

## A Parents' Guide to Soccer

What you and your child need to know about the sport that is sweeping the nation

By Moira McCarthy

It smelled like victory. My 9-year-old daughter, Leigh, was out in front as her soccer team rushed downfield. As I screamed her on, her teammate passed her the ball, and Leigh was ready to charge forward and whale it past the goalkeeper.

"Run, Leigh! Get it!" I screamed, wild with excitement. Leigh booted the ball into the back of the net and jumped high with victory — almost as high as I did. I cheered so loudly I didn't hear the whistle. I didn't notice the other soccer parents were strangely still. Until one of them tapped me on the shoulder.

"Uh, Moira? She was offside. That didn't count."

Ouch. That day I realized the plain truth: My daughter, caught up in the soccer craze along with nearly every other child in the nation, had ventured into a world I knew nothing about. Sure, I could pick the legendary Pele out of a lineup, but that was about it. When I was growing up, there was no girl's soccer and very little boy's soccer. It was never on television and you rarely, if ever, read about it on the sports page. It was time for me, a budding soccer mom, to get educated.

Because soccer is here to stay. The United States Youth Soccer Association has three million members and another 600,000 are registered with the American Youth Soccer Association, and those numbers are growing. In small towns and big cities, more unusual is the child who isn't on a soccer team. And last year's Women's World Cup, complete with superstars, role models, and nail-biting last minute wins, only boosted the sport's popularity.

That popularity may also be because soccer is just plain good for kids. Soccer is a sport where biggest and strongest isn't always best. Though big players can certainly succeed, smaller, petite players can as well, if they are faster and more agile than larger players. And soccer teaches teamwork: The best player is the one who knows instinctively to give up the ball to another player with a better chance of scoring, and who understands that the act of giving up the ball is a play unto itself. Sage advice for life, all in the form of fun and games.

It's important for us parents from the presoccer generation to learn and learn fast. Our kids are going to be heading and bunting and blocking whether we understand it or not. Isn't it more fun to go along for the ride knowing what you're looking at?

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