US Women’s National Teams Program

Is Girl’s ODP in America Serving the Purpose?

By: April Heinrichs, Tracey Leone, Jerry Smith, Steve Swanson, Jeff Pill, Janet Rayfield and David Simeone

This position paper is based on the knowledge and experience of multiple people who have been intimately involved with the Girl’s and Boy’s Olympic Development Programs for over 20 years. Within the women’s national teams program staff are people who have been Club players, Club coaches, Club Directors, ODP players, State Director’s of Coaching, State ODP Directors, State ODP coaches, Regional ODP coaches, College Coaches and currently, National Team and National Staff coaches.

The challenge to identify and develop talent in this country is a UNIQUE one that can not be compared to other countries that are the size of a single US state. The obstacles can not be compared to countries that have professional programs that provide multiple team scouts to identify talent, youth training programs to develop and weed through that talent, and extremely large budgets from the commercial success of the leagues. The challenges on the men’s side are as different from the challenges on the women’s side as the challenges abroad are different from our challenges domestically, and therefore, the solutions to finding the best players in the US will be different.

ODP is not a perfect system. However, given it’s success and longevity over the last 22 years, we must look to improve it not replace it. It is important that we continue to make ODP more inclusive, and more affordable to all players capable of playing at a higher level. Listed below are obstacles we as a soccer community face in improving the ODP system:

1. Cost. We all agree that cost should not be a deterring factor in any player’s ability to participate in this program and cost is becoming more prohibitive as we try to better the program. Many parts of the soccer community are working to eliminate and reduce the cost of the program at every level. Almost all states and all regions have implemented a scholarship program. Every ODP planning meeting has “How can we cut cost?” on the agenda. Every fee received from an ODP player goes back into the program to pay the expenses of the players, coaches and administrators. Do club programs look at how they can reduce expenses so that players might be able to afford ODP and other development activities? Our ultimate goal should be to reduce the cost of playing soccer in all arenas.

2. A Time Commitment. Yes, if you add ODP on top of an already busy schedule of club and high school soccer as well as other activities, conflicts will arise. However, if becoming a better player, pursuing excellence on the soccer field is the player’s dream, then participating in a program that provides her that opportunity should be her priority. Coaches and parents must realize that whether it be a scouted program or a tryout process players will be asked to participate in training camps and tournaments and therefore scheduling conflicts will be inevitable. We do not tell players what to do in these instances. Players must make their own decisions on the field and therefore we encourage them to make their own decisions off the field. These decisions help players prioritize what is important to them. A successful national team program is the result of a strong commitment from the soccer community and the players invited into regional and national team events. ODP tries to work around Club soccer in America. These efforts
may reduce conflicts or move them to a different level but scheduling conflicts are going to be a part of the system whether we use a tryout selection process or a scouted process. The country is too large to choose a regional or national team without bringing players together and making comparisons and selections with players in the same environment. If a player has the goal of bettering her performance or making a regional or national team then the ODP selection process must be a priority in her soccer life.

3. The Scouting and Tryout Process. Due to the time and scheduling conflicts discussed above, the debate surrounding the best method of player selection has been lengthy. The reality is such in this country that neither method is sufficient by itself. Scouting players while playing for their club team greatly assists in the identification process especially at the state level. However, this can not be the only means of player identification. Similar problems arise as with a tryout process. What if a player is sick, injured, or having problems during the game that a scout is in attendance? What about the player who can not afford to play on a competitive club team? The cost of club soccer can be even more excluding than ODP. And we must also think of the cost and organizational requirements it would take to develop a national scouting system. Scouting within the state is feasible. However, it would take great coordination and great resources to use a scouting system nation wide, and who would pay for it? What would it take to compare a player from the classic league in Dallas, Texas with the talented player in a divisional league in Sioux Falls, South Dakota? Also, a tryout or training camp poses different problems for a player to handle and provides another opportunity to gather new information about players. The players are outside of their comfort zone, playing in an unfamiliar system where they must know the concepts of the game not just the system, playing in a different position, playing against players who challenge them technically, physically and psychologically, playing with and against different players. Training alongside and competing with the competition for a roster spot is the single best way to evaluate players of comparable levels. The 8th player on a great team can be realistically compared with the best player on a weaker team in a camp format. Ideally player identification would involve creating a portfolio on a player that would involve scouted information as well as tryout experiences rather than any single snapshot. Each state must design and implement a program that fits the demographic, geographic, and soccer scenario within their boundaries. Many states are working to develop the overall level of players in an effort to improve the daily soccer environment for players future development. We are moving in the right direction. US Soccer has 4 National Staff Coaches who travel their respective regions watching players play within their state and club teams to assist our National Team Coaches and ODP Coaches in identifying all the best players in the region. We must attempt to create this portfolio with the limited time and resources available to further the identification process inside and outside of ODP. A common myth surrounding ODP and National Teams is that you have to be on an ODP team to make a national team. This is not correct. We select the best players in America!

4. Distance. The problem of travel distance is legitimate. Using state boundaries to break up this vast country may not be the most efficient and convenient for each individual player. This is where as a soccer community we must cooperate and work in the best interest of the players. For example, South Dakota and Nebraska set a great example this past year. A South Dakota player who lived near the Nebraska border was allowed to participate in the Nebraska ODP program. The Nebraska program was very cooperative in allowing a South Dakota ODP player to join their program and provide a reduced travel requirement and a better training environment for that particular
individual. South Dakota showed great character in that allowing the player to leave greatly impacted their state team, however, they understood it was in the best interest of the individual player.

5. Club Coaches Support. There are many club coaches who are involved, participate and are great supporters of the ODP program. As often as ODP loses players because of the above mentioned reasons (Cost, Time Commitment and Travel), we lose players because club coaches don’t support the national identification process. The Erie Admiral Club has done a survey of college coaches and found that 84% of women’s college coaches recommend that players tryout for ODP. They also found that 91% of women’s college coaches surveyed were involved in ODP at the state level and 66% were involved at the regional level. Yes, it is a recruiting opportunity but it is also a system that they believe can be helpful in a player’s development. College coaches also respond that the players participation in a strong club program is more important than ODP in terms of daily development. How true! We can never lose site of the importance of the daily soccer environment in a young player’s development. Club coaches have the greatest impact and their contribution to player development is invaluable. State and Regional ODP is where the best players begin to truly be stretched on a competitive level. And, ultimately the National Team level is where every player (whether you’re Tiffeny Milbretty or Mia Hamm) gets stretched by the competition for playing time.

The Olympic Development Program is the single best player identification system in the world! ODP is and has always been another opportunity to Develop as a Player, for those players looking for environments to improve themselves. The Olympic Development Program has taken on a monumental task of trying to identify the best players in 55 state associations at 6 different age groups, and the best players within each region at 5 age groups. If you look at the success of our youth national teams, you can credit ODP for helping find and develop those players. No question ODP has areas to improve upon. It may not be perfect but it has been in existence for 22 years and has helped identify and develop some of the best players in the world. ODP has helped produce the best Division II league in the world (NCAA Women’s College Soccer), the best women’s professional league in the world (WUSA), the best women’s Youth National Teams in the world, and, the best team in the world (the US Women’s National Team). 22 years of ODP feeding players to the US Women’s National Teams Program has brought home two World Cups and Olympic Gold and Silver Medals.

Let’s work together as a soccer community to solve the problems we face and to put the players’ development ahead of our personal agendas. Get involved in your state team selection process.