Comparing Practices of USA Soccer Against a Global Model for Integrated Development of Mass and High Performance Sport

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Abstract 2012-315

Saturday, May 26, 2012

4:05 PM

20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Salon C)

The US Women's soccer team could be considered the most successful FIFA World Cup team since the World Cup was first organized in 1991. The US Women placed 1st in 1991, 3rd in 1995, 1st in 1999, 3rd in 2003 and 2007, and 2nd in 2011. However, the US Men's team ranked 18th in 2011, placed 23rd in 1990, 13th in 1994, 32nd in 1998, 8th in 2002, 25th in 2006, and 12th in 2010. At the mass participation level, 7.6% of the US population play soccer, compared with Germany's 19.8%. This study was designed to help and improve international performance as well increase soccer participation in the US.

Over 200 sources of literature on general (e.g., De Bosscher et al., 2006 & 2010; Fetisov, 2005; Green & Houlihan, 2005 & 2008; Isaev, 2002; Riordan, 1978, 1989 & 1991; Tan & Green, 2008) and soccer-specific (e.g., Buehler et al., 2007; Christensen, 2009; Matuszewski, 2010; Vaeyens et al., 2004; Vessell, 2010; Zafer & Cimen, 2011) sport delivery systems from 28 Australasian, North and South American, Western and Eastern European countries were analyzed to construct a globally applicable model of high performance soccer integrated with mass participation, comprising of the following seven elements and three levels:

Micro level (operations, processes, and methodologies for development of individual athletes):

1. Talent search and development.
2. Advanced athlete support - Meso level (infrastructures, personnel, and services enabling sport programs).
3. Training centers.
4. Competition systems.
5. Intellectual services - Macro level (socio-economic, cultural, legislative, and organizational).
6. Partnerships with supporting agencies.
7. Balanced and integrated funding and structures of mass and elite sport.

The above model was used to design a questionnaire of 54 statements reflecting desired practices. Examples of the survey statements by element are:

1. Young soccer players are trained based on guidelines for multiple development stages recommended by US Soccer, and USSF.
2. Player career is prolonged by medical personnel knowledgeable in soccer.
3. Training centers provide specialized facilities and equipment for each age and level of participation.
4. US Soccer & USSF attempt to integrate professional and amateur tournaments into a progressive plan of competitions gradually preparing athletes for peak performance at "majors" (i.e., World Cup, Superliga, North American Soccer League, FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup), and the Olympic and Paralympic Games.
5. Research results are well communicated to coaches (e.g., by research institutes, universities, USSF and US Soccer).
6. Cooperation with agencies outside of sport industry (e.g., medical, scientific, military, philanthropic and sponsoring organizations, lotteries) is in place.

7. A multi-stage system of elite soccer player qualification is integrated with a system of fitness tests for mass participants.

The 54 statements were validated by 12 international experts, including executives from sport governing bodies, academics who published on high performance and sport development, and soccer coaches and administrators. The survey samples of 1,000 soccer professionals’ email addresses were collected from various sources, including: US Soccers’ web page, college and university athletics web pages, and high school and club soccer team databases. Fully completed questionnaires were returned by 124 coaches for a response rate of 12.4%. Additionally, 6 regional US Soccer administrators were interviewed on the 7 elements of the model to suggest possible soccer system improvements.

After outlining the key areas for improvement based on opinions of soccer coaches and administrators, the presentation will focus on possible advancements of the most vital mechanisms for integration of mass and elite soccer in the US, particularly the uniform qualification, education and award systems for athletes and coaches across all participation levels as well as a national network of schools where academic education and player services are integrated with soccer training for all appropriate ages. These schooling conditions are emerging at such training centers as IMG academies in Florida and are to become available and affordable to all talented players across the US. Relevant international practices available for transfer to the US will be discussed.