

The Connecticut Youth Soccer Landscape

By William Whittaker

Youth soccer in the state of Connecticut has experienced tremendous growth over the years. With this growth parents and players are faced with a wide array of options when it comes to player development opportunities. The following outlines the different levels of youth soccer in the state of Connecticut, as well as offers some guidance for parents and players as they navigate through the process of selecting programs that best fit their goals and level of play.

REC Soccer:

Many towns offer a recreation soccer program, which in most cases is a player's first introduction to the game. While "Rec" soccer programs vary from town to town in regards to philosophy an organization, the common goal is for players to have fun, and develop some basic soccer and life skills, as well as begin to enjoy the game of soccer. Rec soccer is meant to be all inclusive and non-competitive soccer experience, and ideally should be offered from age 4 through 15 (Rec Plus). **Rec Plus** is an inter-town recreation league that has as its purpose to provide players the opportunity to play soccer in a non-competitive atmosphere that stresses fun and participation rather than winning and losing. It is a program that provides clubs that might not have the number of players sufficient to sponsor their own in town league a place for their players to continue to play. Rec Plus is a non-tryout based program that mirrors CJSA and FIFA rules to govern play and is open to all non-premier players from grades 3-9.

Typical Seasonal Costs: \$50 - \$200

Time / Travel Commitment:

8-10 weeks per season

One practice a week @ 45 min -75 min

One game a week

- In Town

- In Town

Travel Soccer:

In Connecticut, travel soccer begins at U9, and is a player and parent's first opportunity to experience the process of travel soccer tryouts. Travel teams are formed based on number of "qualified" players available, and depending on the policy of the town, are formed as "balanced" or "ability based" teams. At the U9 through U14 age groups town travel teams play both a fall and spring season. Beginning at U15, travel soccer is only offered in the spring. Travel soccer teams compete in league play within their districts, and may also elect to compete in Connecticut Cup Competition. Currently U9 through U11 compete in an 8v8 format with a full roster of up to 14 players, and U12 and up play an 11v11 format with a full roster of up to 25 players.

Typical Annual Costs: \$300 – \$1,000

Time / Travel Commitment:

10 – 11 weeks per season (possible winter indoor)

Two practices a week @ 75-90 min

One league game a week

Possible Connecticut Cup Games

Possible Seasonal Tournament

- In Town

- In District

- In State

- In State

"Premier" Soccer:

"Premier" Soccer in Connecticut officially begins in the fall of a player's U13 year. During the Fall season all teams in the state of Connecticut that have intentions of playing with "premier" status must compete in pool play to determine what "premier" division they will compete in for the U13 spring season. Based on the fall seasons results, the CJSA will form three "premier" divisions: Division I, II, and III. "Premier" soccer teams compete in divisional play around the entire state, as well as State Cup Competition beginning in the spring of the U13 year. **Note:** Many Clubs offer "premier" team opportunities at U11 and U12 ages. Very important to make sure the offerings are of a higher quality than current Travel experience.

Typical Annual Costs: \$1,500 – \$3,000

Time / Travel Commitment:

Fall – Winter – Spring U12 – U14

Winter – Spring U15 and up

Two / Three practices a week @ 90-120 min

One / Two games a week

State Cup Games

Seasonal Tournament

- TBD

- In Region

- In State

- In Region

“Developmental Premier” Programs:

This is where it can get confusing for players and parents. A little history may help. Several years back the CJSA made a decision to actually do away with a U12 “premier” team league play. This action prompted several of the well established “Premier” clubs to begin what they called Developmental training programs, so as to not lose ground with other regional clubs in regards to player development. Over the years, some of these “training” programs have evolved into “Developmental Premier Teams”, creeping down to the younger ages of U9, U10 and U11.

Typical Annual Costs: \$750 - \$1,500

Time / Travel Commitment:

Depends on program set up and philosophy

YPDP / ODP:

YPDP (Youth Player Development) is a player’s introduction to the State ODP (Olympic Development Program). Both of these programs are sponsored by the CJSA, and are designed to support the development of Connecticut’s most talented players as the first step in the US Youth National Team Selection process. Top players from each age group within a State’s ODP programs are invited to Regional ODP selection combines / tournaments. US youth national player pools are made up of the top regional players.

USSF Academy Programs:

The USSF (United States Soccer Federation) American soccer’s governing body developed the USSF Academy Program in 2007 to better develop and identify American youth soccer talent. The purpose of the USSF Academy program is to elevate the quality and consistency of high level development and competition within the world of youth soccer within the United States. More info can be found at www.ussoccer.com.

Helpful Advice:

Hopefully the above brief explanations are helpful in painting a clearer picture of the many different levels of soccer available to a youth player in the State of Connecticut. With so many options, come many choices and decisions about what is best for the player and family; a sometimes confusing and difficult process. Below are some guidelines that may make the selection process more manageable:

- *Engage your player in discussions about what they would like to get out of the game of soccer.*
 - *What personal goals do they have as a player, athlete, and student?*
 - *This stream of dialogue is critical in determining what the next step will be in the soccer development of your young athlete*
- *Gaining a perspective on what level of programming you are currently involved in, and determining whether or not your athlete is receiving the proper balance of challenge and success in the experience will also help to give you a sense of how to proceed.*
- *Once you and your athlete have determined that you are ready for another level of soccer, it is important to do your research on the many different program opportunities that exist, so as to make sure they are a proper fit for both your family and athlete. ASK QUESTIONS!!!*
 - *Speak with parents and players that have been through, or are currently enrolled in the program you are looking into*
 - *What type of experience does the program staff have?*
 - *What is the player to coach ratio?*
 - *What is the focus of the program, and underlying purpose and philosophy?*

- *Is the team you are interested in a single team with limited experience and resources to draw from, or is the team a part of a club that may offer deeper experience and resources?*
- *What is the overall reputation and track record of the club?*
- *What are the club's expectations in regards to cost, commitment, and player standards?*
- *Look to see if particular programs actually do what they claim*
 - *Remember "Premier" has Div. I, II and III. Many Div. II and III programs are not much more challenging than some higher level Travel teams, but still demand the same amount of time, travel, and money that a Div. I premier team requires.*

About the Author

William Whittaker is currently the Head Boy's soccer coach of the 2006 Class "L" State Champion New Canaan High School. Prior to his arrival at New Canaan, William served as a Special Assistant to the Athletic Director and the Dean of Students at Rye Country Day School, where he directed one of the top prep school soccer programs in New England. Before coming to Rye Country Day School, William served as the Athletic Director at Oakwood Friends School (OFS) in Poughkeepsie, NY, and a teacher and coach at King & Low Heywood Thomas School in Stamford, CT.

Mr. Whittaker has over 15 years of coaching experience at the state premier, high school, and youth soccer levels. He holds both a USSF 'A' License and NSCAA Advanced National Diploma, and has directed and coached at many soccer camps and clinics throughout New England. Along with his extensive coaching experience, William has played at the collegiate level in both NCAA Div. I and III. He was a four year letter winner on his high school team, and competed with Teams USA throughout Eastern and Western Europe, as well as the former Soviet Union.

Mr. Whittaker earned his Masters degree in Counseling Psychology from Fordham University in 1996. He spent the following two years developing and refining a counseling model for student-athletes, which has been presented at several state and regional conferences related to the field of sports psychology. This counseling model, along with his extensive coaching, educational, and administrative experiences, serves as the driving force in the development of successful soccer educational systems.

Please feel free to contact Bill Whittaker @ 203. 852. 6969 if you have any questions or comments related to the Youth Soccer Landscape in Connecticut.