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# Some skipping high school sports

## For many athletes, scholarship road runs through clubs, not prep teams

By Dustin Dow • [ddow@enquirer.com](mailto:ddow@enquirer.com) • November 9, 2008

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Some of the best girls' soccer players in Greater Cincinnati, and indeed the entire state, didn't play for their high schools this season.

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They didn't give up the sport - they just chose to play for elite club programs rather than their high school teams.

Girls' soccer is at the epicenter of this recruiting reality for high school athletes: For many of them, success on the high school court or field isn't enough.

If players want to compete on the college level, they might have to play on a summer or club team, something that often adds several months to a sport's season and can cost thousands of dollars per year.

Club soccer recently has taken up residence on the fall sports calendar, when high school teams play, forcing some of the best area girls' players to make a choice.

**St. Ursula** coach Dave Ruehl, whose team won its second straight Division I state championship on Saturday, is convinced he will have to recruit some of his own players to come back to the team next season.

"I hope that what we're doing by making things fun is enough to keep them around," Ruehl said. "If the time comes, I'll remind them of how much fun this year was, playing for their high school."

The club program Ohio Elite Academy in West Chester Township had two full teams of high school-age players this season, none of whom played for a high school team. Instead, players practiced three times a week and competed in showcase tournaments in places such as St. Louis and Washington.

"If a player just played high school soccer, it would be very difficult to get recruited," said Doug Bracken, the Ohio Elite girls' coach and a former college coach at Iowa State. "The top clubs have the best collection of players in any area, and they play around the nation in tournaments that are more accessible for college coaches who want to see a large number of games and players at once rather than going around the country to see high school games."

**Clubs are businesses**

Whether the sport is soccer, volleyball, tennis or basketball, the high school season is becoming almost

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**Dave Ruehl expects he'll have to persuade girls to play for state soccer champ St. Ursula over club teams.**



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The Enquirer/Amanda Davidson  
**Soccer players like Tara Campbell, Nicole Muni and Lindsey Thompson have chosen to play for Ohio Elite over their high school teams.**

irrelevant in determining where a player might end up in college.

Even football, which has one of the last traditional recruiting scenes, is chock-full of recruiting-oriented summer camps, though Cincinnati coach Brian Kelly said the UC staff still uses players' junior seasons as part of their evaluation.

**Sycamore** wide receiver Steve Hull received just a single college scholarship offer, from Akron, until he ran a 40-yard dash in 4.4 seconds last spring at a camp sponsored by Under Armour. Within six days, Hull received offers from six schools.

Hull eventually committed to Illinois after participating in a one-day camp there. He also attended camps at Ohio State, Cincinnati and Louisville, as well as one sponsored by Nike.

"People didn't know who I was before those camps," Hull said. "They get you in front of coaches and scouts who can see you behind the scenes, more than just in a game. I really don't think I'd have any more offers without the camps."

Hull spent about \$30 per camp last summer, not including the price of transportation. It wasn't cheap, but the cost to compete in the summer in football is nominal compared to soccer and volleyball.

Clubs such as Ohio Elite and others in the area operate on a business model, and coaches receive salaries. In 2006, Ohio Elite brought in \$801,978 in fees from players for its two dozen-plus teams, which feature boys and girls ranging in age from 8 to 18, according to federal tax documents. Ohio Elite spent \$675,889 that year and the program's director of coaching, Timothy Lesiak, earned a salary of \$70,200.

"It costs money to run a top-level program," Bracken said. "But we give kids the most opportunities we can to play in front of college coaches and develop as soccer players. It is kind of an industry, a lot like making a career out of college coaching."

Bracken estimated an elite player's family spends \$5,000 per year, not including travel expenses. For a player who spends several years in the program, costs easily can surpass \$20,000.

"We've tried to tell people this is not an investment where you should count on a scholarship," Bracken said. "The things associated with club soccer - the competition, the intangibles - those are worth something. Are they worth \$20,000? I don't know. Is ballet worth \$20,000? I don't know."

### Catching coaches' eyes

The costs hardly discourage college-bound players. **Milford** senior Alyssa Rich is widely regarded as one of the best players in Ohio and has played for Ohio Elite for seven seasons. Having orally committed to play for North Carolina next season, she opted not to play for Milford High School's team, training instead with Ohio Elite's fall team.

Former **St. Ursula** player Emily Cardell also left her high school squad, which won a state title in 2007 while she sat out with a knee injury.

"Playing club in the fall gave me a chance to rest my body," Cardell said. "We only have three practices a week, and I get more individual work with really good coaches. I do have a lot of friends at **St. Ursula**, and it's hard for me to see them celebrate victories, because I used to be a part of that. But I still root for them."

Cardell will attend Louisville on a full soccer scholarship.

Ohio Elite has had a fall program for two years, and Classics Hammer FC has a less intensive Under 18 girls' fall program that keeps weekends open so players can visit colleges.

Like Ohio Elite, Classics Hammer recently played in the Metro United Girls Fall Classic and College Showcase in suburban St. Louis. The event's Web site listed 98 college coaches who attended the Nov. 1-2 tournament, which falls in line with part of Classics Hammer's mission statement: "The Club's goal is that the majority of its premier level U18 athletes receive college scholarship placement in some form to play college soccer."

### Establishing relationships

Rich Zeciski tries to emphasize to parents that their daughters aren't guaranteed a college scholarship simply by playing for his prestigious club volleyball program. Then again, he doesn't hide the fact that dozens of former players from Team Z, his North Avondale-based outfit, have gone on to receive full scholarships.

Zeciski includes names and photos of those former players in the club's promotional material. For \$2,260 per year plus travel expenses, a player can join Team Z's national team if she is selected during tryouts, presenting her with an opportunity to play in front of hundreds of college coaches a year.

"We're recruiting pretty much strictly from a club situation," said Xavier University coach Floyd Deaton.



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**Volleyball club Team Z touts former players who went on to receive college scholarships on a PowerPoint presentation on its Web site.**

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"With club tournaments, you've got 40 to 50 courts under one roof and some of the best players in the country ages 12 to 17 playing on those courts."

Deaton has coached for Team Z, as has University of Cincinnati head coach Reed Sunahara. NCAA rules permit coaches in all sports except basketball to work for club teams, allowing them to build long-lasting relationships with elite players early and giving both sides a jump on the recruitment process.

Former **Mercy** High School star Missy Harpenau played for Team Z, where Sunahara coached her team to a Junior Olympics national championship. The MVP of that 2007 tournament, Harpenau now is a freshman at UC and recently was named the Big East Freshman of the Week for the third time.

"Having him coach me as a 17-year-old definitely helped," Harpenau said of Sunahara. "I was thinking about playing for UC, and that was an opportunity for me to see what it would be like playing for him."

### Some opt for school spirit

There is nothing within the mission statement of the Ohio High School Athletic Association that mentions college recruitment. The organization sets out "to regulate and administer interscholastic athletic competition in a fair and equitable manner while promoting the values of participation in interscholastic athletics as an integral part of a student's educational experience."

Fostering a recruiting scene is the domain of the clubs, whether it's in basketball, soccer or tennis.

A high school soccer coach who teaches history can't compete with the full-time club coach whose name comes up on the caller ID of college recruiters. But a club coach can't promise the same atmosphere of school spirit that playing alongside high school classmates brings.

Joy Albi coached standout tennis player Gabby Steele at **Summit Country Day**. Steele, a state champion as a junior in 2007, wrestled every year over whether to play high school tennis or focus more on her United States Tennis Association ranking by playing exclusively in USTA-sanctioned events, which feature a more robust recruiting scene. In Ohio, players have to choose one or the other; Steele always opted to play for Summit.

"I still really badly wanted to be a part of the team, and I still really badly wanted to win state," Steele told The Enquirer last month as the tennis postseason tournament was beginning. She went on to finish as the Division II state runner-up to cap her Summit career.

"It only affects the higher-caliber players, but it seems unfair that they should have to choose either their ranking or playing for their high school," Albi said. "Summit had a big banner cheering Steele on at the state tournament. High school is the only time that elite players like her get to play on that kind of a team."

The goalkeeper for Ohio Elite's Under 18 fall team, Tara Campbell, understands Steele's conundrum.

A senior at **McNicholas** High School, Campbell decided two years ago that she needed to devote more time to developing her skills with Ohio Elite if she wanted to play for a renowned college team. So after her sophomore season at McNicholas, she gave up high school soccer for good, and her reward came by way of a scholarship to Duke that will pay 80 percent of her college bill.

"I never got this kind of goalkeeper training playing high school soccer," Campbell said during an Ohio Elite practice session. "I did high school soccer for two years and got a taste of it. I'm looking forward to being on a school team again, but I figured I'd get that in college."

*Mike Dyer contributed.*

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**acoach** wrote:

Club Soccer is also political and can be costly as the above article says. I think Mr. Dow should have posted the pay of other Club DOC also so we can see if it is out of line. Rumor has it also that Doug was misquoted and the amount of 5k included travel costs. so their fees are not that high. Why did Mr. Dow pick OE? Was it because as OE fans say they are the best or was it because they have the highest fees? I am not sure but OE should really get a better front man for PR Doug should stick to coaching.. Doug is a great coach and wonderful man but in no way is he not a PR guy...

11/11/2008 1:34:57 PM

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**b08rsa** wrote:

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Hard to believe that my 8 yr. old is already asking about what high school has a good girls soccer program. I tell her not to worry about that, it will change by time you need to really start thinking about that. Currently plays for Kings Soccer Academy, which so far has been a great program.

11/10/2008 7:38:06 PM

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**sig4969** wrote:

The article does not talk about the other reason for not playing highs school sport. Amount of politics that goes on in high school sports.

11/10/2008 11:47:42 AM

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**YeahRight1950** wrote:

Playing club ball gives players who are in smaller division high schools a chance to be seen by recruiters and coaches in tournaments who otherwise would never give Div III schools a second look. It also keeps them in shape the other 3 seasons when high school teams are off. My daughter is in a AAU basketball team and plays 3 out of the 4 seasons for them. If she's going to get looked at by a college, it'll be in the summer at tournaments and not in the winter. It's extremely pricey, but worth every penny.

11/10/2008 11:44:20 AM

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**74champs** wrote:

If Dave Ruehl can't recruit some of his old players to continue to play, he will have to continue the tradition of recruiting new players. It seems as if many of the better soccer players just gravitate towards St. Ursula and Ursuline programs. And the good basketball players towards MND. Probably the same for volleyball. Is this just a coincidence? Quit winning. I don't hear the public school coaches complaining.

11/10/2008 7:51:40 AM

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