

Arizona Club Soccer Produces Scholarship-Backed Players, but At What Cost?

By John Dickerson

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Kieran Clancy loved soccer. Like most club soccer players in Arizona, the 18-year-old had long hoped to land a college soccer scholarship.

Clancy and his family had done all the right things. Since he was 10, he'd played with one of the most expensive clubs in Arizona, the Sereno Soccer Club, at a cost of about \$10,000 a year.

This past June, Sereno's top boys' team gathered for the State Cup. Clancy scheduled college scouts to travel to Arizona to watch him play, according to one of his teammates.

But Clancy never got to play in the tournament. A signature on a form showed up — allegedly Clancy's signature — stating the boy had agreed to drop out of the game, to make way for a college All-Star player. (Clancy's mother did not return repeated phone messages left for her and Kieran.)

As he and his family apparently told soccer officials, after Sereno had won the state championship and then the regional championship in Hawaii, Clancy never signed the form. At a meeting of soccer officials, they said that his coach, Les Armstrong, 45, forged his name to get him off the team.

Such are the high stakes in Arizona club soccer.

It caught the interest of the club team in Colorado that had lost to Sereno. The team hired lawyers to investigate. In July, the US Youth Soccer National Championship board revoked Arizona's victory, awarding the championship to the second-place team.

Then, the Arizona Youth Soccer Association conducted its own investigation. It concluded that Armstrong had ordered the forgery.

On August 8, the Arizona board suspended Armstrong from coaching soccer for five months. As the director of all Sereno coaches, Armstrong was making a base salary of \$75,000 at the time.

Armstrong went from being *the* coach to beat in Arizona to being unemployed.

"Kieran had these college coaches coming out to see him [play] at the State Cup game. It was just terrible because they forged his drop signature on the form," says a Sereno teammate who played with Clancy since they were 10.

The teammate, now 19, doesn't want his name used — for fear that Les Armstrong could sabotage his chances of getting a college scholarship.

"With people like Les, who have huge pull in certain colleges, one phone call could destroy us. If he makes one call to a university that I'm looking at, there goes my soccer career," the young man says.

Armstrong says Clancy was never on the team in the first place. He maintains that he never signed anything.

Armstrong's drive to win the State Cup was typical, according to a Sereno parent who also worked as a sports psychologist for Sereno athletes. That man, Daren Treasure, resigned from the club in April, citing an abusive culture that trickled down from Armstrong.

"Based on my observations and work with the coaches and virtually all competitive teams in the Club, I believe the culture in the Club is at best unhealthy and at worst abusive," Treasure wrote in his April 17 resignation.

"Winning cannot be the ends that justifies any means, and the desire to win should never serve as a justification of dysfunctional, abusive, or demeaning comments or behaviors," Treasure wrote, adding that under Armstrong, "winning has come at too high a price for the emotional, psychological, and physical well-being of the children and adolescents in the club's charge."

On a recent Saturday afternoon, about 5,000 soccer players, parents, and siblings gathered for the annual Ahwatukee Foothills Soccer Tournament. A comfortable breeze passed over the groomed grass. SUVs, Lexuses, and motor homes with plates from Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado lined the parking lot.

Soccer moms with umbrellas and snacks relaxed in lawnchairs as their kids played. But the apparently calm parents at this tournament belie a deeper reality that's taking hold of Arizona club soccer.

As parents have grown increasingly concerned about college scholarships, the competition — both on and off the field — has grown fierce.

Standing under an awning, digging through a box of red T-shirts, Alec Gefrides, director of the tournament, says some Arizona club parents and coaches have lost sight of the sport altogether.

"Most states only allow eight tournaments a year. Arizona has 42, so the kids are literally playing year-round," he says. Gefrides adds that he knows a lot of great parents and coaches in club soccer. But the competition is getting out of hand.

"It's ridiculous. It's jealousy. Those parents pay all that money, and they want to be the best because they're paying all that money. As a parent, you get obsessive, I think," he says. "When I

see somebody saying a 10-year-old kid shouldn't even be on the field, that's going too far. These parents are way too competitive."

That competition routinely spills off the soccer field. A few weeks after Sereno director Les Armstrong lost his job and was suspended, two parents of former Sereno players contacted *New Times*. Both parents requested anonymity.

Over coffee, the parents told stories about Armstrong. One provided an inch-thick binder of legal "dirt" on Armstrong: divorce documents, a citation from the city of Scottsdale for urinating in public, and a stack of photos that looked as though they'd been taken by a private investigator. The photos show Armstrong standing on a soccer field in Nevada, a violation of Armstrong's suspension, they said. (Armstrong says he wasn't coaching in Nevada, just watching a game, which would not be a violation of his suspension.)

The parents' bold attempt to oust a soccer coach is indicative of the high stakes in club soccer. Not surprisingly, the entire trend of club sports — now a national phenomenon — was born out of a lust to win.

In the late 1970s, parents and coaches across the country created "clubs" as an opportunity to get the upper hand. Most school sports last only two or three months, so parents created private clubs to train their kids year-round.

When club players showed up for school sports, they dominated the players who trained for only a few weeks. Other parents saw the skill of club players and quickly enrolled their kids in clubs, too. By the mid-1990s, the best high school athletes in nearly every sport played club.

Now some of the best club soccer coaches in Arizona ban their kids from playing high school sports altogether because they say the competition is beneath them.

Twenty years ago, however, club soccer in Arizona was still just a half-step up from recreational soccer. Soccer moms brought zip-lock bags of sliced oranges to games and gave carpool rides to kids who played the sport for the fun of it. Most coaches were volunteer dads who didn't get a penny for their hours on the field.

Now, soccer moms refuse to give rides to their children's teammates if those teammates get more playing time. Directors like Armstrong make annual salaries of \$50,000 to \$75,000, on top of the \$50 to \$100 an hour they can charge for private training sessions. Coaches ban parents from talking to their kids during games and, during out-of-town tournaments, some coaches require parents to sleep in separate hotels from their children.

Club sports have grown into the premier training grounds for top college athletes, particularly in soccer. As the relationship between club and college soccer tightened, a market for paid coaches developed.

The concept is that a professional coach can help a high school student get noticed by a college coach and receive a scholarship. Because colleges have more scholarship funding for female soccer players (see sidebar for more information), the competition is most brutal among the girls.

To this day, the best club coaches in Arizona don't waste their time coaching boys' soccer. Coaches like Armstrong spend their evenings and weekends coaching girls under-15 to girls under-18, for which parents gladly pay between \$8,000 and \$12,000 per year.

In a culture of intense competition, some are wondering whether the basic love for soccer has been lost.

When the board members of Sereno met to discipline Armstrong for the alleged forgery, about 100 parents and athletes showed up to protest. The issue became so nasty that Sereno president and soccer mom Darla Sipolt wrote in a letter to parents:

"Somewhere along the line, it seems that some folks have lost sight of the reason why we are all here — FOR OUR KIDS! Let's be mindful that it is still YOUTH soccer."

Others are concerned, too. Athletic trainers worry about chronic over-training and career-ending injuries during the teen years.

High school and college coaches say the best athletes are no longer playing high school soccer — an experience those athletes could eventually regret missing if they don't get a college scholarship.

Some wonder whether club coaches, focused on their salaries, have become more concerned with self-promotion than player development.

Parents say they're concerned about verbal abuse from overly competitive coaches, too. Some are having second thoughts about the psychological effects of throwing 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds into that mix.

Jim Dougher's oldest daughter, Maggie, played on Sereno's top team for three years. He remembers a time when Armstrong berated his daughter in front of him and the other parents.

"We were at a game at regionals and Maggie got called offsides. Les yelled out, 'Oh. Maggie, how the fuck can you be so stupid?' I said, 'I can't believe he just said that.' Other parents said, 'Oh, don't worry. It's nothing. He's just trying to get her motivated,'" he says.

Fed up with the drama at Sereno, Dougher recently transferred his younger daughter to another top club that he feels is slightly less competitive, SC Del Sol.

"In my opinion, youth soccer has gotten out of control. It's become a cottage industry. My other girl is going to [a tournament in San Diego] this weekend. We're being forced to stay in certain hotels, pay more than we would at other hotels. We have to prepay for three nights, no matter if we stay there or not."

Other parents are less concerned about cursing and more concerned about losing. They're wondering where Les Armstrong — known for his championship teams — will be coaching when his suspension ends in December.

Before the early 1990s, there was little money to be made in club soccer, says Hugh Bell, who has coached club, high school, and college soccer in Arizona for more than 20 years. Soccer was the most popular sport in the world, but it wasn't a priority for parents or kids in Arizona.

Among other reasons, American kids had no superstar soccer players to idolize. Boys in the 1950s could dream of becoming the next Mickey Mantle, and the 1980s begat Magic Johnson, but there were no American professional soccer pros to emulate.

Major League Baseball started playing its World Series in 1903.

The NBA took root in 1946.

Leatherheads formed the NFL in 1921.

Major League Soccer, the only pro league to succeed in the U.S., wasn't formed until 1993.

Now American kids can dream about playing in the MLS or even the World Cup. They can idolize superstars like David Beckham or Tim Howard, a New Jersey goalkeeper who now plays on a multimillion-dollar contract in the U.K. (Ironically, Howard didn't play for an expensive club team. The U.S. National Team recruited him straight from his high school, where he played basketball, too.)

As soccer's popularity increased in the U.S., so did the market for paid club coaches.

Alec Gefrides, at the Ahwatukee Foothills Soccer Club, says that because soccer is young in the U.S., parents don't know the sport. They hire foreign experts to coach the kids.

"Dads know how to teach baseball, basketball, football. But dads don't know soccer in the U.S. So what happens is the dad would be trying to teach, but their knowledge of the sport is just not big enough," Gefrides says.

"Then these English and Brazilian guys who didn't have careers moved to the U.S. and found this huge hole for kids who needed coaches. They didn't take a lot of money back then. But they knew how to teach the game. The dads realized really fast, 'Wow, I don't know anything about soccer.' So a guy could call his buddy back in England. 'Hey, come over and coach soccer.' Then all the sudden the whole club soccer phenomenon happens."

Les Armstrong was one of those international coaches. In 1986, he moved to Phoenix from Scotland. He lived with his uncle, a plumber, and worked at an indoor soccer complex in Tempe.

In 1988, Armstrong took the reins of Sereno from a volunteer dad and became one of the first paid coaches in the state. The money was tight. Armstrong says he made just \$114 a week when he started.

"I was painting fields, working with other coaches. We were working 70 hours a week, easy, and every weekend. But it's not work when you love it. Even painting the fields, I loved doing it because I wanted the teams to come and say, 'Wow, look at Sereno's field,'" he says.

Clubs with paid coaches soon began to dominate the competition. Other clubs followed suit, hiring their own full-time coaches. Now the top clubs in Arizona have staffs of 10 or 12 coaches, all on salary. Directors at top clubs can make between \$75,000 and \$85,000 per year.

In those days, Sereno was one of the few clubs in Arizona. Now the state has 63 clubs. Many of those clubs have dozens of teams. The five or six top clubs vie for the best players in the state. Those clubs have multiple girls' teams and boys' teams in each age bracket. At the very top of each girls' and boys' bracket is an A-team and, below that, a B-team.

Even within clubs, the competition to get bumped up to the A-team can be fierce. Armstrong remembers when a new board of directors was elected. The board members privately tried to use their positions to promote their own kids.

"Within one week, I had already been approached by three of them, asking me if I could push their kid up onto the top team," he says.

As demand for club coaches increased, also-ran soccer players from England, Brazil and Central Europe migrated to the U.S. to coach. Now the directors of Arizona's top clubs hail from overseas. Mark Lowe, director of SC Del Sol, is from England. Petar Draksin, who directs the club CISCO, is Romanian.

Ironically, given his international status, Draksin thinks the influence of international coaches has been detrimental to soccer in Arizona. "We have too many foreign coaches," Draksin says. "If we foreign coaches were so great, our own countries would keep us. Ninety percent of coaches are great. But there are some who are very controlling and many of them are in the top clubs."

Hugh Bell is an Irish-born American who moved to New Jersey from Ireland during high school. He coaches the men's team at Yavapai College and has coached at every level in Arizona.

"Some of these people — who usually talk with an accent by the way — are supposed to be God's answer to coaching. That is the biggest joke in the world. They come to this country and have an opportunity to make money. And they're just waiting for the next check to come," he says.

Whether it's the fault of foreign coaches or not, Arizona club players now train and play more than those in neighboring states. Some parents feel the players get more attention from college coaches than they did in the early 1990s.

Nevada, Colorado, and California each have eight or 12 weekend tournaments a year. Arizona has 42. This doesn't mean Arizona's players are better. It just means they play — and pay to play — in a lot more tournaments.

Also unlike in other states, Arizona club soccer continues year-round. Some drive from Gilbert or even Yuma to make practices in central Phoenix four nights a week. Then the teams spend all weekend together at tournaments.

Coaches on the top teams are discouraging — or altogether banning — their kids from playing high school soccer. College players and coaches think that's a disservice to the athletes.

"Playing high school got me prepared to play for a different coach, because my club and high school coach weren't the same," says Brittany Cole, a freshman at the University of Arizona on a full-ride soccer scholarship. Cole played for Corona del Sol and for a club that allows its players to compete in high school, AZFC.

Many of the girls on the soccer team at Xavier Preparatory, a private Catholic school in central Phoenix, do manage to play both club and high school soccer.

Xavier's athletic trainer, Laurie White, says that with the increase in club competition has come an increase in career-ending injuries. "I have to say that, from back then [in the '80s] until now, I just see so many more over-use injuries and chronic things," White says.

Some former club parents also think the training has gone too far.

"I would say that [Armstrong's] training style is a somewhat abusive, controlling style," says Peggy Neely, a soccer mom — and the vice mayor of Phoenix. Neely's daughter, who now plays for University of Nevada-Las Vegas, walked away from Armstrong's Sereno team during her senior year — after she felt punished for deciding to play high school soccer.

"Les' deal was always to control everything they did at all times," Neely says. "There were kids who had brothers and sisters graduating from high school. They didn't go to the graduation because they were too afraid of what Les would do. Those are just some of the tactics he would use. Les wouldn't even let the parents stay at the hotel with the kids."

Asked about over-training his female athletes, Armstrong says there's no such thing as over-training.

"Over-training, it doesn't exist. The bar was set here," he points to his chest. "We took the bar, and we made it up here," he points above his forehead. "Some kids are not capable of stepping out of the comfort zone. Those are the parents who will complain. They don't want to travel.

They just want to have fun and have cupcakes after the game and play some baseball, too. That's not how it works."

Armstrong says that if a kid won't play up to the level he or she is capable of, he'll tell them: "No, take your boots, get the hell out of here. We don't want players who are going to decide when they're going to train and not. This is a special environment. If you want to be here and prosper, then you'll play by my rules."

The scholarship dream rarely comes true. Some 36 years after Title 9 went into effect, women's soccer is incredibly competitive. That doesn't keep Arizona parents from dreaming, though, or from paying thousands of dollars to keep their daughters in the best clubs.

"I know now kids are thinking about playing college when they're like 8 or 9," says Kyleyn Felts, who attended ASU on a soccer scholarship.

She was a starter and captain of ASU's soccer team until spring, when she finished her senior year. *ESPN the Magazine* named her to the all-district team twice. Now, Felts coaches under-9 soccer for the Ahwatukee Foothills Soccer Club.

Felts, who played club soccer in California, says Arizona's club culture has an increasing over-emphasis on scholarships.

"Now I see more pressure from parents to get scholarships. A guy approached me in the gym and asked if the SoCal Blues helped prepare me for a scholarship. I was like, 'Yeah, they helped.' Then I found out in the stream of the conversation that his daughter was 9 years old. I was just blown away."

Few, if any, parents will recoup the thousands they invest into club soccer, college coaches and other experts say. Alan Meeder, former college coach for University of California-Santa Barbara and director of The Soccer Academy, says most scholarships are only partial.

"Cobi Jones [an American soccer legend who played for the Los Angeles Galaxy] was a walk-on at UCLA. He was not a scholarship student. That's a reality check for some of these kids. Cobi Jones wasn't a scholarship player at UCLA," Meeder says.

Bell agrees. "That's nonsense that you have to play club to get scholarships. I have sent players — very, very good players — to Division I programs. I'm talking about Alan Gordon, who now plays for Galaxy. That's quality. Now, did Alan Gordon get 100 percent at Oregon State? No. He got an 85 percent scholarship, but that didn't start until he was a junior," Bell says.

Other coaches confirmed that the majority of scholarships they give out are not a full ride. Many are not even awarded until an athlete's junior or senior year.

Jim Dougher spent \$32,000 for his daughter Maggie to play three years at Sereno. During her first two years at Washington State University, Maggie didn't receive any athletic scholarship. Now the captain of the team, she gets a 70 percent athletic scholarship, which will equate to about \$22,911 in scholarship savings by the time she graduates. That's about \$9,000 less than Dougher invested in club soccer.

"There are very, very, very few full-ride offers," he says.

On an early November morning, Les Armstrong is seated in the open-air patio of an Einstein Bros. Bagels in Phoenix. Steam from his coffee swirls into the chilly air. Armstrong has just returned from a visit to his mom, in Aberdeen, Scotland. He's counting the days until his suspension ends.

Soon, he'll get back to doing what he loves: coaching soccer. He says he has three job offers and that wherever he lands, it will become the best club in that state (he won't say which state) within years.

One thing is sure: Armstrong won't be returning to Sereno. President Darla Sipolt says the club remains competitive, but adds, "We're trying to broaden our perspective, as opposed to being just about wins and losses."

Armstrong has shoulder-length hair parted down the middle. He's wearing a waterproof Nike training shirt, warm-up pants, and an athletic watch. Armstrong says that after 20 years of directing a club, with more than 40 teams per year, he can point to dozens of parents and players who enjoyed their years at Sereno.

Paige Carmichael, a senior on Texas A&M's soccer team, told the Sereno newsletter that Armstrong prepared her to play at the college level. "I think the club experience I had with Sereno prepared me above and beyond for college. Les really made me — I think everyone else would agree he did the same for them — the player I am today."

Claire Bodiya, a captain on the University of Arizona soccer team, agrees. "When I came in to University of Arizona along with the other girls from Sereno, we were definitely the most prepared," she says.

Armstrong's former players have excelled in college, and two former Sereno girls on the U.S. Women's National Team, which recently played in the World Cup.

Armstrong says the parents who aren't happy are the ones whose kids didn't make it to the next level, probably because they weren't good enough.

"The reality is that, if my kid has a bad experience, the easiest thing is to blame somebody. Right now, I'm a pretty easy target. They can blame me for the rain, the snow. I'm probably at fault for the economy right now."

Armstrong says he doesn't mind parents complaining about his dirty mouth, but he wishes they'd confront him in person — rather than baiting a newspaper. He says the parents can be just as brutal, whether they swear or not.

One group of club parents booted a "scholarship player" who was an African refugee off the team because he was getting more playing time than their rich white kids, Armstrong says.

"On road trips, we were asking people 'Can you take one of these kids?' These are kids that have no money. We were asking 'Can somebody let this kid share a room with you?' They'd go, 'No, there's no way I'm taking him, because my son's only playing 20 percent of the time, and he's playing 80 percent of the time. We'll not take him in,'" Armstrong says.

"The culture really changed. It got kind of twisted, you know, from being a team sport, which is what it should be, and it ended up being a group of individuals — parents — doing what they think is best for their own kids," he adds.

For all his wily ways, Armstrong has delivered what club soccer parents paid for — victory at any cost and opportunities to play before college scouts. Former Sereno parent Jim Dougher says, "Les was verbally abusive, in my opinion. His method for motivation was fear and intimidation, a lot of threats. But he really does a good job of getting kids prepared to play at a college level."

Competitive parents created the market for coaches like Armstrong. Now, it seems, they're getting what they paid for.