

Here's the real reason why the US men's soccer team didn't qualify for the 2018 World Cup

Carlo Celli and Nathan Richardson, Opinion contributors

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Maybe the problem isn't up top; maybe the problem is the tightly controlled youth soccer scene. We're focused on practice when we should be playing.



(Photo: Kyle Terada/USA TODAY)

As soccer's 2018 World Cup winds down (<https://ftw.usatoday.com/2018/07/you-2018-fifa-world-cup-semifinal-tv-guide>), there is no American men's team in the finals — or even the tournament. For all of America's wealth and population, the U.S. men's team was eliminated by ... Panama ([/story/sports/soccer/2017/10/04/in-danger-of-missing-world-cup-us-needs-win-over-panama/106314096/](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/04/sports/soccer/panama-usa-world-cup-2018.html)). Adding insult to injury, Panama lost every game they played, including a 6-1 thrashing ([/story/sports/soccer/worldcup/2018/06/24/world-cup-2018-england-offense-panama-belgium/728878002/](https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/2018/06/24/world-cup-2018-england-offense-panama-belgium-728878002)) by England.

What happened? Why is our men's soccer team so weak?

Pundits may place blame at the highest levels — the president of the U.S. Soccer Federation, or the coach of the national team. But maybe the problem is not at the top. Maybe it's at a local field, where kids practice in fancy uniforms under the eyes of anxious parents, hands-on coaches and vigilant referees. Kids stand in line kicking balls through cones, listening to lectures about technique and tactics.

They are not playing soccer, they're practicing it. But soccer is a game. To learn the beautiful game, they need to play it.

Teams that win teach their kids differently

Around the world, kids play in mixed-age pickup games, un-coached, without parents, uniforms or shin guards. They play with different-sized balls, not on grass, but on hard, fast, small courts packed with kids, where real skill is required just to control the ball, and the basic skills of the game teach themselves.

The greatest player of all time, the Brazilian legend Pele (Edson Arantes do Nascimento), learned to play soccer barefoot (<https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/18/archives/pele-gains-a-goal-end-of-world-play.html>). The "Shoeless Ones" (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/sports-and-games/sports-biographies/pele-soccer-player>) was the name of his first team. He had no cleats, cone drills, or heroic soccer parents carpooling to practices, games, and tournaments. His ball was a sock stuffed with rags.

In some of the countries that eliminated the U.S. from the World Cup, that same lack of equipment and organization at the grassroots results in the sort of creative and fast-paced game that American soccer has not produced.

Are American kids learning to really play?

Many kids are left behind in a pay-to-play system that excludes (<http://time.com/money/4037391/soccer-bills-college-family-budget/>) huge swathes of America's youth. Those who can pay find themselves in ever fancier uniforms, participating in ever-more-tightly organized practices. Our kids travel for hours, often across state lines, and even across the entire country in search of "outstanding" competition, sometimes spending more time traveling than playing. What skill are they learning?

How to sit in the car.

Of course some may obtain a college scholarship, which in men's soccer might cover (<http://www.scholarshipstats.com/soccer.html>) the cost of books. An even tinier sliver may make it to the pro ranks. But any fan watching our men's national team in action can recognize that the products of America's "soccer industrial complex" lack the creativity and skill on the ball to be world-class.

This could be the solution

Just maybe, the keys to getting a U.S. men's team to the World Cup and a child's happiness are the same. Perhaps the quest for perfect equipment, perfect fields and perfect competition in an adult-driven system has prevented our kids from developing the skills, instincts and creativity to master the beautiful game.

To become a soccer-playing nation, we need to rethink how the game is learned and played at the grassroots level, even if it means not playing on grass at all. Because what we're doing right now isn't working. No wonder participation has declined by around 24% (<https://www.socceramerica.com/publications/article/76121/new-study-finds-big-drop-in-soccer-participation-i.html>) in recent years.

More: [Why I'm deeply into the World Cup: It's like watching the world at war, with no blood \(/story/opinion/nation-now/2018/07/05/world-cup-soccer-2018-compelling-even-without-america-column/749435002/\)](#)

[Why 'Brits' don't support England at the World Cup \(/story/sports/soccer/worldcup/2018/07/09/england-great-britain-world-cup/767359002/\)](#)

[Let's hope Russia doesn't end up ruining this amazing World Cup \(/story/sports/columnist/martin-rogers/2018/07/07/russia-world-cup-doping-vladimir-putin/765246002/\)](#)

With soccer, less may be more. In the early years, forget the drills, equipment and travel. Let the kids play on the speedy blacktops, concrete and hard-packed dirt abundant across the fruited plain. Let younger kids learn by copying older kids. The simple supervision of a YMCA, parks and recreation program or local club is all the organization needed.

The same countries where kids first learn a "shoeless" game have carefully controlled systems at higher levels. But at the grassroots, their kids are playing. Ours are not. Their kids are winning. Ours are not.

The solution is simple. The cost- and time-savings are staggering. And the organization and infrastructure already exist. Let's strip off the gear, throw out the expensive system and take soccer back to the creativity of the streets. Like Pele, let's go "shoeless."

Carlo Celli and Nathan Richardson are professors in the Bowling Green State University Department of World Languages and Culture and authors of the book "Shoeless Soccer: Fixing the System and Winning the World Cup (<https://www.amazon.com/Shoeless-Soccer-Fixing-System-Winning/dp/0692109099>)."

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