I don't know why; it's just more deep for me I guess."

One clue as to Amy's attitude towards high school soccer came from her parents' description of her club coach: [he] "just thinks high school soccer is worthless.... He thinks they should all go to some soccer academy and be educated through the soccer academy. I don't know if I am using the right word, but it would be because that's the way it is in other countries." Amy's mother had mixed feelings about that model: "that's all good and fine but I kind of like it the American way.... The social camaraderie part I think is great with high school sports. And, you know athletically, I don't think it hurts. At SHS it doesn't hurt." Amy's father, despite having himself been a collegiate basketball player, was less enamored with high school sports. But rather than focusing on an academy approach, her father focused on an interest in soccer as a tool towards a broader ideal: "When I look at Amy's development through soccer, is the end result that she kicks a ball well to another person? Absolutely not. And I think she sees— I mean she loves that part of it but she sees well beyond that so I think for her it wouldn't matter what the activity is. The leadership and using the gifts that God gave you to make everybody better around you in all ways would come out no matter what the activity was."

Megan Poway, the pseudonym of a soccer player at UHS, would likely agree with both Amy's mother and father: she loved the social camaraderie part of high school soccer, but also saw soccer as just one of many school-based activities she found worthwhile. Megan had played recreational soccer much of her life, but never had ambitions of playing at any kind of elite level: "I always played soccer for fun, not because I thought I would get a college scholarship or go be an amazing soccer player in the world—I just did it..."
because it was fun, so I never saw the need to go join a professional, or not a professional but, like, a select team." Megan's conflating of select club teams with "professional teams," and the contrast with her own experience of playing "for fun," is meaningful. Even as a sophomore in high school she recognized that the soccer world is bifurcated between the "professional" and the "fun," and her own interests were firmly on the fun side of the divide.

Yet, Megan had wanted to attend UHS in significant part because it did offer competitive high school sports—her previous school had been an arts magnet that did not sponsor any competitive teams. Her parents had also long encouraged Megan to be active and engage in a variety of activities—her father had coached one of her childhood recreational soccer teams, and her mother had helped organize activities at the school as a way to volunteer and be involved with her children. But they had encouraged her to sample activities widely and saw no need for Megan to specialize in any particular sport. In fact, while the family was stable and supportive, they were of decidedly modest means and did not push Megan towards any particular professional ambitions: her father worked as a retail appraiser, and her mother had stayed home with their children due partly to never having found meaningful employment. When they thought of Megan's future they were skeptical that university level education, given the growing costs, would be a wise investment (her older brother had skipped higher education, eventually ending up in the military). Megan herself was interested in going to a university, but sports and soccer seemed to play no part in her thinking about that future.

Instead, through her broad palate of high school activity participation Megan had realized that her true passion was more for theater and drama rather than for soccer. In school she had also become a student-leader for an environmental club focused on promoting "green" initiatives, had been involved with school-based outdoors expeditions, and was an active member of the school track team. Her parents were just happy that she was involved with constructive activities of any sort, and while they enjoyed watching soccer themselves the game was decidedly secondary to their goal for Megan to be engaged and happy. When I talked with Megan's parents her mother, who had emigrated to the U.S. as a young adult from Europe, emphasized wanting all her kids to be involved in whatever activities they could find simply because in her own childhood she remembered feeling "totally bored."

Megan did feel engaged and happy with her high school soccer experience, but mostly because it "became a chance to hang out with my friends and make friends.... I never got any epiphanies or anything from playing soccer. I don't know if I'm supposed to or not?" When asked if there was anything she would change about her experience she again focused on friends and community: "I really wish we had a home field so ... people could come to our games and it could be more, you know, everybody's rooting for us."

The reality, however, was that the UHS team was not particularly good and played in a not particularly good league—girls like Megan played the game because it was a fun part of high school life, not because of competitive ambitions or a passion for the game. Megan herself, exasperated with questions about the deeper meaning of her soccer participation, described the high school experience just exactly as it was: "we ran around the field trying to kick a ball and that is fun."

Ultimately, Megan Poway and Amy Shorter were on opposite ends of the American soccer pyramid. Megan was a recreational player with limited opportunities who enjoyed the game as one small part of a diverse palate of childhood activities and had few ambitions for her soccer career. Amy was an elite player with considerable resources who had devoted much of her adolescence to the game in a quest for both personal development and future prospects. Both had other things in their lives they found more meaningful than high school soccer — theater for Megan, club soccer for Amy—but both also thought of their high school experience as a "fun" way to engage a community. Importantly, however, neither girl thought about high school soccer as being about actual athletic performance and neither particularly cared about whether the U.S. national team was competitive at the World Cup.

Both Amy and Megan valued competition and wanted their teams to win, but the girls, their parents, and their coaches all talked about their high school team as about something other than on-field performance. In fact, when Amy's SHS coach—who was among the most successful high school soccer coaches in the state—addressed the question of whether there was anything particular about soccer or sports as related to his players' experiences he explained: "I don't think it matters a lot whether a kid is in ... drama [or] art or robotics... or whatever and ... it's the same thing between baseball and soccer. You know to me it's that commitment, that involvement, that commitment to get better, that learning to work with other people, that leadership potential...." School soccer in the United States is, in other words, about lots of things. But even for the participants themselves it is not really about soccer.

**U.S. vs. World: Negotiating American Identity on School Soccer Fields**

So if school soccer in the United States is not really about soccer, then what is it about? The argument here is that school soccer, and school sports
more generally, is best understood as a peculiar American “tradition”—one of many globally strange and potentially inefficient ways of working out the classic American tension between individualism and community. In the history of American school sports, in contemporary controversies pitting high school and club teams, and in the experiences of high school soccer players, the U.S. soccer system serves as a contested space where the global game mixes together with particularly American ideas about meritocracy and community. But that mix, like American identity itself, is far from a static blend.

This essay began by noting that U.S. national soccer teams have long been globally distinct for the number of players who have invested heavily in education—most have university educations rather than lengthy professional apprenticeships. But that is too is changing. Whereas seven of the first eleven on the aforementioned 2010 team had attended a university, the starters for the 1990 U.S. Men’s World Cup team—the first U.S. team to participate in the World Cup since 1950—had all attended a university (the majority for the full four years). Perhaps not coincidentally, the 2010 team was significantly better on the field than the 1990 team, which lost its opening game in embarrassing fashion (1–5) to a Czechoslovakia team stocked with seasoned professionals. The 2010 team, in contrast, advanced to the second round (topping England in the group stage) only to lose in extra time to Ghana. Even on the women’s side, the professional apprenticeship model that predominates globally may be starting to encroach on a school soccer system often lauded as responsible for much of the U.S. women’s success on the global stage. In 2012 U.S. U-20 midfielder Lindsey Horan became one of the first elite female American players to forgo university soccer, signing directly out of high school with Paris Saint-Germain.

These changes at the elite level, the broader shift away from schools towards professional apprenticeships befitting the specialization encouraged by globalization, will almost certainly benefit the competitiveness of United States national teams. If more elite youth players dispense with high school and university soccer in favor of intensive specialization and professionalization from a young age, the U.S. national teams will most likely be able to find eleven excellent players to compete in future World Cups. Like much of the contemporary global economy, however, that system may also produce some deleterious by-products: only eleven players can step on the World Cup field, and global competition for lucrative professional careers will only continue to grow. In bypassing schools the U.S. soccer system is improving its global competitiveness while risking what makes it American: its integration with broader goals of merging broad opportunity and diverse community. There is a way in which American players who opt out of school soccer may identify more with the game than with whatever it means to be American.

Amidst such shifts at the elite level, however, it is worth re-emphasizing that the total number of American youth playing in the globally strange school soccer system continues to rise. Much of that rise is attributable to the broader growth of soccer in the United States at all levels, but some of it is also about the enduring appeal of school sports in American education. From the early missionary zeal of those promoting sports as part of a broad and democratic education, to the challenges posed by elite development academies affiliated with professional clubs, to the diverse experiences of youth players in contemporary high schools, the peculiar American ideal of a school playing field as a space where individualism balances with community endures.

Notes
1. In describing the “high school movement,” Goldin and Katz note that in the 30 years between 1910 and 1940 the percentages of American 18-year-olds with high school diplomas went from 9 to more than 50—and attendance of at least some high school became the norm rather than the exception.
2. For more extensive discussion of related issues see Soccer in a Football World by David Wanterin.
3. Other countries do, of course, still employ national level training centers—such as the well-known “Clairefontaine” national technical center in France or St George’s Park National Football Centre in England.
4. Though the U.S. Soccer Federation did start funding a residency program in 1999 for members of the Under-17 and Under-16 boys national teams at the IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, that program only served approximately 40 players at a time.
5. It is clear, for example, that the three month season typical of a high school sport is not enough to significantly accelerate elite talent—but it is short enough to allow any one sport to be compartmentalized as part of a broader high school educational experience.
6. In 2012, the U.S. Soccer Federation also announced it would start an Under-13/14 division to start in the fall of 2013. At the time of this writing the specifics of this division are still being developed, so are not being discussed. The push to younger ages does, however, seem to fit the pattern of tension between American traditions and global trends towards increasing specialization.
7. For more extensive discussion of related issues see The Most Expensive Game in Town by Mark Hyman.

Works Cited


