

September 4, 2005 Sunday
Late Edition - Final

HEADLINE: We Return You to His Regularly Scheduled Childhood

BYLINE: By KEVIN DAVITT

IT'S over. Finished. Kaput. Emancipation is mine.

After hundreds of hours spent in the car -- racing to practices at the home field, running late to games in Newark and Ho Ho Kus, picking up, dropping off -- I'm finished with it, relieved of at least one huge parental responsibility.

My 12-year-old son no longer wants to play soccer.

I am a free man. Our fall will be filled with autumn leaves and hot apple cider.

After thousands of dollars spent on fees, cleats (there are two, um, borrowed milk cases full of old ones in the garage), water bottles of various shapes and sizes, multiple folding chairs for my wife and me, it's over, finally over.

No more risking leaving work early. ("Boss, I know it's only 9:15, but my son's been moved up to forward for this game only.")

No more booking hotel rooms in the wilds of Mercer County (Billy Bob's Bed & Breakfast?) and two-day tournaments sponsored by Fred's Chevrolet of Trenton.

No more parents screaming at referees: "Where'd you get your glasses, Ray Charles? Old Coke bottle bottoms?"

No more parents screaming at one another: "Marty, ya gotta ask the coach to pull your son! For the sake of the team, Marty! For crying out loud, Marty!"

No more soccer gibberish screamed by parents at their children: "Tyler, center!" "Morgan, defend!" "Brittney, protect!"

And maybe most pleasant of all, no more parents screaming at coaches: "If you don't play my son now, today, this instant, his self-esteem will go right down the toilet! He'll flunk third grade, and there goes his soccer scholarship!"

Ah, the elusive soccer scholarship.

Every single player I have ever met was destined for one -- well at least according to parents and coaches.

"You know," they would whisper, "he could wind up rent-free at Wassamatta U. with that kick of his."

And that is part of my distaste for the sport.

But even the New Jersey Youth Soccer Web site's "Coaching Techniques" section contains a passage about this:

Parents? Coaches? Or a combination of the two? Are the kids being lead to believe they can get a college scholarship?

"It's amazing how many parents project their children at professional levels," says Vern D. Seefeldt, director emeritus of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State.

Coaches feed the frenzy, too. When a soccer guru urges playing another tourney or ratcheting up practice time, parents often don't object. They're being told by the coach: "Your child has amazing potential and needs to continue to improve."

So for 8 of his 12 years in an effort to prevent future mishap ("Dad, if I had played soccer I probably never would have plundered WorldCom.") we would pack him in the van along with water, soccer bag, soccer ball -- "Dad? Where's my MetroStars ball?" (A fruitless search through the hedges and bushes of the backyard resulting in scratches, poison ivy, low-limbed eye-poking) -- two, sometimes three times a week like all the other "involved" parents.

We would head off in the dark of the early morning only to remember that the new chrome-plated, steroid-enhanced, bend-it-like-Beckham shin guards were still sitting on the kitchen counter, and do an immediate U-turn on the Turnpike back to Glen Rock.

And then there were the practices after school. Parental attendance was expected.

For the life of me, I could never figure out what these other guys did for a living that they could be home, two or three days a week at 3:30 p.m. (Bookies, all of them, I'm convinced.)

My Dad came to three or four of my games in my entire life, and that was baseball. And a request to him for a ride to practice would have been provided by airborne means -- made entirely possible by a well-placed Size 11.

I don't like soccer. (Is it obvious?)

Didn't like the structure, the over-organized aspect of the sport. I didn't like having to sit down in a certain spot.

"No, not there. That's for the visiting team's parents."

"But, there's over 200 acres in this park."

"Sorry."

But admittedly, I'm in the minority. There are to 3.2 million registered youth soccer players and more than 800,000 coaches and volunteers, according to the United States Youth Soccer Association. Little League Baseball on the other hand counts a mere 2,748,765 participants.

And that is why I will remain fascinated by (and secretly pleased with) the fact that, for some reason, soccer was not something my son and his friends "played." By that I mean that I never saw a time when he and his friends left the house, picked up a soccer ball and just kicked the ball around in the park, despite all their practice, the amount of time they devoted to the sport and the obvious skill they had acquired over the years.

On the other hand, I have seen many children from South America and Europe in the park doing just that.

But my guys would take a baseball and glove, a basketball or a football. And they would choose sides or just play.

And maybe that's the distinction for me, right there.

They would just "play."