

US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program A Brief Perspective

I would like to offer a brief perspective on the current standing of the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program ("ODP") in the changing national soccer landscape... First, a little information about the often-confusing structure of youth soccer in the United States.

American Soccer Structure

FIFA, founded in 1904, is the world governing body for soccer. It is based in Zurich, Switzerland and is the organization responsible for organizing the FIFA World Cups for men, women and youth players. FIFA is comprised of 208 member countries and recognizes only one National Governing Body (NGB) for each member association.

US Soccer, founded in 1913, is based in Chicago and is the NGB for soccer in the United States. Underneath US Soccer in the national pyramid are the professional, amateur and youth bodies.

The youth members consist of US Youth Soccer (founded in 1974), with around 3 million members, including OYSAN (1977) as one of the 55 state associations; US Club Soccer (2000), with around 275,000 members; SAY Soccer (1967), with around 150,000 members; and AYSO (1964), with around 600,000 members. SAY and AYSO are primarily recreation-based organizations.

The United Soccer Leagues (1986) straddles the professional and youth levels, with the Super-Y League (1999) functioning as the youth division with around 15,000 players.

In Ohio North, the OYSAN State League is US Youth Soccer sanctioned, while the Lodi-based teams are primarily registered under the US Club Soccer banner.

Player Identification

The US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program was founded in 1977 as an identification vehicle for the US Soccer Youth National Teams program. Given that very few players actually reach the top level, the program quickly evolved into 1) a college identification network and 2) a developmental opportunity for regional and state-level players.

As a general operating principle, US Soccer will scout potential national team players wherever they can be found. When US Youth Soccer ODP was the only national identification program, the US Soccer task was quite simple and the fall inter-regional events served as the key identification events.

With the addition of the Super-Y League ODP (2003) and US Club Soccer's id2 (2004), the national team identification process became a little more diluted, a little more political ("our system is better than yours"), and a lot more territorial. Today, it is not uncommon

for players to attend "ODP" identification events staged by US Youth Soccer and/or SYL and/or id2 during the same calendar year. The net effect is that US Soccer scouts tend to see the same faces in different places.

US Soccer Training Centers

Because their primary interest is in potential youth national team players, US Soccer created a "Training Centers" program in 2010 which invites the top players to train and be tracked by US Soccer National Staff.

These centers take place in major populations centers and OYSAN routinely recommends players to participate in these events.

From the US Soccer website....

U.S. Soccer Training Centers are single day, invitational training sessions run by U.S. Soccer staff for elite players in key soccer markets. Training Centers are open to the top players from any team, club or organization at no cost to the player. The purpose of the Training Center program is to identify the best players for the U.S. Soccer Youth National Team (YNT) program.

US Soccer National Team Selections

Boys

In an effort to improve the youth player development environment, US Soccer created a national Development Academy (DA) program in 2007 . In Ohio, the Internationals and Columbus Crew field academy teams. The league encompasses U-16 and U-18 divisions.

Over the past four years, the evolution of the US Soccer DA has changed the selection dynamic for the Boy's YNT. Only the U-14 national team pool continues to be based heavily on selections from the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program regional camp. For example, of the 38 players named to attend a U-14 boy's national team camp in May, 2011, 30 were identified through the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Process. Nine of the players were from Region II and one was from OYSAN.

At U-15 and above, the DA scouting system identifies and tracks each player for possible inclusion into the national pools at each age group.

The role of ODP for boy's U-15 and above has therefore changed significantly from a primary Youth National Team identification process to a complementary process for players who live in states without a DA club, or who chose not to compete in the DA. For these players, the Training Centers, regional camps, and the fall inter-regional events serve as the most important opportunities for YNT exposure and referral.

Girls

At the 2010 inter-regional event in Florida, no fewer than eleven YNT team coaches attended the week-long event to scout and track US Youth Soccer ODP players. The first Girl's YNT selections occur at U-15 and these players are selected primarily from the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program regional camp.

Without a Development Academy for girls, the inter-regional events remain an important event for players aspiring to the YNT program.

So, does the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program still work for Ohio North?

In 2010/11..

There were four OYSAN girls and two OYSAN boys involved with the US Soccer YNT program. All were initially identified through the US Youth Soccer regional camp process.

There were a total of 39 OYSAN players (26 boys and 13 girls) identified as US Youth Soccer regional ODP level players. Of these, 19 were invited to compete for a US Youth Soccer Regional Team.

In the DA era, the opportunities for OYSAN boys to be involved at the regional level have actually improved, while the number of OYSAN players (boys and girls) named to YNT's has reached an all-time high.

In Summary...

The opportunities for OYSAN girls to advance through the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development process remain as positive as ever. There are lots of talented young players in OYSAN - and in our 14-state region - who continue to participate in, and benefit from ODP and the very top players are being identified, one way or another. The ODP process also continues to provide valuable developmental opportunities for the many young players who may evolve into top players over time.

While the DA has attracted many of OYSAN's top boys, the pool is large and many other strong players now have the opportunity to make a state team and benefit from the challenges of regional competition. The pathway to being a top player often takes many twists and is not always predicated on being identified as a top young prospect. Given the changed mission, ODP is now providing non-DA players with excellent opportunities to also develop into capable adult players.