

ARTICLE

Congestion on the Pitch: Growth and Conflict in Georgia Youth Soccer

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Abstract

This article uses youth soccer in Georgia, a state traditionally dominated by American football, as a case study of the challenges of the American youth sports system as a mechanism for talent development. We trace the historical divergence of US youth sports from global models, emphasizing the inefficiencies of school-based athletics and the rise of privatized club systems. Through historical analysis and interviews, the study reveals how socioeconomic barriers, geographic disparities, and competing league structures hinder equitable access and talent development. The pay-to-play model exacerbates exclusion, particularly for minority and low-income families. Georgia's case reflects broader national trends, where market-driven youth sports systems prioritize elite experiences over inclusive development.

Keywords: Youth sports; youth soccer; American sports; sports policy; soccer

In United States sports culture, the state of Georgia is perhaps most closely associated with the American version of football. The University of Georgia won national collegiate titles in 2021 and 2022 and regularly sells out its 93,000-seat stadium. Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta hosts the National Football League's Atlanta Falcons, along with thousands of spectators at top-level college and high school games during the championship season. Football is by far the most popular sport at the high school level, with 32,445 players in the 2023–24 season.¹ And Georgia ranks first in the number of homegrown NFL players per capita, with one per 74,908 people as of 2025.²

However, soccer is rapidly becoming a major sport throughout the state. Atlanta United won a Major League Soccer title in 2018 and consistently ranks in the top 20 soccer clubs around the world in attendance and the club announced a

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National Women's Soccer League franchise to begin play in 2028.³ The United States Soccer Federation is moving to a new headquarters with a national training center south of Atlanta in 2026, and "the Benz" has become a leading host of major international matches in the 2020s, including those from the Copa América in 2024, the Club World Cup in 2025, and the men's FIFA World Cup in 2026. At the high school level, the sport is growing rapidly for boys and a little more slowly for girls, whereas the more traditional sports of football and baseball are losing participants as a proportion of total students. An analysis of these sports found that boys' soccer grew 14% from 2013 to 2023, girls' soccer grew 7%, and both baseball and football declined by about 1% in absolute numbers statewide. Controlling for overall student population growth, boys' soccer grew 2% while football and baseball both declined by 12%.

But Georgia players are and always have been underrepresented at the top levels of club and national soccer. Despite having the eighth-highest population of any US state, Georgia ranks outside the top ten in interest in soccer, players in the MLS, players in the National Women's Soccer League, and players for the US men's and women's national teams. And only one player with roots in Georgia plays international soccer. Why does the state lag so far behind in talent production? In this article, we posit that a key reason is the fractured developmental pipeline for players. Beginning as early as eight years old, players are sorted into clubs based on geography but also on a combination of family resources, parents' cultural capital in terms of awareness of coaches and clubs, and coaches' opportunity to notice potential talent. Clubs themselves are sorted into a range of leagues and associations organized under the aegis of Georgia Soccer, the Southeastern Club Champions League, or Major League Soccer's "MLSNext" program, which includes Atlanta United's academy and a handful of teams from other clubs. As such, players find it difficult if not impossible to find the programs that are best suited to help them develop to their fullest potential or to play at the optimal level of competition. And, of course, the better programs are limited to players whose families can afford the four- or five-figure annual costs of competing in youth sports or who happen to catch the eye of a coach that can give them a "scholarship" to a top club.

These trends are not particular to Georgia. They occur in youth soccer across the country and indeed in most youth team sports in America. Georgia Soccer is governed by US Youth Soccer, as are state associations in all 49 other states, whereas SCCL is under the aegis of US Club Soccer, which has member organizations scattered across the country. There are similar organizational structures in sports like baseball, lacrosse, volleyball, and softball. The soccer disparity may be acute in Georgia because of the dominance that football and baseball have exercised traditionally. However, in other countries, public-sector organizations provide opportunities to local children, who then stay with local clubs or, if talented, move on to more elite clubs where they are trained at no cost.

In America, we hypothesize that the organic sport participation opportunities that have evolved throughout Europe and other parts of the world were held back because of the development of school-based sports at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. With the exception of American football—where the resources needed to develop teams suitable

for teenagers are generally restricted to schools—parents and athletes (and recruiters) found developmental opportunities lacking beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. Private clubs and associations sprung up to serve a market of parents looking for access to opportunities they think could lead to college admissions or professional opportunities, and as clubs found the opportunity to make money and derive prestige from “elite” opportunities, they shifted their focus from recreation and participation to winning and qualifying for higher rated leagues. The market structure of this system has led to a mismatch between players and the optimal circumstances to nurture talent and interest.

This article traces the history of American youth sport from its origins in nineteenth-century English and American schools with particular reference to soccer, charting how the advent of school-based sport caused the United States to diverge from other Western countries in developing systems for athletic development. Through interviews and document review, we also analyze the history and structure of youth soccer in Georgia to provide a case study for the development of youth sport culture as a response to a public-sector failure in sport development that is caused by deficiencies in the school model.

The Intertwined History of Sports and Schools

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of profound change in two civic realms in America: education and sports. Building on Horace Mann’s “Common School Movement,” most US states began offering free education supported by taxpayers in the years following the Civil War, retaining gender and racial segregation in many places.⁴ By 1870, roughly 78% of children aged 5–14 were enrolled in public schools.⁵ High schools multiplied rapidly, from 160 in 1870 to over 6,000 by 1900, although they enrolled only 4% of the population of teenagers at that time, most of that drawn from the rapidly growing middle class. Colleges and universities also expanded in enrollment and funding thanks to the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890, with a number of universities starting and others broadening their offerings into agriculture, engineering, teacher training, and other practical arts.⁶

Growing amounts of leisure activity due to industrialization, a change in religious beliefs about the value of exercise, and other factors led to the widespread popularity of sport for both spectators and participants during this era. The first intercollegiate athletic contest was a rowing race between Harvard and Yale in 1852 at Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire. Professional baseball came to life in 1869 with the founding of the Cincinnati Red Stockings, followed shortly by the National League in 1876.⁷ Basketball for boys and men was invented by James Naismith at the Springfield, Mass., YMCA in 1891, followed two years later by a women’s version of the game devised by Senda Berenson at nearby Smith College.⁸

All of these sports became popular at high schools and colleges favored by the moneyed elite, particularly in the Northeast, Midwest, and Pacific Northwest (San Francisco to Seattle) sections of the country, and educational institutions played a central role in shaping many sports. Some of them were English imports,

particularly sports contested by two teams with a ball on a rectangular field. British schools developed two versions of “football,” one governed by “Rugby rules” (which permitted handling the ball) and the other by “Cambridge rules” (which didn’t). Schools and clubs played matches under both sets of rules, often on a match-by-match basis.⁹ The two sports diverged when the English Football Association (FA) was formed in 1863 and adopted a version of the Cambridge rules, prompting clubs favoring Rugby rules to leave the FA and eventually to form the Rugby Football Union in 1871. Rugby became known as rugby union, whereas the term “soccer” arose as slang for “association football.” Visitors and immigrants brought both sports to American schools (and immigrant enclaves), with the first game of football being played between Princeton and what is now Rutgers in 1869.¹⁰ It probably looked much more like soccer than modern American football, but its popularity among students and fans alike prompted colleges and high schools to adopt the sport and hire coaches like Yale’s Walter Camp, who developed rules governing things like tackling, stopping play after the ball is downed, scoring, and the forward pass.¹¹ Colleges that wanted to play Yale, Harvard, and other elites had to play by their rules, and so the sport Americans now know as football grew popular as a school activity long before it became a professional sport. (Rugby and what came to be known as “soccer football” in the United States also persisted in pockets in both schools and primarily immigrant communities.¹²)

This evolution is distinctly American and much different from what happened in England and other industrial countries. Football and rugby spread quickly from schools to communities, with “old boys” teams forming of school alumni as well as teams of working-class players, who turned professional and began playing each other under the banners of teams still renowned today, such as Liverpool, Sheffield, and Nottingham Forest. These clubs in turn developed programs for youth and amateurs, as did towns and cities of all sizes in England and in countries across Europe, South America, and European colonies in Africa and Asia.¹³ Football became the hegemonic sport in most of these countries, superseding rugby, cricket, and other local pursuits. Across the rest of the world, youth programs turned into academies within which wealthy clubs identified promising talent in their areas and eventually beyond. This elite-down approach complemented a much more informal grass-roots tradition: children throughout the world have always made games of kicking balls and other objects around, making the transition to organized soccer much simpler.¹⁴

In America, however, community-based clubs emerged in a very different way. As an outgrowth of the playground movement, local parks and recreational facilities served some communities with opportunities for low-level sport.¹⁵ However, these programs were not tied to professional clubs or other opportunities for the nurturing of talent. Instead, a significant portion of sport development remained linked to the educational system, a system that has endured to this day wherein boys and girls start out playing for local public organizations or not-for-profits like the Young Men’s Christian Association or the Boys and Girls Clubs of America and go on to school-based sport. Moreover, unlike countries where “soccer football” became the dominant sport, American children took up a variety of games including baseball, basketball, hockey, and other sports. In 1896,

Wisconsin set up a state high school association for athletics, followed in the early 1900s by other states and cities.¹⁶ Now, every year, more than eight million high school students will pull on a jersey, a swimsuit, a singlet, a leotard, or other gear to represent their school in interscholastic competition.¹⁷ Millions more will compete for elementary and middle schools in states across the country. Although physical education has existed inside the curriculum, sport has been on the outside but nonetheless integral. In US schools, sports are seen as an activity to teach character and provide opportunities for personal growth but also as a vector to develop talent for elite sporting endeavors such as college sports, professional leagues, and national teams. Some teams also function as a locus for community pride and celebration, perhaps most often in boys' football but also in a variety of other boys' and girls' sports in particular regions of the country. No other country in the world attempts to achieve all three of these goals through a scholastic sports program, and certainly not at the scale of that in the United States.

In terms of this middle goal—elite talent development—schools are profoundly inefficient mechanisms. To be fair, most American elite athletes compete in school sports at some level. However, the education and experience of local high school coaches varies widely, with technical expertise and motivational talent entirely dependent on who is employed by any particular school or school district or is available as an outside coach in a geographic community. Similarly, the availability of facilities, gear, and ancillary resources like weight rooms and sports-medicine staff is dictated by the wealth of the school and the priorities of its administration. Well-renowned teams may inspire families to direct aspiring athletes to that team's school by either moving or participating in a recruiting process. However, to a great degree, whether any particular school can cultivate the talents and desires of a particular athlete in a particular year is left largely to the chance that that school has the right coach, the right teammates, and the right resources.

For athletes who do not find themselves in the middle of this Venn diagram—and, it must be said, for parents who think their child could gain professional opportunities or financial aid to attend college through sports—a market emerged in the 1970s to provide private supplements or alternatives to school team sports. In baseball, softball, basketball, and other sports, both for-profit and nonprofit clubs were organized in communities as “the next level” in sport development.¹⁸ Soccer in the fast-growing community of Atlanta and its environs provides a case study for the evolution of such programs.

Soccer in Georgia

School soccer in Georgia dates back to 1908, when what is now Marist School fielded a team to compete against other Atlanta high schools. Writing in the *Atlanta Georgian*, sports editor Percy H. Whiting noted that faculty at other prep schools would watch this development closely, observing that “there is no denying that the American college game is not the perfect sport in the preparatory schools. It takes so much time and thought that it often leads to the

neglect of schoolwork. It is so strenuous that boys often receive comparatively serious injuries from it and now and then the country is shocked by the death of some boy, killed in a football game. Such a fatality happened last Saturday.”¹⁹ The Atlanta newspapers of the 1910s chronicled the proliferation of “soccer football” in high schools and grammar schools, with both Whiting and *Atlanta Journal* sports editor Julian Murphey writing frequent editorials espousing the sport on the scholastic and amateur levels.²⁰ However, the immigrants who championed the sport in Georgia largely went home in 1914 to fight in World War I, and the briefly flourishing grammar school league ceased operations the following year.²¹ Soccer did not return to Georgia schools until a handful of private schools in the 1950s began playing the sport, leading to the Georgia High School Association sanctioning league play beginning in 1966.²²

As this market was evolving, interest in soccer was growing after generations of dormancy. England’s triumph at the 1966 World Cup and the short-lived popularity of the North American Soccer League (NASL) gave a boost to the American Youth Soccer Association, born out of Southern California.²³ In Georgia, statewide outreach by the Atlanta Chiefs—who won the NASL title in 1968 and also hosted Brazil’s Santos and England’s Manchester City in “friendly” matches—exposed a wide swath of the state’s youth to the game.²⁴ Beyond their on-field success, the Chiefs made a lasting impact on the Georgia soccer community. Led by Welsh head coach and player Phil Woosnam, the club is believed to have held over 390 clinics across Atlanta and its surrounding areas.²⁵

The story of youth club soccer in Georgia officially began in 1967 with the establishment of the Georgia State Soccer Association (GSSA), now commonly known as Georgia Soccer. As an official National State Association and a member of the United States Soccer Federation (USSF), Georgia Soccer serves as the primary administrative body for youth and adult soccer in the state. Under its aegis, Bob Bass and Atlanta Chiefs players Ron Newman and Vic Rouse established the Decatur-DeKalb Soccer League in 1967, made up of 12 boys’ teams that played their matches at Emory University.²⁶ After high interest and involvement in its first year, the league partnered with the Decatur-DeKalb YMCA to expand and form the YMCA Summer Soccer League within Georgia Soccer, becoming the first YMCA in the United States to sponsor rec soccer. When the Chiefs folded in 1972, the soccer community remained upheld by parent volunteerism, public schools, and the YMCA, largely in DeKalb County. However, as Metro Atlanta continued to grow outside of the DeKalb area, parents grew tired of commuting to that area so their children could play organized soccer.

The club that became Georgia Impact in Cherokee County was one of these. Executive Director Shane Moore recalled that in 1971, the founders of the club took out loans against their homes to construct the first soccer field.²⁷ The first clubs were largely recreational, focused on providing opportunities for children to play for fun. This recreational movement grew as several Georgia counties began to establish their own programs. They offered soccer in public parks at affordable prices, making the sport more accessible outside of school. Soccer programs expanded across Georgia in the 1970s and 1980s, but the 1990s marked the true professionalization of the sport. This change was illustrated by the rise and eventual dominance of what would become the state’s “Big Five” clubs:

Tophat, Concorde Fire, Atlanta Fire United, United Futbol Academy, and Gwinnett Soccer Association, all within Georgia Soccer. The 1990s saw the original iterations of these clubs invest in select programs that provided soccer at more elite levels but with higher financial barriers. Well into the late 2000s, the most competitive tiers of Georgia Soccer remained the pinnacle of youth soccer in the state. The Georgia Soccer system operated much like the promotion and relegation models of international soccer. On the boys' side, teams competed to rise from Classic III to the highest tier, Classic I. Similarly, the girls' leagues ranged from Athena C up to the top division, Athena A.

Georgia Soccer also organizes the annual State Cup competition, which, for several decades, represented the highest levels of competition in the state because it was the sole path to the US Youth Soccer (USYS) Southern Regional Championships and, ultimately, the National Championship. As the best teams were found in Classic I, Athena A, and State Cup, these three competitions were a primary destination for college recruiters searching for local talent. However, as parents increasingly prioritized college pathways for their children, coaches and club directors formed new associations including the US Soccer Development Academy (USSDA) in 2007 and the Elite Clubs National League in 2009, promising higher levels of competition for the very best players in the state.

As competitive select soccer became increasingly lucrative, several other elite leagues were created in the years that followed, including the National League (NL) and the Development Player League (DPL). Amid this shift, Atlanta United established its academy in 2016, a year before its senior team took the field in Major League Soccer. In its inaugural season, the academy competed in the USSDA and won the national title, securing the first trophy in Atlanta United's history. The academy teams continued to play in the USSDA until the league's collapse in 2020, driven by financial strife of the COVID-19 pandemic and internal conflicts with MLS academy structure.²⁸ The same day on which USSDA's closure was announced, Major League Soccer revealed their plans for a new elite boys' player development platform, MLS Next, which launched later that year.

The continued creation of these national-level leagues drew the most competitive players away from the state structure, spurring a market-driven fragmentation of youth soccer. The largest clubs in the state, often based in Atlanta and its metro areas, led this migration away from Georgia Soccer. In 2018, six of these major clubs formed the Southeastern Clubs Champions League (SCCL) "to offer relevant, necessary programming for clubs in Metro Atlanta and its surrounding region."²⁹ As a result "Georgia Soccer, all of a sudden, became only the clubs outside of Atlanta," said Adrian Juarez, director of Macon Soccer Club.³⁰ Teams outside the metro Atlanta bubble were forced to travel hours to their games, from Macon to Athens, Rome, and Savannah, for example. "Georgia [Soccer] was no longer a competitive place for our teams," Juarez continued. "And our players were not getting the opportunity to play and show themselves in higher leagues."

This fracture between Georgia Soccer and elite leagues like SCCL and ECNL replicated the national split between USYS and United States Club Soccer (USCS). US Youth Soccer has a strategic plan premised on participation and growth of the game, whereas USCS focuses specifically on providing elite competition.

Although nearly all state soccer associations, including Georgia Soccer, belong to USYS, most of the elite leagues fall under the USCS umbrella. This divide creates intense competition for the same pool of youth clubs, players, and teams. Savannah United Executive Director Gary Wright highlights another problem with this national schism: “You haven’t got the best players playing the best players.”³¹ With a fractured and saturated talent pipeline that is reflected nationwide, it is nearly impossible to effectively identify and develop youth talent in the state.

Another barrier to talent identification lies in one of the biggest buzzwords of the youth soccer sphere, “pay-to-play.” For children to play at the highest levels, parents have to pay the highest fees. For instance, the cost to participate on teams that are part of elite leagues such as ECNL and SCCL often range anywhere from \$1,000 to \$10,000, taking into consideration factors like league registration, tournament fees, uniforms, travel, equipment, and more.

Some argue that the pay-to-play system is necessary to ensure the best quality of facilities, coaching, and resources. “When people see it’s a pay-to-play game and they’re saying, ‘that’s unfair, you’re not allowing these players opportunities,’ they don’t realize the cost behind that,” said Robert Roddie, girls director of coaching at Georgia Impact.³² Roddie said that funds are necessary to pay top-tier coaches and staff and to maintain fields. He also mentioned the cost of joining elite leagues and providing high-level competition. “It all goes to a good cause and for the betterment of the club,” said Roddie.

Neil McNab, president of Georgia Soccer, said the entry to play soccer is often quite cheap, and there are financial aid and scholarship opportunities for talented players from underserved communities.³³ Georgia Impact officials said that they put around \$55,000 into its budget for scholarships each year.

Some opponents of the pay-to-play system also highlight the unfortunate necessity of high player fees. “Unfortunately, in order for us to survive as an organization, we do have to charge higher fees,” Juarez said. However, he said that for the United States to develop players that can compete at the international level, “soccer has to be free... I think there’s a lot of talent out there that, unfortunately, can’t afford to play soccer.”

As both arguments mentioned, the pay-to-play system excludes communities from competing at the highest levels. Although recreational leagues may be more affordable for lower income families, participating on premier teams requires significant financial commitments. Wright said that elite leagues can miss out on talented players because many cannot afford their costs. On top of financial barriers, competing in these elite leagues demands a substantial time commitment. Often, players are required to practice three to five times a week and asked to travel several hours by car or plane to participate in tournaments. These expectations are unreasonable for many working-class families, as they can place significant burdens by forcing parents to take time off work and requiring players to miss school. Juarez highlights that, in Macon, a lot of players in the public school system tend to stay in recreational programs due to these financial and time constraints. At his club, recreational games are always at the same time and location on the weekends to make it easier for these families. “We start in the morning and then they can enjoy the rest of the weekend,” he said.

“In comparison, of course, the travel program can take your whole weekend away with Saturday and Sunday games.” Another common alternative for young players who may not be able to access elite soccer are majority-Hispanic Sunday leagues and tournaments that often take place in neighborhoods across the country.

Minorities are also often underrepresented at the highest levels of play, which can be a result of economic and language barriers as well as biases about who belongs in elite soccer. Wright noted that many minority athletes tend to be drawn to more traditionally American sports, such as basketball and American football. Additionally, although scholarships may be available for talented players who attend club tryouts, what happens to those who don’t receive or cannot access outreach? Cristina Coca, director of event and tournament operations at Georgia Soccer, said language barriers and transportation difficulties are factors that can prevent families from playing club soccer: “If they’re not going to the tryouts, they’re not getting those opportunities.”³⁴ She added that Georgia Soccer is investing in partnerships including the “Get on the Bus” program, which provides children from underserved areas with transportation to club facilities, uniforms, equipment, and structured play.

Discussion

School sports may be seen as an example of American exceptionalism. The presence of sports in schools is not just tolerated; it’s celebrated. Going back to the earliest days of school-based sport, educators have lauded their teams as laboratories of experiential learning in which students must build skills in teamwork, perseverance, leadership, and other areas that are not commonly taught in the classroom. Sports accelerate fitness and teach healthy habits. And varsity teams are supposed to provide critical developmental opportunities for athletes who want to compete at “the next level,” be that in the American college system or in professional or semiprofessional programs.

However, school-based sports present a basic market inefficiency in which variables that have nothing to do with athletic potential, such as geography and school zoning, play a determining role in the coaching and other resources that athletes are able to receive. Even private schools with gorgeous fields and gleaming weight rooms may lack coaches with the education and drive to provide elite opportunities. A market-based solution to this inefficiency has arisen in the form of private clubs, but it has inherent problems of its own. The public good desired by the country, fans of the sport, and athletes themselves is the largest possible pool of well-prepared players and pathways for them to remain involved in the sport as long as they desire. But the private good supplied by soccer clubs (and those in other sports) is an elite experience for a single child, to be purchased by a single parent. Therefore, clubs compete to maximize the perceived value (and thus the price) for families.

Both the institution of school sports and the market response to its failings are indeed American exceptions, but generally not in healthy ways. In most countries, athletes encounter sport in community organizations and those with

promise are scouted by clubs and leagues and pursue their dreams outside the educational context, often leaving formal education altogether. German sports clubs that evolved after World War II served important community functions, developing teams that were important sources of community pride and eventually embodied talent development pipelines of their own under the auspices of national organizations.³⁵ In England, the men's national team's failure to qualify for the European Championships in 2008 and early exit from the 2010 World Cup prompted a reorganization of youth and academy soccer, bringing public funding together with finances from the nationwide Football Association and individual clubs to create the Elite Player Performance Plan.³⁶ The plan called for clubs at all levels in the English system to build out their academy programs and revived a rule that stated that players may travel no more than 90 minutes for training with the club they join and also set the goal that all players would be within 90 minutes of an elite training opportunity. At the 2024 men's European Championships, 19 of the England side's 26 players had been developed through the performance plan. Other countries also have implemented national talent development strategies centered on nationwide training centers, such as Clairefontaine in France.³⁷ In countries where the state takes a larger role, such as China, state-sponsored academies enroll athletes with potential and focus resources to help them develop primarily in their sport. For example, the basketball star Yang Hansen grew up in Shandong Province in China. In fifth grade, he entered the Zibo Sports Academy in his hometown, a government-funded residential school for training athletes.³⁸ When he reached high school age, he began playing for the Qingdao Guoxin Club, a member of the Chinese Basketball Association. At age 19, he was drafted by the Portland Trail Blazers in 2025.

Conclusion

The American school sports experience holds many rewards for participants, such as building friendships and instilling pride in one's school and community. But the system's inefficiency in matching skills to resources has prompted other actors to enter the market for youth talent development in the United States, including private academies and indeed the entire industry of privatized youth sports clubs. These clubs exist across many sports and often employ highly skilled coaches, offering elite training and competitive opportunities for athletes who show promise. However, the club system embodies inefficiencies of its own. Spots on club teams are a scarce resource, and clubs operate to turn a profit or at least to generate revenue to pay their coaches and expand their operations. As a result, parents with children in club sports will pay thousands of dollars if not tens of thousands in club fees and travel on an annual basis. Moreover, clubs compete with one another for both coaching and athletic talent, often leading them to form separate leagues or pursue regional or national competition to brand themselves as elite and attract even better athletes.

These two factors—cost and interclub competition—shut the doors to many promising athletes across the United States. Those without the income to cover

fees and expenses are shut out of the system unless they are visibly talented enough to prompt a club to offer them a scholarship. And by dispersing talent across a competing range of leagues and clubs, athletes do not have a chance to polish their skills against the best possible competition. Finally, late bloomers who do not show immediate promise are left out of the system altogether.

In 2025, both club sports and school sports reached new levels of population and popularity in both Georgia and nationally.³⁹ However, only three players with Georgia roots—Emily Sonnett, Caleb Wiley, and Walker Zimmerman—are in the selection pools for US senior national soccer teams. Markets remain misaligned: As long as youth sports organizations are selling experiences to parents and national and elite teams are buying talent, inefficiencies will hobble both buyers and sellers alike.

That said, the changing demographics of the state are creating the conditions for soccer to continue to grow. A 2023 report found far higher levels of interest in soccer among millennials and members of generation Z than older cohorts nationally and growing levels of interest across White, Hispanic, and Black respondents.⁴⁰ Given the youth and diversity of the state, more children likely will be growing up here with an interest in soccer, particularly following the men's World Cup in 2026. It remains to be seen whether the system evolves to meet their needs as a collective or if the most talents are left behind by the pay-to-play model.

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