

## **RPI, CYL, and the PDL: A Primer on Developmental Perspectives.**

Ask a blindfolded person to describe an elephant and you'll get a number of different descriptions depending on where they're placed. It's an example familiar to most folks when broaching the subject of perspective.

All coaches, clubs, and team representatives within the WSYSA organization have views that pertain only to the part of the elephant they're in charge of describing. When we rely on these descriptions to define how we manage and care for just those parts, maintaining the integrity of the organization (and in this case the elephant) is impossible.

Programs originally designed to work in conjunction with each other, for the benefit of the entire organization, have been allowed to develop competitive agendas that function only for the benefit of that program or authority, and as a result we all suffer the consequences of well-intentioned but short-sighted solutions.

A brief review of WSYSA's league formation and current issues support this thesis.

### **Associations and Premier Leagues**

Over 20 years ago the Premier Leagues were formed with a great deal of thoughtful consideration. Competitive play at the District level was inconsistent and dependent on the depth of the player pool within that boundary.

Associations, described in the bylaws as a minimum grouping of teams rather than clubs, were assigned the seed for Premier League play. At that time there was but one paid professional coach in all of WSYSA, Bobby Howe.

Enlarging the team pool to a state wide scope and limiting the number of positions to be competed for created a strong set of tiered leagues. The League Placement Qualifying Tournament was created to take the best District teams originally entering the U13 age group and place them into the Premier leagues based on their number of losses in a simple bracket format.

Conceptually this is a sound structure for a limited number of teams entering the tournament format. It was successful for over a decade before the ability of this system to respond to club and team needs was exceeded.

The LPT's were shifted to U14 and the U13 league was recreated to prepare teams for travel and obtain top seeds for the LPT's. As the development of the sport included areas from which teams did not play in the State U13 league, their arrival in the LPT pool as unranked teams often upset the seeding principle and created 'good and bad' draws. In fact, the variation of depth in each of the U13 divisions ensures debate on the draw every year.

Soon the number of teams applying for LPT's exceeded the number of 'slots' that each District had been awarded (2). Districts were relied upon to send only the teams best suited for this high level of play, and some instituted 'mini-LPT's' to determine the best qualified teams from their District. The argument was made that some Districts had more qualified teams than others, so the mini-LPT format was scrapped and all teams from all Districts were free to achieve any level of play conceived.

Inter-District Leagues were created to try and accumulate the best teams that didn't make the State Premier Leagues into one league. The Districts were unable to cooperate well enough to sustain the original concept and the IDL was folded into the State as the WSYDL, but only as an extension of the LPT selection format.

So the system that is relied upon to put teams at the appropriate level marginally sorts and ranks teams for seeds, does not account for out of State or remote team play, and over the course of a three weekend tournament of attrition places teams into a single 'stack' of leagues that does not mimic population-ability trends in any regard.

Political realities preclude restricted approvals from Districts. Districts can no longer use knowledgeable discretion as an argument for allowing only the best teams to apply for U13 or LPT play.

Furthermore, the competitive nature of team formation as an endorsement of club capacity outweighs the rationale of appropriate level play for all aspects of player and club development. Distortions occur when agendas presume status and ability beyond the means of both. Establishing standards that are attainable, objective, and open are critical steps toward solving these distortions.

### **CYL, RPI, PDL - Oh My!**

Why spoof on a classic line from 'The Wizard of Oz'? The bizarre and outlandish environment of Oz provides immediate proof to Dorothy that she is no longer in Kansas, and even her fears can only reference the threats she is familiar with, 'Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!'. Who would have imagined the flying monkeys?!

The movie serves an entertaining metaphor for the sometimes frightening transitions of youth and the limits of idiosyncratic thinking. Change is inevitable, and positive change is achieved through thoughtful and timely action based on a realistic grasp of the situation. The proposed changes seek to facilitate steady growth by benchmarking developmental standards to ensure quality rather than quantity.

### **Commissioners Youth League and the Relative Power Index**

The Commissioners Youth League (CYL) strives to create more balanced leagues between Districts that previously could field partial and inequitable leagues after the U13 age groups. An IDL has formed between Districts I, II, III and IV to create stronger, more balanced leagues for those older teams that fall short of State level play.

Level of play governs league formation. Good leagues are often the most competitive and tightly contested. No 'easy games' or 'easy wins' is a good thing as long as some of them are winnable. The best leagues feature average goal differentials of close to 1 and 75% or more of the teams close to .500.

For a number of years District III has admirably served as an adjunct IDL, where a central location and strong number of teams and fields provided a logistical magnet point for smaller District's teams. We all have been fortunate enough to benefit from the gracious extension of their league memberships. However it hid the real nature of the needs presented by clubs and teams, since inclusion needed only an application and a subjective recommendation on level of play.

Establishing a more objective measure for team strength, with the cooperation of all the Districts, was sought.

Simple is almost always better and the current point format for W-T-L in league play has done a great job of providing an easy to understand metric for determining position. However this simple metric needs an immense number of rules and tie-breakers to determine league finish when point ties occur, ultimately depending on a coin toss to distinguish the teams. It does not translate well between leagues, where a team may appear strong but be in a weak division, or appear weak and be in a strong division, or be mediocre in a strong division, etc... Goal differentials and league reputations have proven equally inadequate for accurately assessing level of play between leagues.

Several different ranking algorithms were evaluated, including the models used by hockey, football, basketball and soccer, not only from the NCAA but also the NHL, NFL, FIBA and FIFA. National and regional ranking systems that take all 'registered' cup results during summer tournaments were also reviewed.

Few can argue that the largest collegiate is not also the best balanced tournament - the NCAA 'Big Dance' men's basketball championship. It utilizes a system that uses the strength of opposition to compute a relative index of team ranks. The Ratings Percentage Index is only a portion of what is evaluated by NCAA administrators in setting up the pools. Most of the other weighting factors for selection to the NCAA tournament have less to do with ability than with marketability.

Those elements that do not pertain to competitive level have been removed and this method has been adapted to the youth soccer game to include capped margins. It has proven accurate in assessing current strength and reliable in predicting near future results. The Relative Power Index (RPI) weights wins, ties and losses according to the strength of the opponent and regularly adjusts league strengths to actual results in cross-over competition. It's a remarkably fair system that rewards teams for good performances against strong or equal opponents and not on reputation or large results against weak opponents.

Utilizing scores in League play, and crossover tournament results from the winter Cups and LPTs, this tool is utilized from U13 to U18 league play among all Districts. With the crossover matches from cups all leagues and teams in those leagues become linked in the index. Since it's based on real results and adjusts on a game by game basis (with an established goal differential cap), teams literally play to their appropriate level. The ability of a team to consistently maintain a high level of play results in higher ranking scores. The cap prevents one sided wins or losses from distorting the overall view of the team.

Running league and cup results for the last 3 years, the RPI has proven 90+% accurate in estimating future LPT results, and the accuracy increases to above 95% when promotion/relegation confirms 'mis-drawn' LPT teams at U15.

If the theory of level of play is true, that is if every team is playing at the appropriate level, then all league results will trend towards balance. From the highest to the lowest, appropriate level will result in tighter matches and fewer blowouts. In general, league champions will have fewer wins and bottom of the table teams will have fewer losses. More importantly, the average goal differentials for league play should drop closer to 1. In this regard the CYL has proven extremely successful.

### **Player-Club Development League**

Clubs that most often frequent the State premier leagues, (in this case the top 16 field 75% of the teams in Divisions 1-3, U14-U18), and representing 7% of all clubs in WSYSA, also provide over 30% of the budget revenue for WSYSA.

The Coaching Directors of most of these clubs, frustrated by the inconsistent competition offered in the growing U13 State league, approached the Commissioners for resolution. It prompted a discussion on the level of play offered at U11 through U13, and a statistical study (see attached tables) confirmed the Coaching Director's concerns.

The placement of the teams and the pressures for clubs to be considered 'equitable' at younger player ages has resulted in the abuse of the game through improper recruiting, training, and a focus on results instead of quality. Teams can be successful at younger ages on the basis only of raw athletic ability and not develop the necessary skills for future success in the game. Many clubs make the argument that they provide equitable services for less, but never have incurred the costs of Premier league preparation, qualification, and league play, nor have demonstrated this ability over time.

The document produced by the joint committee of Commissioners and Coaching Directors attests to the need and desire to improve the quality of soccer in the State. It's still available for viewing on the District IV website, on the public side of the site. All who read this article are encouraged to read the relevant articles on site regarding the PDL, the CYL, and the RPI.

An open-ended system of standards was debated and invoked on a trial basis. This standard is evolving to better assimilate and meet the need for ‘level of play.’ The open nature of the standard allows clubs to move into, and out of, the PDL according to their performance over time. There is no desire or aim to make this an exclusive, one-time entry organization. Clubs will move into and out of the league based on the criteria set before the committee.

The Player-Club Development League (PDL) is a league structure for the younger ages of select soccer that moves directly away from the ‘results’ impetus destroying the integrity of the game at its foundation. The game is a fun and social endeavor and cannot be accelerated and professionalized past the mental, emotional and physiological limitations inherent in children. Prodigies, after all, are rare occurrences.

Clubs that utilize a Coaching Director USSF licensed B or higher, have an academy program that promotes knowledge of the game to coaches and/or players outside of their own club, and a recent history of producing State level teams were considered for inclusion in the initial pool of clubs for PDL. Clubs were initially asked to be ‘all in’ or ‘all out’ with no accommodation for teams that might be considered exceptional in year 1 of the program. Initial pools were based on a first team, second team format in a structure of 2 groups of clubs.

Clubs that did not meet the initial criteria were invited to form another group based on similar but lesser qualifications for inclusion. The goal was to not only to create stepping stones of qualification for clubs participating in tiered league play, but also to give the clubs a voice and opportunity for self-determination. However there was no consensus among the clubs for the next tier of participation and those plans were scrapped when only 6 clubs agreed to work together in Tier 2.

As of the year end 2006, Harbor FC and FC Alliance have earned promotion into the PDL. Commitment to quality and a consistent emphasis on development has earned these clubs a spot in the PDL this coming year.

With the proposed change in league structures, the points tabulated from the State leagues will no longer be used, but replaced with points tabulated from the Cups, U12 through U17. Clubs are evaluated much the same, with the number of competitive teams generating points for the club. A proposed scale currently is this:

CUP	Place	Teams	Pts	
Champ	1	1	15	Champion
Champ	2	1	14	Finalist
Champ	3	2	12	SemiFinal
Champ	5	4	8	Quarters
Champ	9	8	2	Elim
Challenge	1	1	6	Champion
Challenge	2	1	5	Finalist
Challenge	3	2	4	SemiFinal
Challenge	5	4	1	Quarters

Commiss	1	1	2	Champion
Commiss	2	1	1	Finalist

Since the cups are open to all clubs, all clubs are eligible for the PDL. Status for inclusion or removal will be reviewed on a regular basis. The PDL Committee is aware of several young clubs that are putting their resources in youth development appropriately.

### **Development and Summary**

WSYSA's team-centric focus has proved wonderfully instrumental in establishing the sport of soccer in our State. However, it now provides our greatest challenge as we develop beyond a single team perspective towards levels of play, commitment, and instruction that clubs handle on a regular basis.

Open, published, achievable standards are the first step towards creating a communal understanding of growth and development. The PDL is interested in committed, qualified performance of the highest standards by both team and staff.

All stages of development involve transitions, be it personal or professional. Ensuring that the commitment to the individual player does not get unnecessarily sacrificed for a team perspective is essential to the further growth of our sport.

Understanding our limitations is as critical a part of our duty as it is in our honest appraisal of our players' abilities. We are called to be realistic in our judgments and objective in our reasoning. Our goal may reach to the stars, but without a knowledgeable plan, there's no way to get there.

The PDL committee seeks to make relevant, knowledgeable decisions that create well-defined avenues for clubs to evolve into developmentally sound organizations.