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How Nationality Influences Development in Youth Soccer

John Fay

Honors Thesis Proposal

Georgia Southern University

How Nationality Influences Development in Youth Soccer

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the School
of Health and Kinesiology

By:

John Fay

Under the mentorship of Dr. Chris Barnhill, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of the study was to identify tactics to improve youth soccer development in the United States (U.S.), which will positively impact future American soccer players. The thesis analyzes how factors related to nationality influence development in youth soccer and identifies the fundamental differences in youth soccer development between male and female American and international soccer players. The proposal delineates why player development is paramount toward the success of a country's national team, more so than the population or wealth of a nation. The research study used a structured survey-based approach for statistically testing hypotheses. The targeted group for the study was National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I and NCAA Division II collegiate soccer players. NCAA Division I and II are considered to be elite amateur levels in the United States. Therefore, the players mostly played for quality youth clubs and academies from around the world. Qualtrics was used to create and distribute the survey, which was distributed to numerous NCAA Division I and II men's and women's soccer players across the U.S. at various programs, homing in on how nationality influences development in youth soccer.

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with FC Cincinnati. Varnado plays a key role in coaching and the college placement process at the Soccer Institute at Montverde Academy.

I have tremendous gratitude for Mike Potempa and Montverde Academy. Potempa is a former U.S. National Team Member at the Under-17, Under-18, Under-20, and Under-23 levels and he represented the U.S. in the 1995 FIFA Under-17 World Cup in Quito, Ecuador. He was a three-time All-American at Clemson University, where he helped lead the Tigers to a 1998 ACC Championship. Potempa was the first male athlete at Clemson to be an Academic and Athletic All-American in the same year and he remains one of only 15 student athletes at Clemson to achieve this. Potempa was drafted in the 2001 MLS SuperDraft by the Los Angeles Galaxy but had his career end early because of injuries. He spent 7 years as an assistant coach at Clemson, where he helped lead them to the 2005 College Cup Final Four. He is the Co-Founder of the Soccer Institute at Montverde Academy, where he used soccer as a tool to teach character and promote education. Potempa and Montverde Academy opened many opportunities for me.

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Introduction

The research study examines how nationality influences development in youth soccer and recognizes the basic differences in youth soccer development between male and female American and international soccer players. A nation's soccer prowess is sometimes characterized through the quality of the senior national team. The thesis elucidates why player development is the most vital component to the quality of a country's national team, more so than the population and wealth of a country. The research study is important because it will distinguish the differences in youth soccer development based on nationality and it will bring light to the areas in youth soccer development the U.S. must improve. The thesis presents the differences within player development between the U.S. and abroad. The three stages of player development are the coordination stage, the cognitive stage, and the competitive stage, which will be explained later in the thesis (Puig et al., 2020).

The targeted group for the study was NCAA Division I and II college soccer players, as these are considered to be elite amateur levels in the United States. Therefore, the players mostly played for quality youth clubs and academies in their home countries. To depict how nationality affects youth soccer players, a survey focusing on youth soccer experiences was distributed to men's and women's soccer players participating at the NCAA Division I and II levels. There are numerous factors that go into a youth soccer player's experience. The surveyed participants were asked about the time and burden to get to training, the financial aspect of the club or academy, the socioeconomic status of their family, the duration and frequency of training, the amount of time and frequency of academic obligations determining how challenging it was to balance academics and soccer during the player's youth academic and soccer careers, and scholarship information. The data collected included gender and nationality (American versus international)

demographics to properly concentrate on the differences in youth soccer development between male and female American and international soccer players.

Literature Review

The purpose of the study was to explore the impact of nationality on development of youth soccer players. Building on previous studies outlined in the literature review, it was hypothesized that domestic born soccer players would have different experiences relating to socioeconomics, access to training, and integrating opportunities for training into their lives than their foreign counterparts.

Socioeconomics

Theoretical foundations of the current study are based on the work of Seabra et al. (2007). Seabra and colleagues noted the challenges related to studying sport participation of children and adolescents and providing insights into cultural and demographic factors. In particular, they looked at the associations between demographic (age, gender, and socioeconomic status) and socio-cultural factors (sport participation of family, and peers and physical educator influences) and the sport participation of children and adults (Seabra et al., 2007).

The methods for the research study involved a random sample of 3,352 Portuguese children and adolescents, 10-18 years old, and their parents and siblings were surveyed (Seabra et al., 2007). The results indicated that children with high and medium socioeconomic status were more involved in sports, children and adolescents were more likely to participate in sports when their family also participate, and boys were more likely to participate in sports than girls, but mothers' sport participation influenced their daughters and sons differently (Seabra et al., 2007). Duncan, Woodfield, Al-Nakeeb, and Nevill (2002) also found that children from higher

socioeconomic families are more likely to participate in physical activities. Studying 310 British school children, their results showed that wealthier children in grades seven through nine were more likely to participate in moderate to vigorous activity than their peers.

A study of children in the U.S. offered conflicting results. Shropshire and Carroll (1997) examined sports participation of students who received free school meals compared to those who did not, finding no significant differences in a study of children in the sixth grade. However, Shropshire and Carroll's (1997) results are contradictory to two other large-scale studies (e.g. O'Loughlin, Paradis, Kishchuk, Barnett, & Renaud, 1999, Raudsepp & Viira, 2000). O'Loughlin et al. (1999) used a sample of 2,285 students aged 9-13 in 130 grade four and six classes in 24 inner-city elementary schools. Although parental support played a significant role in sports participation, the researchers concluded that interventions were needed in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas to prevent age-related declines in activity levels. Similarly, a study of urban adolescents indicated that socioeconomic status of a child's family was a significant predictor of sports participation (Raudsepp & Viira, 2000). Although these studies are dated, they indicate the significant role of socioeconomic factors in youth sport participation. Unlike other countries, soccer is an expensive sport in the U.S. (Esi, 2021). This led to hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 1: Youth soccer players in the U.S. spend more money to participate in soccer than youth international soccer players. This is because youth soccer in the U.S. follows a pay-to-play model.

Sport-Life Balance

Travel

The U.S.' population is less dense than other countries, especially in Europe (*Worth remembering (when comparing 'the US' to 'Europe')*). Commuting is a common stressor as it usually is demanding regarding time and cost, which in turn, can affect an individual's mental health, job performance, and personal life (Nepal, 2021). Nepal, 2021 examined adults who commute to work and compared their stress both before and after work to colleagues who traveled shorter distances to work. The results indicated higher levels of stress after both their commute to work and their commute home. This led to higher rates of burnout and lower job satisfaction. Although the current study is exploring youth athletes and not employees, it stands to reason that they may also suffer negative effects from commutes to practice. Therefore, hypotheses 2 and 3 were developed.

Hypothesis 2: Youth soccer players in the U.S. spend more time traveling to their club or academy than youth international soccer players.

Hypothesis 3: Youth soccer players in the U.S. train less with their club or academy than youth international soccer players.

Sport-Life Balance

The work of Guest (2002) focused on work-life balance. The work analyzed the causes and consequences of a more or less acceptable work-life balance (Guest, 2002). The article mentioned that most of the recent research shows that a work-life imbalance has negative consequences for well-being (Guest, 2002). Most of the research related to work-life balance revolves around the concept that conflict is primarily caused by the demands of work (Guest,

2002). However, there is becoming more focus on the high demands in life outside of work (Guest, 2002). There was no research found on sport-life balance, yet the same connection applies in that balancing sport and life is essential in overall well-being. In saying that, hypothesis 4 was developed.

Hypothesis 4: Youth soccer players in the U.S. find it more challenging to balance academics and soccer in their academic and soccer careers compared to youth international soccer players.

Population and Wealth are not the Primary Factors Toward the Success of a Country`s National Team

Before discussing why player development is the most crucial element to the standard of a country`s national team, it is necessary to rule out other factors such as population and wealth as the primary indicators of the success of a country`s national team. Population appears to not be the primary factor for the quality of a country`s national team. Brazil, Belgium, Argentina, France, England, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Denmark, Germany, Croatia, Mexico, Uruguay, and Switzerland are the 15 countries ranked in front of the U.S. per men`s FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking*). Brazil has a population of roughly 216 million, Belgium roughly 12 million, Argentina roughly 46 million, France roughly 65 million, the United Kingdom roughly 68 million, Italy roughly 59 million, Spain roughly 48 million, the Netherlands roughly 18 million, Portugal roughly 10 million, Denmark roughly 6 million, Germany roughly 83 million, Croatia roughly 4 million, Mexico roughly 128 million, Uruguay roughly 3 million, and Switzerland roughly 9 million (*2022 world population by country*). The U.S. has a population of roughly 339 million (*2022 world population by country*). All 15 countries ranked in front of the U.S. have smaller populations. Analyzing the countries` populations rules out the size of the player pool as the main indicator toward the success of a country`s national team. The U.S has

the largest population out of those countries, yet the United States Men`s National Team (USMNT) failed to qualify in the 2018 World Cup and is ranked outside the top 15 in the world per men`s FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking*).

The top five biggest populations by country in order are China, India, the U.S., Indonesia, and Pakistan (*2022 world population by country*). China has the largest population in the world at roughly 1.4 billion, while India follows at also roughly 1.4 billion with only slightly less people than China (*2022 world population by country*). As mentioned, the U.S has a population of roughly 339 million, while Indonesia has a population of roughly 276 million, and Pakistan has a population of roughly 237 million (*2022 world population by country*). China PR is ranked 79th in the world per men`s FIFA rankings, despite having the largest population globally (*Men's ranking*). India is ranked 106th in the world, the U.S. is ranked 16th in the world, Indonesia is ranked 152nd in the world, and Pakistan is ranked 194th in the world per men`s FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking*). The USMNT is the highest ranked out of the top five most populous countries.

There are more registered youth soccer players in the U.S. than in any other country in the world (Papavassiliou et al.). Roughly three million kids play soccer in the U.S. (Ofiana, 2019). Parents in the U.S. spend more money on their children`s soccer career than any other country in the world (Papavassiliou et al.). The U.S. has roughly 24 million adults playing soccer, the second-most of any country and 30% of households have at least one person playing soccer (Papavassiliou et al.). Despite the many sports children can play in the U.S., an Aspen Institute survey showed that soccer is the third most-popular team sport for children aged 13-17 in front of American tackle football and only behind basketball and baseball (Richardson et al., 2021). Instead of focusing on the quantity of the player pool, the U.S. must focus on the quality of the player pool and adequately developing their player pool to surpass powerhouse countries.

This concept applies to all countries, as player development appears to be a critically important component to the success of a country's national team.

Upon extensive research, wealth seems to be more of a factor than population but does not appear to be the primary factor to the success of a country's national team. The U.S. has the largest economy in the world as measured by nominal gross domestic product (GDP) and is on the front end of technology (Silver, C.). Yet, as previously mentioned, the U.S. is ranked 16th in the world per men's FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking.*). China has the second-best economy in the world followed by Japan (Silver, C.). As stated, China PR is ranked 79th in the world, while Japan is ranked 24th in the world per men's FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking.*). India, Canada, and South Korea are also in the top 10 for wealthiest countries in the world (Silver, C.). As previously stated, India is ranked 106th in the world, while Canada is ranked 41st in the world and the Korea Republic is ranked 28th in the world per men's FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking.*). The population and wealth statistics were compared to the men's FIFA rankings, as women's soccer is catching up globally and some nations have inequality regarding women's rights.

What Must the Foundation of Player Development Focus On?

A sizable percentage of professional soccer players have cognitive talent (80%), while only 20% of professional soccer players have coordination talent (Puig et al., 2020). The cognitive talent allows for quality decision making on the pitch in game situations. In a game, 80% of actions involve a simple technical action (Puig et al., 2020). Coaches must train players by simplifying the game such as playing the way you are facing and making the simple pass (Puig et al., 2020).

There must be a concentration on the game understanding and habits with and without the ball, as opposed to focusing on the repetitive technical actions (Puig et al., 2020). As a result of the repetitive technical training in the U.S., players in the U.S. have a love for the ball, when they should have and must have a desire for the game itself (Puig et al., 2020). Training exercises without conscious decision-making has no influence on the formation of the player (Puig et al., 2020). The player actions change throughout the duration of a match; therefore, the decision-making is most important (Puig et al., 2020).

A focus on winning is detrimental to player development at an early age (Papavassiliou et al.). The emphasis must be on playing the game correctly with quality spacing and shape on the pitch as well as quick and strategic passing. While teaching formation and possession, coaches must eliminate the “kick and run” style of play habits (Papavassiliou et al.). If the Major League Soccer Players Union (MLSPU) and the U.S. Soccer Federation were to remove the ban on training compensation, clubs would begin focusing on long-term player development, hiring more qualified coaches, improving their facilities, decreasing registration costs, and increasing scholarships (Papavassiliou et al.). As a domino effect, the level of soccer in the U.S. would rise (Papavassiliou et al.).

How Finances for Youth Soccer Differ Based on Country

The financial aspect is a critical component in youth development systems. The youth structure in the U.S. is the reason for international challenges (Ofiana, 2019). The pay-to-play model prevents low-income children from access to high quality soccer opportunities (Ofiana, 2019). A systematic issue is the affordability of youth soccer leagues in the U.S., as it costs an estimated \$3,000 a year to play competitive soccer (Ofiana, 2019). Other expenses including travel and equipment costs add to the total expenses (Ofiana, 2019). Only 11% of children

registered in clubs in the U.S. are from households that earn less than \$25,000 annually (Ofiana, 2019). On the other hand, over one-third of youth soccer players in the U.S. come from households that make over \$100,000 per year (Ofiana, 2019).

Youth soccer players and their families are not the only people affected by the pay-to-play model. Coaches are affected, as the licenses within the U.S. Soccer Federation cost money (Ofiana, 2019). This is opposite of the Icelandic soccer federation, which paid for hundreds of coaches to get licensed through UEFA (Ofiana, 2019). As a result, Iceland performed well in the European Championships (Ofiana, 2019). Eliminating the costs for coaching education in the U.S. will inevitably increase the quality of the coaches, which, in turn, will increase the quality of the players due to improved training (Ofiana, 2019).

In other countries outside the U.S., when a soccer player signs their first professional contract, the professional club is mandated to pay the training costs to every club that assisted in the development of that player from the ages of 12-21 (Papavassiliou et al.). Also, every time that player is transferred between clubs, training costs are paid until the conclusion of the season on their 23rd birthday (Papavassiliou et al.). When a player transfers clubs before their contract is expired Solidarity Payments happen, where five percent of the total compensation (not including the training costs) are awarded to the club(s) that developed the player (Papavassiliou et al.)

In contrary, U.S. youth soccer clubs are prohibited from being granted financial rewards for the professional players they produce (Papavassiliou et al.). It is evident that U.S. clubs have no incentives to focus on long-term player development (Papavassiliou et al.). The consequence of not having training compensation and solidarity payments is clubs' priorities are on creating a profitable business, which causes them to neglect long-term player development (Papavassiliou

et al.). Club directors aim to get as many players to sign up as they can at a hefty price, typically around \$1,000 per season (Papavassiliou et al.).

How Competitive is it for an American to Play College Soccer?

The targeted group for the study was NCAA Division I and II college soccer players, as these are considered to be quality amateur levels in the U.S., and it is an avenue for one to play professional soccer. Before analyzing how player development connects to college soccer, it is imperative to note there are statistically more opportunities for women to play NCAA Division I and NCAA Division II soccer (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college:*, 2020). There are 205 Division I men`s soccer programs, while there are 338 Division I women`s soccer programs (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college:*, 2020). In total, there are 6,044 Division I men`s soccer players, while there are 9,588 Division I women`s soccer players (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college:*, 2020). For Division I men`s soccer, there are 9.9 scholarships available per year with an average roster size of 29 players (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college:*, 2020). Meanwhile, for Division I women`s soccer, there are 14 scholarships available per year with an average roster size of 28 players (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college:*, 2020). The average scholarship for Division I men`s soccer is \$17,747, while the average scholarship for Division I women`s soccer is \$18,824 (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college:*, 2020). There are more Division I women`s soccer players and programs where they have more scholarships and a higher average scholarship than Division I men`s soccer programs (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college:*, 2020). These same points are true with slightly different numbers for Division II soccer (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college:*, 2020).

While there are less Division I and II men`s soccer programs with less funding, that is not the primary reason many American male youth soccer players do not make it to the Division I or II levels. The inadequate youth soccer development in the U.S. is the primary reason many American male youth soccer players do not reach the Division I or II levels. The point of emphasis is far too many American male soccer players are not at a high enough level going into college, forfeiting potential scholarship opportunities to international players that have had superior developmental training. While statistics display how challenging it is for an American female to make the Division I or II levels, there is less global competition in the women`s game. Asia, Africa, South America, Central America, and Oceania make up only nine percent of registered female soccer players (Kann, 2019).

The United States Women`s National Team (USWNT) have won four Olympic gold medals, three World Cups, which is the most World Cups of any country, and have been ranked number one in the world 10 of the last 11 years (Murray). The USWNT was formed in 1985 and have been dominant since its inception, largely because at the time there were few women`s national teams around the world (Murray). As a result, other countries` women`s national teams are playing catch-up (Kann, 2019).

The number of female soccer players in Europe continues to grow, which will increase the competition for the USWNT (Kann, 2019). According to a FIFA 2014 Women`s Soccer Survey, the number of registered female soccer players in Europe is slightly behind the U.S. and Canada combined (Kann, 2019). Multiple competitive professional women`s soccer leagues are in Europe, which is strengthening the talent pool of female soccer players internationally (Kann, 2019). The data analytics site FiveThirtyEight showed that from 2012 to 2017, Europe`s soccer federation more than doubled their spending on women`s soccer, which displays their investment

to the sport (Kann, 2019). As women`s soccer grows in other parts of the world it will inevitably become more challenging for the USWNT to maintain their dominance. For the USWNT to sustain their superiority, they must fix all the issues that plague the USMNT (poor player development at the youth level, lack of a soccer culture, and the pay-to-play model).

From 2019-2020 there were 476,203 U.S. high school male soccer players and 408,807 U.S. high school female soccer players (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college*:, 2020). 0.8 percent of U.S. high school male soccer players were competing at Division I schools, while 2.1% of U.S. high school female soccer players were competing at Division I schools (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college*:, 2020). The odds for a U.S. high school male soccer player to make a Division I roster is 119:1, while the odds for a U.S. high school female soccer player to make a Division I roster is 48:1 (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college*:, 2020). 7.4 percent of U.S. high school male soccer players were competing at any college level, while 9.7% of U.S. high school female soccer players were competing at any college level (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college*:, 2020). The odds for a U.S. high school male soccer player to make any college roster is 14:1, while the odds for a U.S. high school female soccer player to make any college roster is 10:1 (*Soccer scholarships & odds of playing in college*:, 2020). These statistics depict that the U.S. is neglecting youth soccer development. Player development connects to college soccer because if many Americans, particularly American males, are not good enough to make a Division I or any college roster, that proves the U.S. is behind in player development. Therefore, nationality influences development in youth soccer.

Methods: Participants and Procedures

The current study used a survey-based approach with the snowball sampling tactic, where the participants of the survey recruited other participants for the survey. Participants were primarily recruited via social media. Participants that completed the survey were encouraged to share the survey link with other Division I and Division II soccer players in their networks. A quantitative design was used, with a structured survey-based approach for statistically testing hypotheses. Items within the survey asked participants to rate their perceptions of their experiences on Likert type scales. Some example questions are as follows: How great of a burden was traveling to your youth club or academy on a scale of 1-5 (1 being no burden at all and 5 being a major burden)? How great of a burden were the finances and fees to afford the club or academy on a scale of 1-5 (1 being no burden at all and 5 being a major burden)? How challenging was it to balance academics and soccer during your youth academic and soccer career on a scale of 1-5 (1 being no challenge at all and 5 being a major challenge)?

Data Analysis

Completed surveys were inspected and incomplete responses were removed from the data analysis. A total of 86 ($n = 86$) surveys were deemed usable for analysis. Gender identification of the participants was evenly split (female = 43, 50%; male = 43, 50%). A majority of respondents identified as being from the U.S. ($n = 65$, 75.6%), compared to international citizens ($n = 21$, 24.4%). A majority also played youth soccer in the U.S. ($n = 71$, 82.6%; outside the US = 15, 17.4%). Data was analyzed to compare different experiences of demographic groups in relation to the four stated hypothesis using *IBM SPSS Statistics 27*.

Results

From the survey, there were 86 total participants whose surveys were analyzed. Of those 86 participants, 43 (50%) of them were male and 43 (50%) were female. 65 (75.6%) of them were from the U.S. while 21 (24.4%) were international. Further, 71 (82.6%) of the participants played youth soccer in the U.S. while 15 (17.4%) played youth soccer outside the United States.

Table 1

Pay-to-play in youth soccer

Group	Pay to Play	
	Yes	No
United States	64	7
International	6	9

Hypothesis 1 proposed that youth soccer players in the U.S. spend more money to participate in soccer than international youth soccer players. To examine this question, a chi-square test was conducted to determine if the percentage of participants who played youth soccer in the U.S. and had to pay to be on their team was significantly different than for participants who played in other countries (Table 1). Club soccer players in the U.S. were significantly more likely to have paid to be on their club ($\chi^2 = 20.56, df = 1, p < .000$). When asked to the degree to which the cost represented a burden to their family, players in the U.S. were more likely to perceive the burden to be greater than their international counterparts ($t = 3.006, df = 84, p = .003$). When controlling for gender, women were more likely to pay to participate ($\chi^2 = 15.05, df = 1, p < .000$), resulting in a greater burden on their families ($t = -2.66, df = 84, p = .009$). There

was no difference in the degree to which the cost burden impacted families across different socioeconomic classes ($F = 1.811, p = 1.35$). Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated that youth soccer players in the U.S. spend more time traveling to their club or academy than youth international soccer players. As indicated in Table 2, players in the U.S. were much more likely to travel for more than 30 minutes than players in other countries ($\chi^2 = 10.35, df = 4, p = .035$). Although the players in the U.S. did not see travel to be a burden on their families ($t = .773, df = 84, p = .442$). Differences were not found related to gender ($t = .814, df = 84, p = .721$). nor socioeconomic class ($F = 2.08, p = .090$). Hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

Table 2

Estimated travel time to training

Group	Estimated Travel Time				
	15 minutes	30 minutes	45 minutes	1 hour	More than 1 hour
United States	12	26	7	7	19
International	5	2	5	0	3

Hypothesis 3 proposed that youth soccer players in the U.S. train less with their club or academy than youth international soccer players (Table 3). No significant differences were found in terms of number of training days ($\chi^2 = 6.17, df = 3, p = .104$) or average training session length ($\chi^2 = .824, df = 3, p = .844$) between players in the U.S. and players in other countries. When evaluated based on socioeconomic class, no differences were found ($\chi^2_{\text{days}} = 2.66, df = 8, p = .954; \chi^2_{\text{length}} = 5.51, df = 8, p = .702$). However, the results did indicate that women had fewer

training sessions than men ($\chi^2_{\text{days}} = 12.94, df = 3, p = .005; \chi^2_{\text{length}} = 1.79, df = 3, p = .617$).

Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Table 3

Training days and length

Group	Number of Training Days Per Week			
	1	2-3	4-6	Daily
United States	6	18	42	5
International	4	1	8	2
Group	Estimated Length of Training Session			
	1 Hour	1.5 Hours	2 Hours	2+ Hours
United States	2	51	17	1
International	1	11	3	0

Hypothesis 4 stated that youth soccer players in the U.S. find it more challenging to balance academics and soccer in their academic and soccer careers compared to youth international players. No difference was found ($t = 1.509, df = 84, p = .293$). There were also no differences in perceptions based on gender ($t = -1.087, df = 84, p = .280$), nor socioeconomic class ($F = 1.39, p = .246$). Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 proposed that youth soccer players in the U.S. spend more money to participate in soccer. This is because youth soccer in the U.S. follows a pay-to-play model. Hypothesis 1 was supported. Youth soccer is more expensive in the U.S. than in many other countries. Further, this hypothesis mostly agreed with the literature review. As sport becomes

more expensive, children from lower socioeconomic statuses are less likely to participate (Raudsepp & Viira, 2000; Seabra et al., 2007). Thus, youth soccer in the U.S. is less accessible than in other countries. To make soccer more accessible, interventions may be needed to encourage participation in socioeconomically disadvantaged populations (O'Loughlin et al., 1999; Raudsepp & Viira, 2000). Limiting participation to a pay-to-play model is detrimental to the quality of soccer in the U.S., as it excludes many players from receiving the training they need to compete at a high level and move their career forward. The current landscape of youth soccer in the U.S. is costly and ultimately prevents many players from lower socioeconomic demographics from taking part in quality youth clubs and academies.

Hypothesis 2 surmised that youth soccer players in the U.S. spend more time traveling to their club or academy than youth international soccer players. Hypothesis 2 was partially supported. Players in the U.S. do spend more time commuting to training but do not see the additional time as a burden on their families. This may be because many people in the U.S. have been conditioned to expect long distance traveling to their obligations.

The U.S. is a large country by size in that it is spread out compared to most countries. While the research revealed youth soccer players in the U.S. do indeed spend more time traveling to training, the societal norms of far commutes could have made the players accustomed to this type of travel. As a result, these players might not be aware of the consequences the travel has on them, thus not recognizing the strain of the commutes. Many youth clubs and academies in the U.S. require lots of travel, which in turn takes away time from other obligations, which can result in pressure and stress. This connects to opportunity cost because instead of doing something productive, lots of time is spent traveling to and from

training. Personal beliefs surmise that many players drop out of the sport because of the burden the travel has on them, which shrinks the American talent pool.

Hypothesis 3 stated that youth soccer players in the U.S. train less with their club or academy than youth international soccer players. Hypothesis 3 was not supported. Within the sample, there appeared to be no difference in time training between American and international youth soccer players.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that youth soccer players in the U.S. find it more challenging to balance academics and soccer in their academic and soccer careers compared to youth international players. Hypothesis 4 was not supported. Within the sample, there was no difference in the sport-life balance between American and international youth soccer players.

American students might have become accustomed to lots of schoolwork because of societal norms as the U.S. is one of the better countries for education in the world. As a result, the American participants in the survey might not realize the quantity of their academic obligations with perspective. However, this can weigh on the players and make it challenging to balance academics and sport.

A takeaway regarding gender is that women were more likely to pay to participate. However, this might be because women's soccer has less global competition than men's soccer and the American female players fall into the pay-to-play model, which reflects back to the United States. Another takeaway regarding gender is that women had fewer training sessions than men.

Ways the U.S. can Improve Youth Soccer

Based on the research, the U.S. can improve youth soccer by creating more youth soccer systems that are more affordable. This will give more players opportunities to continue to develop. Another major takeaway is the U.S. must create more residential academies. The residential academy is a concept where many or all the players live at the academy, do their education at the academy, and train at the academy. By putting everything in one place it takes away wasted time from travel that many youth American soccer players face in the current landscape. Further, the U.S. must create more quality youth clubs and academies to provide players more playing options in closer proximities to their homes. The U.S. must eliminate much of the long-distance travel to tournaments and games at young ages which is costly and time consuming and replace that with more frequent training and games with minimal travel. Those are the big takeaways from the study.

From reading other articles, personal beliefs surmise the U.S. Soccer Federation must eliminate the tables and standings at young ages to ensure the game is being used to develop and to ensure the sport is being played the correct way. Ideally, there should be no league standings until U14, which is the first-time there are league standings in Belgium (guru). The U.S. could potentially even wait until U16 to have league standings.

The reasoning this structural change must be implemented is because many youth players in the U.S. get in the bad habit of kicking the ball down the field, which at young ages often puts pressure on the opposing team. The U.S. must mirror what Spain does, as Spain emphasizes possession, even though it occasionally will lead to conceding goals from mistakes during the youth stages (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021). However, it teaches the players to be comfortable on the ball especially

during pressure situations, which will benefit these players in the long-term (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021). This is a reason why player development in Spain is widely regarded as the model for success (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021). The development in Spain is focused on taking the first touch to set their second touch up to distribute the ball (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021).

The U.S. is not the only results driven country regarding their youth soccer development, as the Japanese youth development structure is similar in that regard. According to Tom Byer, who is a grassroots coach in Japan, Japanese coaches tend to be results driven, resulting in less-developed kids to not get much playing time, limiting their development (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). Also, in Japan, the emphasis that is placed on winning during the national tournaments puts substantial pressure on some of the players (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*).

When winning is an emphasis in youth soccer, coaches play the players that are the strongest or fastest, leaving the late developers with minimal to no playing time (guru). This leads to the next structural change the U.S. must apply. The U.S. must align with what Belgium does, as in Belgium the late bloomers will be placed in a one-year lower age group, to allow them to play at a level that aligns with their stage in development (guru). There is a consistent focus on the late developers in Belgium (guru).

The U.S. youth soccer development system must focus on training both feet. According to Gerard Bonneau, who is a former youth recruiter at Lyon, the prototypical French player is a

combination of athleticism and technical quality, who can adapt to any playing system and can use both feet (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021).

Additionally, the U.S. must create consistency regarding style of play and identify players that fit that style of play. They should use England as the model they look to for this, as England looks at how they play, to figure out what style all teams should play from the U15's to the senior team (*How england transformed its young footballers*). This would benefit the U.S., as this method creates a consistent style of play throughout the country and provides the players with clear objectives for how they should aim to play. Also, England focuses on identifying players that fit the style of play of the senior team (*How england transformed its young footballers*).

Finally, U.S. youth soccer clubs must be allowed to be granted financial rewards for the professional players they produce, through allowing training compensation and solidarity payments, which will give U.S. clubs incentives to focus on long-term player development (Papavassiliou et al.). Overall, there are many implementations that must be applied to the U.S. youth soccer structure.

Directions for Future Research

Directions for future research include to expand the sample size particularly getting more international participants. Increasing the sample size of the study will improve the quality of the study. If someone wanted to improve the study, they should get enough participants from NCAA Division I and NCAA Division II schools that are from different continents to compare. There are drastic differences in youth soccer between the continents, so categorizing international is general.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is that the participants were not randomly selected for the study. I reached out to people in my network to start the snowball tactic. Another limitation of the study is that the participants may have answered the survey dishonestly. Additionally, a limitation of the study is that the participants could have misunderstood certain questions. Another limitation of the study is that the participants may be bias toward certain questions on the survey. Further, a limitation of the study is that the sample size was not too big and for certain demographics the sample size was small. For example, there were not many internationals in the study so that affects the quality of the study. Next, a limitation to this study is that international is broad. There is an immense difference in youth soccer between Europe, South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia.

Conclusion

To conclude, the research study revealed that youth soccer players in the U.S. pay and travel more during their youth soccer careers than international youth soccer players. The U.S. must create affordable playing options to cater to players from all socioeconomic backgrounds and must create a structure that involves less travel. It is important to note there are many aspects of youth soccer development the U.S. do indeed get correct. For example, the U.S. emphasizes small-sided games, which is similar to Belgium who focus on small-sided games to create an exciting environment with lots of goals and touches on the ball (guru). Further, the U.S. wants the coach to be a guide for the players which is again like Belgium which has an approach of player development that gives players freedom to be creative in the style of which they play, as the coach is there as a guide (guru). The U.S. Soccer Federation wants training activities to be game-like. Kris Van der Haegen, who is the Director of Coach Education for the Belgian

Football Association, emphasizes creating game-based practices, which focus on the decision-making process, while simulating a realistic game-like speed of play (guru). However, the main purpose of the thesis is to identify tactics to improve youth soccer development in the U.S. which will positively impact future American soccer players. In summation, the U.S. must implement many changes in their youth soccer structure to improve the overall culture of soccer in the United States.

For more information on youth soccer comparisons around the world please go to the Appendix section following the references.

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Appendix

How Nationality Influences Development in Youth Soccer

Player development differs from country to country. The first stage of player development is the coordination stage and occurs from the ages 6-12 (Puig et al., 2020). This stage is to determine the characteristics that the player does well i.e., what the player's natural talents are (Puig et al., 2020). To identify the player's virtues, the player needs the opportunity to play freely (Puig et al., 2020). Europe is superior to the U.S. in this stage of development, as it can be challenging to find an environment in the U.S. to play pickup soccer at a reasonable cost (Puig et al., 2020). Soccer in the U.S. is a suburban sport, because of the pay-to-play model, as it typically costs money to play for clubs and academies. In many other countries, soccer is a street sport, where people do not need money to go play soccer at a high level. Overall, the culture in the U.S. is not at a point where people play soccer in parks and between classes at school consistently (Puig et al., 2020). Soccer is a relatively new sport in the U.S., whereas in other parts of the world, soccer has been around for generations and has evolved into the countries' cultures (Puig et al., 2020).

The next stage of player development is the cognitive stage, and this occurs from the ages of 12-16 (Puig et al., 2020). The coach is largely responsible for the success within this stage, as this stage is where the players learn the technical, tactical, physical, and psychological concepts and fundamentals of the game (Puig et al., 2020). The U.S. trails many other countries in this stage because other parts of the world have a better understanding and methodology around the sport (Puig et al., 2020). Specifically, in Europe there is a heavy focus on the pedagogical component by the coaches, to ensure the players learn the game pertaining to proper spacing on the field and overall shape and positioning on the pitch (Puig et al., 2020).

The third phase of player development is the competitive stage and occurs from the ages of 16-18 (Puig et al., 2020). Upon developing a player identity in the coordination stage and understanding the game in the cognitive stage, the player then competes at a high level applying their skills in an elite level environment (Puig et al., 2020). Europe and several other parts of the world are further along during this stage, as there are no environments in the U.S. where the player can be exposed to the world level competitiveness during these ages (Puig et al., 2020).

Overall, it is challenging to summarize North American soccer, as each country varies greatly pertaining to their soccer culture and approach to player development. For men`s soccer, no country has won a World Cup title (Dillinger, 2019). For women`s soccer, the U.S. have won four World Cup titles, which is more than any other country (*Women's Soccer World Cup Winners.*). The U.S. and Mexico are ranked in the top 20 per men`s FIFA rankings, while Canada is ranked outside the top 20 per men`s FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking.*). The U.S. and Canada are ranked in the top 20 per women`s FIFA rankings, while Mexico is ranked outside the top 20 per women`s FIFA rankings (*Women's ranking.*).

The first country analyzed is the U.S., as this is the country being compared to other countries around the world in the thesis. The U.S. youth system is scattershot and disorganized as the youth academies affiliated with the Major League Soccer (MLS) teams are relatively new, the clubs are expensive and unaffordable for many players, and the high school and college routes are more of a waste of talent than beneficial (Foxsports, 2013). Mexico provides more of a direct path to professional soccer than the American system, as many Mexican American players decide to play for youth academies in Mexico instead of the U.S. (Foxsports, 2013). Some MLS youth academies offer the same program as that with Chivas, but the soccer education is not as good (Foxsports, 2013). Te Kloese, who is the Sporting President of Chivas Guadalajara and

former Youth National Team Director at the Mexican Federation thinks roughly 15 percent of each generation, being two or three players on every Mexican Youth National Team, were born and mostly raised in the U.S. (Foxsports, 2013). Overall, youth boys` soccer development in the U.S. is behind many other countries.

For women`s soccer, the U.S. is a dominant force across the world. The Olympic Development Program (ODP), of which Abby Wambach and Heather Mitts played for, allows highly talented players quality development (Weber, 2021). Elite Clubs National League (ECNL), which is from U14 through U17 age groups, is known as one of the best female development systems in the U.S. (Weber, 2021). Collegiate soccer and the National Women`s Soccer League (NWSL) have created more outlets for women`s soccer players to play following youth development (Weber, 2021). Additionally, in 2022, the USL W League, which is a pre-professional league will start play, creating another avenue to play professional (Weber, 2021). In 2023, the USL Super League, which is a second-professional league is expected to begin with competitive wages and many teams, which highlights the emphasis the U.S. has for growing women`s soccer (Weber, 2021). Another sign that displays the focus of the U.S. to grow women`s soccer is that the U.S. men`s and women`s national soccer teams formally signed equal pay agreements (Peterson, 2022). All things considered, the U.S. is one of the best countries in the world for youth female soccer development, largely due to them being further along with women`s rights in sport than many other nations.

Mexico`s youth soccer system is improving (Foxsports, 2013). Kloese has been at the forefront of the rebuilt Mexican development system (Foxsports, 2013). Mexico mandated a rule that all professional clubs must have at least one homegrown player under 21-years-old, which motivated the clubs to have quality youth systems (Foxsports, 2013). In 2009, Mexico created

national U20, U17, and U15 leagues with the youth teams of all the major professional clubs, where those youth teams play the same schedule as the senior team (Foxsports, 2013). The strong youth systems in Mexico have led to the average age in Liga MX to drop and the level of play to improve, which has ultimately led to the team`s equity in their player development to rise (Foxsports, 2013). The league structure for U13, U15, U17, and U20 age groups are highly competitive and well structured, and include clubs such as Pachuca, León, Querétaro, Santos Laguna, and Atlas (Flint et al., 2018). Kloese says there are certain advantages with Mexican youth soccer development (Foxsports, 2013). For example, there is a residency program at Chivas that includes a complete program of school, nutrition, personal development, daily training, and elite competition in national leagues (Foxsports, 2013). Chivas only chooses Mexican citizens to play for them, like Athletic Club`s all-Basque rule (Flint et al., 2018).

In contrary, many believe that the mental aspect is the weak element in Mexican soccer, from development stages to the senior team, due to the many distractions the players have (Flint et al., 2018). Also, the second division of youth academies is disorganized (Flint et al., 2018). However, there has been progression in the recent generations, as Miguel Gómez, who is the manager of an under-18 side, says the players view soccer as a career and they are disciplined, persevering, and committed to the sport (Flint et al., 2018). This is displayed when they go on tour, as Gómez says they are a national team with prestige (Flint et al., 2018).

The heavy foreign representation in Liga MX, makes the league more competitive for Mexican players compared to the leagues in South America, as every club in Liga MX is allowed to have 10 foreigners on their matchday squad (Flint et al., 2018). Liga MX is the 10th most lucrative soccer league in the world and the second most lucrative league in the world outside of Europe, only behind Brazil (Flint et al., 2018). While the wealth of the league raises the standard

of play which benefits Mexican players coming through the youth academies, short-termism leads to the owners buying more developed foreign players, typically from South America, and neglecting to develop the youth Mexican players (Flint et al., 2018). Gómez believes the Federación Mexicana de Fútbol (FMF) must regulate a methodology of general training to create consistency in the development across the country (Flint et al., 2018). Gómez thinks the FME should focus on the technical, tactical, physical, and mental soccer qualities, while developing the values lacking in modern day Mexican society such as family importance, as many Mexican children`s parents both work leaving them to grow up themselves and at times make the wrong decisions (Flint et al., 2018). However, overall, Mexico has a quality youth development system and provides players with great opportunities, as there have been heavy investments into the youth systems (Flint et al., 2018).

Belén Sanz Luque, who is a representative of the UN Women in Mexico says that sustainable development means there must be equal opportunities, where she believes sport can be an effective tool to eliminate stereotypes against women (*In Mexico, female soccer players take center stage to break gender stereotypes.*) The creation of the MX Female League and the women who are beginning to demand equal conditions and pay have allowed for more opportunities for female soccer players and help change the historically chauvinistic society (*In Mexico, female soccer players take center stage to break gender stereotypes.*) Mexico is trying to take steps toward more opportunities for female soccer players (Diego Mancera, 2021). The first professional women`s league was formed in 2017, and is currently working to address pay parity, equal treatment, collective bargaining agreement, and standard health insurance (Diego Mancera, 2021). Mexico has seen steady growth and engagement in women`s soccer yet is still far away from quality youth development systems for female soccer players (Diego Mancera, 2021). All

in all, youth women`s soccer development in Mexico is worse than the U.S. and Europe. (*In Mexico, female soccer players take center stage to break gender stereotypes.*).

There appears to be a direct correlation between the standard of a country`s national team and the youth development structure. For men`s soccer, Europe is a dominant continent with arguably the best youth development structure in the world. For women`s soccer, Europe is quickly evolving with the continued investment in the youth development. For men`s soccer, Germany and Italy have each won four World Cup titles, which is tied for the second-most World Cup titles for a country, while France has won two World Cup titles, and England and Spain have each won a World Cup title (Dillinger, 2019). For women`s soccer, Germany has won two World Cup titles and Norway has won a World Cup title (*Women's Soccer World Cup Winners.*). Belgium, France, England, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Denmark, Germany, Croatia, Switzerland, and Wales are ranked in the top 20 per men`s FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking.*). Sweden, Germany, England, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Italy, Iceland, Denmark, Austria, and Belgium are ranked in the top 20 per women`s FIFA rankings (*Women's ranking.*).

Belgium adjusted and improved their youth development structure (Jg, 2018). This has resulted in them moving up from 66th in the world at one point, to their current ranking of number two in the world per men`s FIFA rankings (guru). Haegen has been pivotal for the transformation within youth soccer development in Belgium (guru).

Belgium has a focus on the player-centered approach by adjusting the environment to the players` characteristics (guru). Belgium focuses on small-sided games to create an exciting environment with lots of goals and touches on the ball (guru). For five- and six-year-old players, they play 1v1 games with a goalkeeper (guru). While soccer is a collective game, in Belgium

they focus on the players maximizing their touches on the ball and inspiring the passion for the game (guru). U14 is the first time they play 11v11 (guru).

Haegen focuses on the teaching of basic motor skills for all sports (guru). Belgium has an approach of player development that gives players freedom to be creative in the style of which they play, as the coach is there as a guide (guru). Haegen emphasizes creating game-based practices, which focuses on the decision-making process, while simulating a realistic game-like speed of play (guru).

Youth soccer in Belgium is not concerned with winning, as the first time they have league standings is at the U14 level (guru). When winning is an emphasis in youth soccer, coaches play the players that are the strongest or fastest, leaving the late developers with minimal to no playing time (guru). In Belgium, the late bloomers will be placed in a one-year lower age group, to allow them to play at a level that aligns with their stage in development (guru). There is a consistent focus on the late developers in Belgium, as Nacer Chadli, Dries Mertens, and Kevin De Bruyne all matured later (guru). De Bruyne, who is widely considered as one of the best players in the English Premier League (EPL), first appeared for the national team at U19 (guru). Real Madrid and Barcelona in Spain follow this strategy as they understand the importance of focusing on the players that mature later (guru).

France, which won the 2018 World Cup, has become a conveyor belt of global superstars, as they had 52-French-born players in the World Cup that year (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). This was the fourth consecutive World Cup that France had more players than any other competing country (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). In fact, more than a quarter of the players whose teams made it to the World Cup Semifinals had gone through French youth academies (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). CIES Football Observatory showed that France is the second-

biggest global exporter of professional soccer players, only behind Brazil (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). Eight of the 23 players on France's 2018 World Cup squad were from the suburbs of Paris (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021).

Yves Gergaud, who is a youth coach and recruiter, says that players are typically never further than 10 minutes away from a soccer field in the suburbs of Paris (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). There are consistently informal games, where players can play freely (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). This same environment and soccer culture follows suit on a smaller scale in suburbs of other French cities such as Lyon and Marseille (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). In 1973, the French Professional charter mandated that all professional clubs must establish youth academies (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). Today, there are 37 of these academies across the country, which are responsible for training a total of roughly 2,000 players aged 15-20-years-old (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). For players aged 13-15-years-old, there are seven pre-training centers for females and 15 pre-training centers for males (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021).

Gérard Houllier, who is a former Liverpool manager and the National Technical Director from 1988-1998, pushed for more of an emphasis on ball work at the youth level, which has led to the primary focus in youth development revolving around technical development (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). Bonneau says the prototypical French player is a combination of athleticism and technical quality, who can adapt to any playing system and can use both feet (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021).

The future of the French youth soccer landscape will involve a focus on the psychological aspect (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). Lyon, which is one of the most elite academies in Europe, has already established a psychological wellness program for players aged 12 and older,

and includes yoga, hypnotherapy, and access to mental preparation coaches (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). While France ensures all the clubs have the right training, there will be an increased investment in the understanding of why certain players are not making progress (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). According to Bonneau, they will be zooming in on the mental approach toward youth players who do not fit at certain academies (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021).

Because of the 2018 World Cup title, there has been an increase in the number of scouts and agents within the suburbs of France (ESPN Internet Ventures, 2021). The exposure in France is advantageous for youth players within this country and is a benefit many youth players from most other countries do not have. Many talented players from lower exposure countries may never be discovered.

England has not won a major tournament since 1966, when they won the World Cup (*How england transformed its young footballers*). After many disappointing years, England revamped their youth development program, which has led to success (*How england transformed its young footballers*). In 2017, England won the U20 World Cup, marking the first ever win at a world competition at the youth level (*How england transformed its young footballers*). That same year, they also won the U19 European Championships (*How england transformed its young footballers*). In the 2021 European Championships the senior team lost in the final to Italy, displaying the progress they are making (*How england transformed its young footballers*).

Howard Wilkinson was hired as the technical director for the Football Association (FA) and has turned England into a breeding ground for elite talent (*How england created the best youth system in the world?*). England focuses on five key components to improve their training program (*How england transformed its young footballers*). The first is centered around who they are, as they ensure the players are passionate about representing England, while celebrating

everyone`s story and bringing those stories together to unite the team, according to Matt Crocker, who is the FA Head of Coach and Player Development (*How england transformed its young footballers*). The second element looks at how they play, to figure out what style all teams should play from the U15`s to the senior team (*How england transformed its young footballers*). This method creates a consistent style of play throughout the country and provides the players with clear objectives for how they should aim to play. The third part of the DNA within England`s soccer structure coincides with the second element and is about identifying players that fit the style of play of the senior team (*How england transformed its young footballers*). The fourth element is to enhance its training programs based on how they coach, by establishing standard coaching methods and a unified philosophy (*How england transformed its young footballers*). The fifth component is how they support, meaning access to support services, sport science, medical analysis, and psychology development (*How england transformed its young footballers*).

The Elite Player Performance Program (EPPP) was introduced in 2012 by the Premier League (*How england transformed its young footballers*). According to Neil Saunders, who is the Premier League`s Head of Youth, the EPPP was established to produce more and higher quality homegrown players, while implementing a player-led approach (*How england transformed its young footballers*). With the improved facilities, well-trained coaches, support services, and full-time player education where they balance soccer and education, their system mirrors that in Germany (*How england transformed its young footballers*). England used France`s Clairefontaine as the example and created St. George`s Park, which is home to 13 fields, world-class facilities, and 28 England squads (*How england created the best youth system in the world?*). While the state-of-the-art facilities have facilitated the success in English soccer, the methodology to keep the coaching consistent throughout the country has differentiated them

from many other countries around the world. The FA Coaches Association, the UEFA Pro License coaching badge, and the FA Charter Standard Awards for grassroots clubs, have ensured the implementation of coaching points are unified (*How England created the best youth system in the world?*). All in all, the quality and quantity of coach education in England is top notch (*How England created the best youth system in the world?*).

Player development in Spain is widely regarded as the model for success, as they teach the players to be comfortable on the ball especially during pressure situations (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021). The development is focused on taking the first touch to set their second touch up to distribute the ball (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021). Many youth players in the U.S. get in the bad habit of kicking the ball down the field, which at young ages often puts pressure on the opposing team. Meanwhile, Spain emphasizes possession, even though it occasionally will lead to conceding goals from mistakes during the youth stages (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021).

The late Johan Crujff, who was a legendary player and manager, coached Barcelona, where he instilled the vision for how soccer should be played (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021). Crujff is the only Barcelona coach to ever win four consecutive La Liga titles, including his 1992 “Dream Team” that won both the Champions League and La Liga, while playing the most attacking style of play in the world during this time (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021). Some of his innovative strategies, which were not common during this time, included goalkeepers off their line, defenders taking place in the

attacks, and accurate passing in triangles and diagonals (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021). He valued talented and intelligent players over the physically gifted players (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021).

As a result of Crujiff, Spanish youth soccer encourages cognitive development (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021). Spain prioritizes high soccer IQ and creative play over physicality, which allows their youth players to grow into elite players at the world level, such as Xavi and Andrés Iniesta (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021). Crujiff said “football is played with the head and executed by the feet” (Todd Beane is Founder of TOVO Institute dedicated to educating coaches online, on site and in B., 2021).

Tiki-Taka is a Spanish style of play characterized by possession with short, precise, and quick passing (*What is Tiki-Taka?*). One-touch passing is an important part of this style of play (*What is Tiki-Taka?*). Pep Guardiola, who is a Spanish manager that coached Barcelona, is widely associated with this tactic (*What is Tiki-Taka?*). Tiki-Taka focuses on dominating possession with the combination of technical excellence and positioning to out strategize opponents (*What is Tiki-Taka?*). According to Guardiola, the passing must have purpose, with the objective of scoring on the opponent (*What is Tiki-Taka?*). When Guardiola managed Barcelona, they drew their opponents out through strategic passing which created passing lanes because of the open space behind the defense (*What is Tiki-Taka?*). Guardiola concentrates on possessing the ball that makes the defense uneven and shifting toward where the ball is, before quickly switching the field to exploit the weak area (*What is Tiki-Taka?*). The tactic is about making the field big when in possession with the ball by spacing the field and spreading out,

while shrinking the field when defending by compacting (*What is Tiki-Taka?*). Between May 7, 2008, and September 21, 2013, Barcelona went 317 competitive matches out possessing their opponents (*What is Tiki-Taka?*). The highly successful style of soccer was capped off with Spain winning the European Championships in 2008 and 2012 and winning the World Cup in 2010 in South Africa (*What is Tiki-Taka?*). This methodology is the blueprint of the DNA to Spanish soccer and is taught in the youth development systems such as in La Masia Academy.

Germany has a well-defined soccer culture while focusing on a holistic and individualized approach to youth player development, to provide the players with the support and training needed to outlast the toughest competition (Scavuzzo et al., 2019). Their quality youth development landscape led to them winning the World Cup in 2014 in Brazil (*The potential of youth: Germany's Sustainable Success.*, 2016). After their poor showing in the 2000 UEFA European Championships, they turned their focus on revitalizing the youth development system (*The potential of youth: Germany's Sustainable Success.*, 2016). Roughly €520 million was invested in their youth development system between 2002 and 2010, where the money funded the German academies, specifically Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2 (*The potential of youth: Germany's Sustainable Success.*, 2016). In Germany, the academies concentrate on education to provide the total soccer academy system (*The potential of youth: Germany's Sustainable Success.*, 2016). 19 of the 22 players on the senior national team and more than half of the Bundesliga were products of the German youth academies, including over 100 players who played for the club where they were groomed (*The potential of youth: Germany's Sustainable Success.*, 2016). This reflects the emphasis on having home grown players in Germany. All in all, Germany has elite youth player development.

Women`s soccer in Europe is growing in popularity as displayed with the Women`s Super League (WSL) in England, La Liga Femenina in Spain, Serie A Femminile in Italy, and Frauen-Bundesliga in Germany (Desk, 2021). The WSL has the largest commercial agreement in women`s soccer through the £24 million broadcasting deal over three seasons with BBC and Sky Sports (Desk, 2021). This will positively influence women`s soccer and youth girls` soccer development as the revenue from the deal will be put into increased player wages, improved facilities, additional hires such as dieticians and physio`s, and grassroots soccer (Desk, 2021). In 2020, the Spanish government granted La Liga Femenina as professional status (Desk, 2021). FIGC, which is Italy`s governing body for soccer, stated that Serie A Femminile will be granted professional status beginning the 2022-2023 season (Desk, 2021). In Italy, Juventus, Napoli, Inter Milan, and AC Milan have created female teams (Desk, 2021). Frauen-Bundesliga consists of 12 teams, including the likes of Bayern Munich and Eintracht Frankfurt (Desk, 2021). Women`s soccer in Germany is stable, as Germany continues to invest heavily into player development for female soccer players (Desk, 2021). European women`s soccer is growing, which has resulted in increased investment in the youth systems leading to quality player development programs for female soccer players.

Europe has the most advanced and reputable youth development programs ranging from grassroots soccer organizations, professional soccer academies that are sponsored or fully owned by professional clubs, and licensed soccer academies that are independently owned (Bitcademy, 2019). The coaching education and soccer support provides Europe with the ideal youth development system (Bitcademy, 2019).

For men`s soccer, South America is a powerhouse continent, while for women`s soccer, they are not seen in the same light. For men`s soccer, Brazil has five World Cup titles, which is

the most World Cup titles for a country, while Uruguay and Argentina have each won two World Cup titles (Dillinger, 2019). For women`s soccer, no country in South America has won a World Cup title (*Women's Soccer World Cup Winners.*). Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Colombia are ranked in the top 20 per men`s FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking.*). Only Brazil is ranked in the top 20 per women`s FIFA rankings (*Women's ranking.*).

Players from South America have an unrivaled edge over European players because of their tough upbringings (Staunton). Street soccer is ingrained in the culture of these countries. At one point, the top four players on the Goal Transfer List were all from South America: being Luis Suarez from Uruguay, Angel di Maria from Argentina, James Rodriguez from Colombia, and Alexis Sanchez from Chile (Staunton). Sanchez says he never had any coaching growing up and nobody taught him how to strike the ball, as he recalls everything he knows is from playing in the streets (Staunton). Many highly talented players in South American countries are placed in first-division teams at an early age, such as Rodriguez who was playing first-team soccer with Envigado at 14-years-old (Staunton). Diego Costa, from Brazil, lacked formal training, as he similarly played street soccer and did not play grassroots soccer (Staunton). South American teams focus on individual strengths over collective play, which can be disadvantageous at times (Staunton). Overall, while the soccer culture in South America is unparalleled to other continents, the youth boys` soccer development systems are only fair.

However, South American countries neglect player development for women`s soccer. FIFA continues to encourage women`s soccer in South America, yet the support is not there yet across the continent, resulting in the standard and emphasis of women`s soccer in South America being far off from North American and European countries (IzzyWomen`s football enthusiast based in Brazil. Supporting and raising the profile of the women`s game., 2018). Most female

soccer players in South America do not have formal contracts and labor rights, resulting in them having to hold other jobs to sustain themselves (IzzyWomen's football enthusiast based in Brazil. Supporting and raising the profile of the women's game., 2018). Because soccer is seen as a male sport in South America, female soccer players in those countries suffer prejudice from society and family (IzzyWomen's football enthusiast based in Brazil. Supporting and raising the profile of the women's game., 2018).

Inequality, including sexism within clubs and wage inequality, has prevented women's soccer from growing in South America (Diego Mancera, 2021). Miryam Tristán, who is a forward for Peru Women's National Team, says that women who play soccer in Peru do so because of their passion for the game, not to get paid, and instead they get subsidy to cover travel expenses (Diego Mancera, 2021). In Argentina, rules state the women's clubs must have at least eight players on a formal contract, resulting in some players not getting any compensation (Diego Mancera, 2021). Isabella Echeverri and Melissa Ortiz, who play for the Colombia Women's National Team, say the federation did not pay their wages, they were required to pay for their travel and medical expenses, their uniforms were old or second-hand, and anyone that spoke up about those issues was left off the team (Diego Mancera, 2021). In Brazil, women were banned from playing soccer from 1941 to 1979 (Diego Mancera, 2021). Chile's soccer players presented a protocol to eliminate and prevent harassment and sexual abuse in sport (Diego Mancera, 2021). South America has poor culture for women's soccer and youth women's soccer development and must continue to fight against inequality to create more opportunities for women.

Africa is a continent with rich soccer culture, dating back to the 1800s (Thelwell, 2020). South Africa hosted the World Cup in 2010, marking the first time an African country hosted the

tournament (Thelwell, 2020). Despite that, Senegal is the only country ranked in the top 20 per men`s FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking.*). Further, no country is ranked in the top 20 per women`s FIFA rankings (*Women's ranking.*). No African nation has won a World Cup title for men`s or women`s soccer. However, soccer is widely regarded as the most popular sport in Africa, which has resulted in soccer academies being created across the continent (Thelwell, 2020). Right to Dream Academy in Accra, Ghana, is one of the best youth academies in the world and provides the players with an education and a quality player development system, leading to over 30 former students playing professional soccer with many others receiving college scholarships in the U.S. and the UK (Thelwell, 2020). LEAD Monrovia Football Academy in Liberia uses soccer as an incentive to keep students enrolled in school (Thelwell, 2020). Despite these academies, there are not enough quality youth soccer systems in Africa.

To summarize, the problematic areas with African soccer are the lack of fields, organization, and investment, which directly influences the youth soccer development (*Why african football continues to go nowhere*). The passion is there for youth soccer players in Africa, but many of these players do not have access to quality coaching (*Why african football continues to go nowhere*). Well-organized training, tactical training, youth academies, and soccer at schools are rare in Africa (*Why african football continues to go nowhere*). Pierre-Emerick Aubameng, who is the captain for Gabon Men`s National Team and plays for Borussia Dortmund, believes to improve African soccer development, the African clubs must become more professional, beginning at the youth level (*Why african football continues to go nowhere*). Volker Finke, who is the former coach for Freiburg in the Bundesliga and the Cameroon Men`s National Team, thinks the lack of progress in African soccer is due to poor local leagues and

inconsistent salaries (*Why african football continues to go nowhere*). All things considered, youth boys` soccer development in Africa is inconsistent and lacking.

Gender inequality and stereotypes negatively affect women in Africa, including unequal access to land and financial services (*A program for champions: Soccer tackles gender inequality in West Africa.*). The inequality and stereotypes also affect the domain of sport and soccer. Egypt is a country with perhaps the biggest contrast between men`s and women`s soccer (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*). After Egypt`s U-20 Women`s National Team won against Lebanon there was sexual harassment on social media and comments about how women should not be playing soccer (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*). Administrators suspended upcoming games and fired the coaching staff, which displayed the lack of administrative support (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*). The "Championness program" tries to reduce gender inequality through the development of women`s soccer (*A program for champions: Soccer tackles gender inequality in West Africa.*). Soccer is a unifying language that can transcend cultures to empower women in Africa and around the world (*A program for champions: Soccer tackles gender inequality in West Africa.*). Unfortunately, youth girls` soccer development in Africa is poor.

Soccer culture in Asia is strong. However, no Asian country has won a World Cup title for men`s soccer. For women`s soccer, Japan won a World Cup title (*Women's Soccer World Cup Winners.*). IR Iran is the only Asian nation ranked in the top 20 per men`s FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking.*). Korea DPR, Japan, China PR, and Korea Republic are ranked in top 20 per women`s FIFA rankings (*Women's ranking.*).

Japan leads the way for youth player development in Asia (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). When the Chinese Football Association (CFA) thought about revolutionizing youth development, they looked at the Japanese model and called Byer, who is from the U.S. (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). Byer believes that most players in Japan have a strong technical foundation and are coachable because of their eagerness to learn (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). According to Byer, soccer is well organized in Japan with plenty of competition (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*).

Further, grassroots soccer is affordable and accessible, as it is often cheaper than in Australia (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). While the cost for youth soccer varies around Japan, according to Byer, for U12 it is usually around A\$45 per month (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). Japan has league clubs for U12, U15, and U18 age groups as well as local, regional, and national training schools (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). There is also the JFA Academy, however, that is a pay-to-play model (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). There are accessible coaching courses, which leads to quality coaching, however, there is not a national curriculum like there is in Australia (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*).

There are flaws though in the Japanese youth development structure. According to Byer, Japanese coaches tend to be results driven, resulting in less-developed kids to not get much playing time, limiting their development (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). The emphasis that is placed on winning during the national tournaments puts substantial pressure on some of the players (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). All in all, Asia has average youth boys` soccer development across the continent, despite the efforts by Japan.

Asia has been beneficial for the growth of women`s soccer in the world (AFC, 2019). In addition to Japan winning the World Cup in 2011, five Asian countries won global youth titles in recent history (AFC, 2019). For women`s soccer, the JFA Academy is an ideal option (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). Also, most of the best high school aged players compete in either league academies or soccer specific high schools (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). National high school tournaments are well broadcasted, unlike in other countries, such as the U.S. (*Asia youth development: Japan lead the way.*). All things considered, Asia has quality youth girls` soccer development, primarily because of their support for women`s soccer.

The Middle East has a big culture for men`s soccer, where Qatar will host the World Cup later this month for the first time for a Middle Eastern nation (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*). Despite that, Middle Eastern youth soccer players do not have the same quality of coaching, facilities, and soccer technology as the more developed western nations (Bitcademy, 2019). While the interest is there in Saudi Arabia (one of the more developed countries in the Middle East), the level of play stays relatively low (Bitcademy, 2019). The primary challenge in Saudi Arabia is the lack of a feasible commercial system for academies to develop the youth talent (Bitcademy, 2019). However, women`s soccer in the Middle East has not been a point of focus for a while and has been hindered by lack of finances and opinions centered around girl`s not being made for sports and that the uniforms are too revealing (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*). Most recently, some places show signs of momentum, which is dependent on government promotion for women`s sports (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*). A new women`s Premier League has been established with games being played in Saudi Arabia, where only since

2017 women could come to the games (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*). Further, the Saudi Arabia Women's National Team competed against other countries' national teams for the first time this year (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*). Since Qatar was named host country for the World Cup, they have been using women's teams at many universities and academies for girls to develop the game (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*). However, when the Taliban took over in Afghanistan over a year ago it destroyed the developing women's sports scene (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*). Many female athletes fled, as the Taliban put bans on women's sports and teen girls going to school and put constraints on women moving around publicly (*Women's soccer makes gains in the Middle East despite Conservatives*).

Australia has a passionate soccer culture. However, Australia has never won a World Cup title for their men's or women's national teams. Further, Australia is not ranked in the top 20 per men's FIFA rankings (*Men's ranking*). Although, Australia is ranked in the top 20 per women's FIFA rankings (*Women's ranking*).

Mark Viduka, who is a former captain for the Australia Men's National Team, believes there is a gap in player development in Australia (Lynch, 2020). James Johnson, who is the FIFA chief executive, thinks Australia does not have a clear understanding from the top of the professional leagues to the youth development systems in terms of their culture (Lynch, 2020). Johnson thinks they need more emphasis on the coaching, as quality coaching is critically important for youth player development (Lynch, 2020). Overall, the youth boys' soccer development is poor and disorganized.

Australian female soccer requires more promotion and investment to close the gap between the culture of men's and women's soccer in Australia (University, 2021). Despite the gender battles in Australia, they are further along than many other parts of the world in gender equality, resulting in a relatively decent youth girls' soccer development structure.

The common theme between all the countries with highly regarded national teams is strategically crafted youth development systems. While many of these strong soccer nations have unique styles of play, they all have a fervent soccer culture. A commonality between the top youth academies in the world is the philosophy to develop the person first, pertaining to their character, before the player can emerge (Flint et al., 2018). In contrary, the common theme between all the nations with lowly regarded national teams is disorganized and poor youth development systems. Further, in many of those weak soccer nations, the soccer culture is lacking or absent.

Players from countries with inferior youth development systems sometimes relocate to countries with superior youth development systems during the competitive stage. For example, some players from the U.S. elect to play in youth development programs abroad. One of the best American soccer players of all time Christian Pulisic, accurately reflects the trend of American stars leaving their home country for adequate training, competition, and exposure. Pulisic currently plays as a winger for Chelsea FC in the EPL and is the captain for the USMNT. Chelsea bought Pulisic for \$73 million before the 2019-2020 season, making him the most expensive American soccer player of all time (Rodrigo, 2021). After playing youth soccer in America, he was signed at 16 years old by Borussia Dortmund in the Bundesliga in Germany (Rodrigo, 2021). He played in a few matches for the U17 side, before being promoted to the U19 team, and eventually being moved up to the senior team (Rodrigo, 2021).

There are many American players competing in European and in South American youth clubs, developing their skills in international domains (Napier et al., 2016). Specifically, playing in European youth clubs is the strategic pathway to break into the professional game for American soccer players (Scavuzzo et al., 2016). For example, Revolution Global Soccer is one of many companies and agencies that focuses on bringing top American players to Europe to be scouted and train with clubs (Scavuzzo et al., 2016). This is the preferred method, rather than bringing the clubs to the U.S. to scout players (Scavuzzo et al., 2016). It is ideal for the clubs to see the youth American players training in an environment with the top youth European players (Scavuzzo et al., 2016). It is more effective for scouts to assess and evaluate the talent that way, as opposed to watching the American players in lower-level practice and game environments in the U.S. (Scavuzzo et al., 2016).

However, this concept is detrimental to most youth American players. Aside from needing to have specific connections to have an opportunity to play overseas, there are Visa requirements, travel expenses, and families that will simply not send their child that far away from home. British passport standards are an obstacle for many American soccer players that try to play in England (Scavuzzo et al., 2016). The U.S. must create more elite-level training systems for the youth players in the country if they want to compete on the world stage. The talent identification process within the U.S. misses many of the talented soccer players and the subpar level of player development does not justify for European clubs to send scouts regularly to the U.S. (Scavuzzo et al., 2016).

Bruce Dowlin, who was a stand-out player for a RGS Senior-Showcase team in Italy, was offered an extended stay in Europe due to his quality performance (Scavuzzo et al., 2016). However, his mother wanted to bring him back to the U.S. so he could finish high school in

America (Scavuzzo et al., 2016). This is a prime example of the variety of sizeable factors that go into a family allowing their child to play overseas. Education is at the forefront of most parents` focus. Playing overseas can potentially jeopardize the quality of education the player receives depending on the program abroad. The financial aspect is a critical factor, as funding the expensive international flights are only doable for a small portion of families. These examples are relevant because they show that some players from a country with subpar player development often leave their home country for a better club or academy abroad. This trend is consistent around the world. For example, despite the numerous African teams, top tier African players try to play in Europe`s top leagues.

Similarly for women`s soccer, players from countries with poor soccer development often elect to go to development academies and play professionally abroad due to higher wages. (Diego Mancera, 2021). For example, several players from Colombia Women`s National Team play abroad, including Echeverri and Natalia Gaitán who play at Sevilla and Leicy Santos who plays for Atlético Madrid (Diego Mancera, 2021). In Colombia, female players usually try to play abroad, so they can better develop their game there (Diego Mancera, 2021).

All in all, nationality influences development in youth soccer. Player development appears to be the most essential element toward the success of a country`s national team, more so than the population or wealth of a nation. Population and wealth appear to not be the most important indicators if a country will have a quality national team, as there are many populous and wealthy countries with mediocre and poor national teams and many unpopulated and poor countries that have top tier national teams.

Player development must focus on habits with and without the ball and ensure players have a sufficient game understanding, rather than focusing on the repetitive technical actions and

winning (Puig et al., 2020). For a country to see soccer success on the global stage there must be a soccer centered culture. There must be access to high quality soccer leagues for players from low-income households. In summation, player development differs from country to country and each country`s youth development structure has unique advantages and disadvantages.