

MISSING THE POINT



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PHOTOS BY RUSH UNION



These days, every time you turn around you hear about a new travel league, and layers of competition that are being offered in youth soccer. Organizations are reeling people in on the promise of “next level play” and “exclusive opportunities.” Though newer to soccer parents, it’s a reality in all youth sports now. Leagues, tournaments, clinics, camps, private training, ID programs... you name it, there’s an offer out there that promises (and costs) more than what you may actually get out of it.

I work full time in youth sports that has become a multi-billion-dollar industry over the last decade. Instead of streamlining a process for player development, the landscape has become more fragmented with varying layers of competition being offered. Predatory in some ways. Many of these come at a higher cost, including further travel, and missed days of school. For what benefit? And, more importantly for whose benefit?

Families are being sold on the premise that to play at the highest level, and to play beyond the youth level, their child needs to be playing in these “special” leagues. “This is where the college coaches will be scouting” is something I hear all the time. The harsh reality is that only 1.5% of high school athletes make it to the college level and fewer make it at the professional level.

High level play is enticing to young athletes, and their parents. Imagine the pride seeing your child play at the next level. But don’t get sold. Unfortunately, there are 8-10 leagues that could be named and not everyone can be considered to have that top 1% of players. What this means is that we now have second, third, or even fourth tier teams now paying over-inflated costs to find competition that

quite frankly they can find in their own backyard. Parents and players experiencing FOMO are investing time, energy, and lots of money to ultimately discover their community team may have been the best route to take.

What happened to playing close to home, as part of your neighborhood team or competing with your classmates and sense of community? I think we are missing the point of youth sports if you are truly not in that top 1%. Let’s face it, exceptional athletes are rare and are easy to identify, even outside of the fancy high-priced camps. Development is one thing, but falling prey to scouting, “looks” and promises that come with a high price tag mean missing out on family dinners, community leagues, and local coaching.

When families are searching for leagues and programs to invest their time and resources into, please don’t be fooled into the “travel experience” and sold on “we play in these events” and “your child will get exposure.” Organizations should be able to articulate how they will help your child grow as a player on and off their field.







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There should always be a focus on what team sports bring to the development of our children. Friendships will outlast a sport, and connection to a team or group can provide a powerful and much needed support system for our children. Teams create bonds that are lifelong and in the teenage years, those teams can help our children get through obstacles that we, as adults, didn't face at the same age.

Team social events and watching our children enjoy their teammates off the field will prove to be just as important as the game that happens on their field.

I was recently reading an article by the Changing the Game Project that highlighted the compromise between development and exposure... and let's be candid, if you are getting exposure but lacking on the player development aspect, players will never reach their potential and be able to advantage of the college or pro scouts who may be watching them.

When looking for a community program to get involved with, families should inquire about the real reasons certain programs are offered. Do they offer programming or support that goes beyond soccer training? An investment in Mental Health? Or College applications? Or Parent education? At Rush Union (and some others), we are proud to keep programming close to home, bring travel expenses to a minimum and allow families to either put that time and resources into additional training opportunities or invest it back into family time. As a parent, are you asking the right questions when looking for the right fit?

After all, youth sports are supposed to be an extension of our community and focus on the development of our children, that is the point!

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