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Are youth soccer buzzwords like 'elite' and 'premier' misleading parents?



With the emergence of what many in the youth soccer community refer to as “alphabet soup”, the continuous expansion of new travel leagues, tournaments and championships has flooded the market with so-called

‘elite’ and ‘premier’ level competition.

Of course, any league or tournament that brands itself as 'average' or 'mediocre' probably won't attract many travel soccer teams with even the slightest of ambitions. However, with so many competition platforms referring to themselves as 'elite', 'premier' and other similar glowing terms, the words have quickly lost almost all meaning.

Here's how Dictionary.com defines two of youth soccer's most common buzzwords:

- Elite (adjective): representing the most choice or select; best.
- Premier (adjective): first in rank; chief; leading.

In today's convoluted youth soccer landscape, it's mathematically impossible for the number of leagues and events branding themselves as top-notch to truly be in the prestigious category that they would like to claim.

Meanwhile, even coaches and administrators who work full-time in the youth soccer industry openly admit that they can't keep track of all the new leagues and events that are being created. With that being the case, how can parents with no insider knowledge be expected to know the difference between truly elite competition, and that which is simply labeled as such?

If more parents had the luxury of understanding the full youth soccer landscape, would a significant number of them be less willing to invest \$10,000-\$20,000 per year for travel soccer fees and expenses, in favor of cheaper local options?

While it may be marketing malpractice for youth soccer organizations to brand themselves as 'run-of-the-mill', a heavy dose of no-frills self

awareness just might be a refreshing alternative for many young players and their parents, who aren't interested in being sold a false bill of goods about where they stack up in the overall U.S. soccer talent pool.

On a special Thanksgiving edition of [The SoccerWire Podcast](#), we discussed the causes and effects of the “alphabet soup” problem in youth soccer, and provide tips for how parents can best navigate the murky waters.

[Click Here](#) to listen to the full episode, or continue reading for quotes from the show, which features host **Marc Serber**, founder/publisher **Chris Hummer** and managing editor **Quinn Casteel**:

“What frustrates me the most is that the majority of the problems aren't necessarily about the ‘alphabet soup’, as much as they are about the fighting between leagues, and jockeying for position between the leagues, and the fighting between the clubs ... When one league starts battling with another for supremacy, or when one club gets really upset that a DA club is taking one of their players, this is going to sound harsh, but know your role. Know where you are in the soccer landscape, and then embrace it, and we won't have these kind of problems.

Look at USL. They decided that weren't going to try and say ‘we're better than MLS’, they said ‘we're D-II and not only are we going to grow with MLS and expand, we're going to help MLS by giving their reserve players a place to play, and giving a bridge for the Development Academy, providing a place where they can play 34 games in a season.’ By USL doing that, they not only helped the entirety of soccer in the country, but they helped make Major League Soccer better.” *-Marc Serber*

"I've tried to whiteboard the structure of U.S. player development pathways, and it's really hard to explain, even to coaches who are earning a paycheck in the game, where everything fits. When you get that added effect of coaches and the people making decisions about where clubs play, and if they have a chip on their shoulder at all, decisions start to get made about what they can keep, if they have a strong team, or how they think things should be run. It's the age old saying of: 'If I don't get my way, I'm taking my ball and I'm going home.' It's the capitalistic economy type of a system where you're free to start your own business if you don't like the way the other businesses are being run.

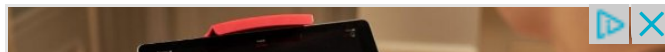
At the top level leadership, there's no clear leadership about the actual best pathway. Because we're in a country where you can start an organization and give yourself a brand name, and rent field or build fields or get fields from your county, and start your own teams and enter league, we can't ever stop all of the dilution. The Federation, or maybe a dream scenario, is an MLS/USL-only development academy, a top league that is free and regionalizes itself ... There would be real leadership from U.S. Soccer, which is difficult because the people in power at U.S. Soccer get voted on by members, who are the 55 youth soccer state associations and all the of the members. But some kind of leadership that says 'this is the pathway for the best players, period' and then it gets worked out in the marketplaces where it's clear where best players are playing in that league. That would help." *-Chris Hummer*

"The marketplace allows people to come together and create leagues if they think they can do it better, and to that point, I think the free market works pretty well. The Girls ECNL is kind of an example of that, and lot of people would agree that the ECNL has been a total smash hit. They're a

very high quality league, they're the first and original elite girls national league, and so far, even U.S. Soccer hasn't even been able to knock them off.

However the same marketplace that has allowed the Girls ECNL to create and become a fantastic, smashing success, the same market forces are conversely creating this conversation about pay-to-play and low-level travel soccer, where I think there's some consolidation on the horizon. I think the heart of this conversation right now is, 'Which of these travel leagues and organizations have become, or on the track to becoming just glorified, really really expensive rec soccer?'" *-Quinn Casteel*

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