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TOTAL IMMERSION

Ingredients for success (2026 and beyond)

“Mentally it’s pretty tough. But once you get used to it, it becomes routine. I would say it almost becomes an addiction.”

— Ninth-grade YSC Academy student discussing his intertwined soccer training and school experiences with a TV reporter

It may seem strange to start the last chapter talking about current NBA stars, but hear me out.* The NBA’s 2025 MVP, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, grew up in Canada, and didn’t move to the States until the cusp of his seventeenth birthday. Basketball in Canada arguably ranks third in interest and popularity behind ice hockey and soccer. That didn’t stop SGA. Runner-up MVP Nikola Jokić grew up in Serbia and didn’t move to the States until he

* The opinions in this last chapter stem from private conversations with over twenty people across five professional franchises, including MLS owners, sporting directors, first- and second-team coaches, youth academy directors, and youth coaches. I also spoke with about a dozen current MLS players, and former (i) professional players (including two World Cup participants), (ii) high-ranking former USSF officials, and (iii) former youth National Team coaches. I conducted these conversations off the record, and invited them to share freely. This is not *the* map—it is a map. And it focuses less on the base of the mountain and more on the upper peaks.

was twenty. Serbia's most popular sport by a comfortable margin is soccer. Didn't stop the Joker. Also didn't stop Luka Dončić (Slovenia), Giannis Antetokounmpo (Greece), or Victor Wembanyama (France).

The flood of foreign NBA stars—and it is a flood—has proven the incontrovertible fact that it is possible to become a world-class athlete despite growing up in a country where your team sport is not the most popular. How did these athletes do it? They did it by totally immersing themselves in their chosen sport, together with that sport's social trappings, within a network of dedicated, caring adults. These gifted athletes never had to feel that their sport and dreams were less-than, unimportant, or unattainable. I call this concept Total Immersion (TI). Before we get into the specifics of TI for elite American soccer players, let's dispense with some myths and misunderstandings about the current soccer landscape in the U.S.—and reset the conversation.



Does the *current* USMNT lack athletes and athleticism? *No*. Nobody is outsprinting, outjumping, or outrunning us. Let's go to the other end of the pipeline. Does the U.S. youth soccer system in its early development stage (U-6 to U-12, what the USSF calls Zone 1) lack athletic boys? *No, not really*. Attend any major youth tournament and look solely at the athleticism (not the soccer!). We have athletes. And, no, we don't need LeBron James, Tyreek Hill, and Aaron Judge playing soccer. We just need a lot of young people of all colors and socioeconomic backgrounds assembling at the base. True, in Zone 1, we need more diversity in all senses of the word. But we already have a sufficient number of athletic boys playing soccer.

Does the U.S. lack infrastructure for elite young soccer players? *No*. All the MLS academy teams and virtually all the independent superclubs have really good, and, in many cases, extraordinary, facilities. A growing number of American youth sports complexes rival the facilities of the best soccer academies in the world (notwithstanding the annoying field hockey and lacrosse lines on many of the pitches).

Are there enough options in the U.S. for elite soccer players whose families exert an extraordinary amount of money, time, and energy pursuing

soccer, and still don't turn pro? Yes. It's called college. The U.S. currently boasts over two hundred colleges and universities that sponsor NCAA Division I soccer teams (not to mention Division II, III, and the NAIA-member schools). Many Division I schools offer athletic soccer scholarships. Even without scholarship funds, coaches often go out of their way to help deserving athletes navigate the admissions process and find alternative financial aid. America has the best schools in the world. And top soccer talent helps unlock the college admissions gate. It's the stuff that dreams are made of for the poor kid from Brazil or Croatia who isn't quite good enough to make the local pro team. No other country offers this unique system that links athletics with the opportunity to earn a college degree.*

As noted, MLS already has a fully operational academy system up and running (which lassoes many superclubs into its MLS NEXT program across the country), all with pipelines to the pro teams. The MLS Homegrown Player Rule lets clubs sign their academy players directly to the first team, bypassing the college SuperDraft, provided the player has spent at least one year in the club's youth system and lives in the club's territory. The signing clubs receive salary cap benefits and now keep virtually *all*

* Readers may recall my earlier critique of the college system as the lone path for elite soccer development, which was terribly constrained by NCAA rules that disadvantage soccer athletes. Some important dynamics have changed. Today, the best young Americans will turn pro (MLS) in their teens and probably won't enter college directly out of high school or at all. That's the way it's done in the rest of the world. Many MLS clubs also offer homegrown players a flexible "College Tuition Program" stipend, which pays for or reduces the cost of college. Players can use this benefit during or after their playing days. With very few exceptions, this benefit is not available anywhere else in the world. Those high-schoolers who aren't good enough (yet)—but who are still chasing the soccer dream—can matriculate to college, play soccer, and, if they develop and impress, may get drafted by an MLS club. Beginning with the 2025–2026 academic year, NCAA Division I schools will move from offering 9.9 full-equivalent scholarships to allowing up to twenty-eight *full* scholarships. In June 2025, the USSF created the NextGen College Soccer Committee to better integrate college soccer into the wider soccer system. A key proposal is expanding the season from fall-only to year-round, easing match congestion and aligning with pro calendars. All of this is good news for elite American soccer athletes. *Great news* for Division I athletes would be if the NCAA, with the full support of the USSF, would limit the number of full scholarships awarded to international students to three per team.

homegrown player transfer fees from sales to non-MLS *and* MLS clubs. The latter is a massive change and it will promote investment in youth development.* True: It's unclear to the general public whether some (many?) current MLS ownership groups genuinely care about their youth academies. The feeling is that the academies don't offer a suitable return on investment (ROI). This sentiment, if it gathers steam, is a real problem for the American player development model.

Some owners would rather spend several million dollars on a Latin American or Eastern European player under the Designated Player (DP) Rule—riding him for a few years—than invest the time, money, and effort needed to strengthen their own youth academy. And when only 30 percent or so of the MLS academies are genuinely operating at full capacity, it's hardly fair to criticize the current ROI *league-wide*. (I will come back to this issue in a moment.) In any event, our entire soccer ecosystem—even with the pay-to-play model ruling the roost and sucking the oxygen out of most conversations about soccer development in this country—is more than sufficient to propel elite soccer players to the professional level. Why isn't it working better or faster? Three primary reasons.



First, the base of the pyramid does not have enough qualified coaches and enough grassroots soccer programs making serious inroads into underserved populations, such as Latino and Black populations. Therefore, we are missing out on some very good athletes, statistically speaking. This issue has been true for many years and is the theme of many articles and books, including, more recently, George Dohrmann's *Switching Fields: Inside the Fight to Remake Men's Soccer in the United States*. We need to assemble better athletes and coaches at the base of the mountain.

Second, the good coaches that the U.S. does have, both domestic and international, too often focus on winning games during the formative

* Internal MLS sales and transfers of players, including homegrown players, is incredibly complicated and rapidly changing.

years. This happens even though we've known for years that the priority should be placed upon building a "learning environment" on the pitch that emphasizes skill development, problem-solving abilities, Total Football competencies, and grit. Better coaches are the cradle of everything. We can, and often do, blame the USSF and the pay-to-play model for this situation—even though lots of blame should also be placed upon the large number of relatively oblivious parents at youth matches yelling from the sidelines about goals and victories. But the coaches and the clubs (the employers) need to do better, too.

And the coaches and clubs could be helped immensely by the USSF, which has too often made coaching and credentialing courses too expensive, too elite, and painfully inaccessible. Currently, the Federation's Pro License costs in excess of \$10,000, requires ten months of coursework, and is more selective than getting into Harvard. The other USSF coaching tiers have many of the same obstacles. This is ridiculously silly. The USSF's primary duties are to run the U.S. National Teams and be a credentialing agency. So why doesn't the Federation partner with every MLS club and their corresponding academy (that's where most of the men's National Team players come from, at least for a portion of their careers) and USL top-tier franchises? And why not accelerate learning and credentialing—especially national coaching licenses A, B, C, and D—at the existing nodes across the country? Who is training and supercharging the Sherpas?

Third, most of the elite of the elite youth academies in America (the MLS academies and the best independent superclubs) still haven't figured out how to situate their academies within *a larger holistic learning environment that emphasizes soccer within a Total Immersion environment*. Thus, even the best academies in the nation are still only scratching the surface of their potential. It is to this TI environment that this chapter turns. And this book concludes.



Most of the top American soccer academies focus solely on the sport itself. But to truly move the needle, elite academies need to adopt a more holistic

approach to player development. This means creating and supporting a model that integrates social and academic components within a strong academic school. The latter is crucial both because it's the right thing to do and because it keeps the college pathway open if the professional route doesn't work out. The school could either be located on-site and operated by the MLS franchise, or be a soccer cohort within *an already existing* independent school (often the more affordable option). Such an environment should work as both a place and as a process, supporting student-athletes on and off the field.

In this setting, soccer training, development, and academics are seamlessly woven into the daily routine. Most importantly, the social cues throughout the school environment *must* reinforce soccer and the dream it represents—approaching the natural cultural climate found within communities and schools across soccer-obsessed nations. No U.S. school has a monopoly on how to do this well. And we already have several good models.

Take two soccer schools, one real, one imagined. The Philadelphia Union's campus includes YSC Academy (School), an independent, accredited school that partners with the club to provide education for its academy players. The School has been completely embedded within the MLS franchise for over a decade. It is club-neutral, though most of its students populate the Union's academy teams.* My kid is a young teen and currently

* Allow me to shill just this once: YSC Academy provides a rigorous education designed for elite student-athletes. Here is how the current Head of School, Dr. Nooha Ahmed-Lee, articulates the School's atmosphere: "What really sets YSC Academy apart is the way we blend elite soccer training with academic excellence and emotional growth. We built our program based on how young people learn best—based on the science and research of adolescent brain development. Our goal is to help students build flexibility in their thinking, emotional maturity, and resilience. Coaches and teachers work closely together, forming strong relationships that give student-athletes confidence, a sense of ownership, and a clear sense of who they are and who they can become. And that drives excellence on and off the field." The School is open to any player (boy or girl) through its virtual education program called YSC Advantage. Advantage offers a similar rigorous academic solution for student-athletes anywhere in the world. YSC Advantage teachers, like their compatriots in the School building, are highly qualified and accustomed to adjusting the curriculum and pace to support student-athletes with the demands of travel, training, and competition.

a student at the School (where I also teach English). He loves the place. When I'm fiddling with my morning coffee, he is already badgering me, complaining about running late for morning training.

We jump in the car and head to campus. During our fifty-minute commute, he knocks out some homework and scrolls through his social feeds, often packed with clips of older peers—soccer moves, team victories, National Team call-ups, teens in his school closing in on pro contracts—alongside highlights of Mo Salah, Ryan Gravenberch, and Alexis Mac Allister (Liverpool is his favorite club). Lamine Yamal probably sneaks in there, too.

Nearing our destination, we come upon the Commodore Barry Bridge that crosses the Delaware River. But we don't take the bridge. Instead, we edge onto an off-ramp, and for a few glorious seconds—like a joyous coaster rounding a curve high in the air—we catch an expansive view of the entire campus: the training fields, Subaru Park stadium, WSFS Sportplex, and the academic building. It's a rare footprint that reflects a deep alignment between school and sport. Way off in the distance, the bridge and the river keep going. I always say the same thing every morning, tapping my son on the knee for emphasis: "Looks like *optimism!*" Lately, my remark has become an annoyance to him, a sign that puberty is kicking in.

I drop him off at the training facility, and he walks past the fence next to the pristine grass field where the first-team players are already training. Some of the pros are only a few years older than my son. For the young pros beyond the fence, MLS is quite an achievement. Yet the very best of them are already setting their agents' sights on Europe, just as top Latin American players do. But we are getting ahead of ourselves and the ball again (for the last time). Some of the pros still have homework to finish—yes, a high school degree is required at YSC Academy, even for the pros. My son is grinning, still buzzing from watching those same pros play under the lights the previous weekend. "Doop! Doop! Doop!" (*i.e.*, the universal crowd chant after a goal is scored for the Union). On his way to meet his coach, he passes student-athletes from other age groups, all in identical gear with the same crest, honing their skills within view

of Subaru Park stadium on one side, and his School on the other. All this occurs before 9 AM.

After morning training, he showers at the Sportplex and heads to the academic building, a five-minute walk. Around 10:45 AM, he grabs a snack before starting his first class. His schedule includes five classes—English, Math, History, Science, and Spanish—which run until 3:15 PM. There’s no band, chorus, or art. The curriculum is intentionally streamlined to support the boys’ athletic commitments while maintaining academic rigor and purpose. The classes are taught by highly skilled teachers. They are experts in academics, not soccer (though huge fans!). And they focus on intellectual and social growth while supporting overall development as young student-athletes.

The teachers have become very good at adapting to soccer needs (and lingo). OK, you’ll be out next week for a U-16 National Team camp? Let’s create a plan for your homework and some accommodations (upon your return) so you can perform at your best. Good luck. OK, the whole team (basically the whole grade) will be out next month for a two-week trip to Spain? Here’s your curated homework schedule, organized by teacher, and aligned with the peaks and valleys of your training and game schedule (what the athletic people call periodization). OK, you’re injured? No worries—soccer isn’t quite as important as preparing for college. There are multiple paths to get where you want to go. Here’s more homework.

The boys know the odds of signing a professional contract are slim. Yet compared to most youth players, their chances are strong. Over the past decade, more than 15 percent of YSC Academy students have signed pro contracts before their high school graduation, while the others go on to college—most of them on an athletic scholarship. Some turn pro after college. Over a third of YSC Academy alumni have turned professional before their twenty-second birthday. It’s a win-win.

On any given school day, about eighty boys crisscross the campus, talking, laughing, playing Teqball (in the courtyard), sharing videos—

usually soccer clips—eating, doing homework (hopefully not with the aid of ChatGPT or Photomath), and bantering with teachers, coaches, and each other. They attend extra math sessions, review game footage with coaches, sit in on nutrition talks with the first team’s nutritionist, meet visiting college coaches for panel discussions, and hear from YSC Academy alumni—who are eager to return to campus and talk about careers after competitive play. Each week features a different speaker. The School buzzes like a traditional single-sex independent school—a vibrant hive of teens. But it is unmistakably unique.

The main hallway is lined with scores of college pennants representing the places graduates have matriculated and graduated. In a conference room off the hall hang the jerseys of YSC graduates capped by the senior USMNT—seven as of 2025. The students named it the Jersey Room. For a while it displayed the jerseys of *all* the graduates who turned pro. But now there are too many pros (thirty and counting) and not enough wall space. Around 4 PM, my son walks to afternoon training with his peers—none of them ever feeling, let alone noticing, that soccer ranks fourth or fifth in popularity among the general public.

On weekend home games, my son’s youth team is watched by about six Union coaches and a couple of teachers. Every other weekend, it’s back to the stadium lights to see the first team play, where he sees maybe a fifth of his high school peers in the stands, including a few lucky enough to score box seats (the soccer Academy and School have their own boxes—they’re connected by sliding panel doors!—and tickets for the game are pretty easy for the boys to score, either from Union VIPs or the pros on the first team). Rinse. Wash. Repeat. For four years or more. The only missing piece is the immediacy of young women. But the Union’s model can’t be perfect (though a coeducational component is in the works!). That’s the secret sauce behind how Mauricio Pochettino selected six YSC Academy graduates for the senior USMNT Gold Cup roster during the summer of 2025,

and how the School's graduates have earned over one hundred caps over the past five years—a darn good ROI for one MLS team.*

Now, pause and consider that other, *imagined* school, where they have the best soccer coaches in America by a drop-kick mile. But after ninety minutes of training each day, the boys go home, eat dinner, go to sleep, get up, and go to their normal high school. Their academic day doesn't have to be imagined. It's much like the school you went to, where soccer was a second-class citizen. Or worse, invisible.



There's no time machine. But I wonder why the bigwigs at the USSF, back in early 2020—before it killed its baby, the Development Academy (DA), and essentially abdicated all responsibility for elite youth soccer development to somebody else (without providing any clarity about the future)—didn't call Commissioner Don Garber and the bigwigs in MLS. That call could have gone to the heart of the current American owners with very deep pockets—such as Arthur Blank, Stan Kroenke, Robert Kraft, Philip Anschutz, Lamar Hunt's family, Carl Lindner III (there are too many American owners to name). And the voice on the line could've said something like this:

“Look, we love what you guys have done with the soccer-specific stadiums across the U.S. But we really need your help now on the human side of elite youth development.

“And before we turn the DA over to the MLS people, which we believe is the right thing to do at this point in time, we would like a financial commitment from all of you that has legs. Yeah, we know MLS has a bunch of owners who don't care about American athletes or American soccer youth development. But you do; we Americans do. We want to win the World Cup. Before we do the turnover thing, we also need an independent board of

* On October 4, 2025, the Philadelphia Union won their second Community Shield (for the best regular-season record)—and the 2025 Community Shield, incredibly, was accomplished with more homegrown players on their game-day rosters, playing more minutes, than any other MLS team.

oversight for all the MLS academies, with metrics, targets, and quality controls (regular audits), and a cadre of independent employees—including a bevy of credentialing people, scouts, and coaches within or related to each franchise but focused solely on youth development in Zone 1—who will look outward and into local underserved communities that no single MLS academy has the resources for. Yes, all this will cost money. But it will be *a lot cheaper* than the stadiums. Yes, we also know it will be a hassle getting all the owners to toe the line. But we can do this together. And, in the long run, it will make all of you a lot of money.

“Now, let’s go make this big announcement to the American fans.”