

U.S. Soccer is trying to clarify the chaotic youth scene, but it has a long way to go.

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“Parents just don’t understand,” said Will Smith and a whole lot of soccer coaches.

For years, the coaches may have been right. Parents typically didn’t play the game, and they didn’t have many resources to educate themselves. Show up with an accent and an embellished resume, and you can fool any parents to send their kids your way.

Not anymore. Youth soccer is losing players – down from 11.2 million in 2011 to 8.9 million in 2015, **according to Project Play**.

Not coincidentally, parents are getting smarter every year. The ignorant parents telling the coach to just let their little Mia Hamm kick the ball hard make for great YouTube satire, but their numbers are shrinking.

Soccer on television is no longer exotic. More parents these days are avid, knowledgeable fans, and they’re starting to ask legitimate questions that you can’t simply shrug away with vague appeals to authority.

One example: On a windy day in which parents from both teams – a 7-v-7 Under-9 game – wound up bonding as they chased stray balls, bags and other debris around the field, one parent complained that his team’s coach wasn’t really paying attention. The players were clumped together, chasing in packs against a short-handed side that couldn’t get a goal kick out of its own end. All of the parent’s criticisms were valid.

And his team won the game 21-0.

Knowledgeable parents can no longer be pacified with results. They know the priorities in the youngest age groups are having fun and learning. No reasonable person gives in to short-term thinking at U-9.

Parents also may question why travel soccer is getting to be less about “soccer” and more about “travel.” Clubs have splintered long-standing regional leagues into competing “elite” leagues that leave clubs driving past each other every week. The “elite” leagues may look good on paper, but they **look less appetizing on a map**.

Or parents might question why high school soccer was good enough for national team stars from Clint Dempsey to Mallory Pugh but not their kids. The U.S. Development Academy’s insistence that its players skip high school soccer was one of the factors in an **academy program’s demise** this spring.

Or parents may ask why their local soccer club is moving away from convenient age groups that generally allow classmates to be on the same team. U.S. Soccer has mandated “birth-year” age groups that make things immeasurably simpler for coaches and much more complicated for parents. The mandate is enforced in most travel leagues, but clubs have been deciding on their own whether to terrify kindergartners’ parents by forcing their kids to play their first season of recreational soccer with first-graders.

At least U.S. Soccer is making a belated effort to clarify the chaotic youth soccer scene. Even as parents get better-educated, soccer clubs and leagues challenge their ability to figure out what’s really going on. One region may have several competing leagues, sending parents driving down the interstate to a remote

“league” game rather than playing a neighboring club. And between regions, we don’t even have a common language to tell us what “Premier,” “Select” or “Elite” really mean.

We’ve seen elsewhere that a concerted effort by a federation can pay dividends. USA Hockey, which has embraced the standard-setting **American Development Model**, is one of the few sports going *up* in the Project Play survey above – 0.5 million in 2008 to 1.1 million in 2015.

U.S. Soccer certainly has a role to play in making sure families understand different programs and aren’t being duped by shady coaches. But in doing so, the federation -- and the coaches and clubs that work with and within it -- can’t ignore the people who’ll be writing the checks. Parents are turning into savvy consumers.

A coach can’t simply say “it’s for *development*” and move on. Parents want to know what their kids are being developed *for*. Only a few are being developed for pro careers or college glory. Everyone else is being developed as the future generation of recreational players – and much more importantly for the sport’s future, the next generation of fans who’ll buy tickets and the next generation of parent-coaches who’ll bring *their* kids out for youth soccer.

And parents view their kids as *kids*, not just fodder in some scheme to increase by 1 percent the United States’ chances of winning a men’s World Cup. Parents are demanding that their kids get something out of the soccer experience – friendships, life lessons and a love of the game.