

## 'They need a guiding hand' (Derek Armstrong Q&A, Part 2)

Interview by Mike Woitalla

Few individuals have had as great an impact on American youth soccer as **Derek Armstrong**, who is celebrating his 30th anniversary as head of the San Diego Nomads, one of the USA's first fully staffed, multi-team youth clubs. In Part 2 of our interview, Armstrong addresses the USA's challenge in producing special players and the U.S. Soccer Federation's role in player development.

**SOCCKER AMERICA: Your view, that American youth soccer is producing more “good players” than ever but lacks special players, is widely shared. Why aren't we producing more exceptional players?**

**DEREK ARMSTRONG:** There are so many different things needed to create that environment. ... It's such a big issue. I think everybody who's anybody in the United States should be involved in that question. Coaches, parents, the Federation.

One part of the answer is straight: we're not doing enough.

**SA: Let's start with the environment in general ...**

**ARMSTRONG:** Years and years ago in England in the early 1930s, the talk was you could shout down a coal mine, “You got a center back down there” and you get a center back. There were so many of them. You had street soccer happening then.

A bit like the Brazil of today, where you see technical players all over the place. The environment in Brazil is conducive to supplying special players. You've got street soccer in Brazil in the way of futsal, in the way of other stuff that goes on there.

Everybody loves the game. They're steeped in it. Mothers, fathers, grandparents ... So the kids have inspirational people around them. The enthusiasm and the knowledge. ...

You've got to have inspirational coaches working with inspirational players. You've got to match the two together. You've got to create an environment in which special kids can grow.

**SA: There's certainly more of a soccer culture in the USA than ever, millions of players, and thousands of coaches trying to do the right thing. At what stage in players' development do you see the biggest problems?**

**ARSMTRONG:** I guarantee there's been special players missed in the last 10, 15 years.

A key is putting players, at 14 years old, into the right environment in which they can grow. There are kids at 13 or 14 with potential, then stuff happens in the body and the mind that doesn't allow them to progress.

**SA: Can you give some examples of what stifles their progress?**

**ARSMTRONG:** There are discipline issues. We haven't come to terms with the society we're confronted with. The TV, the drugs, the lack of discipline in the home. Parents working two jobs and trying to look after their kids at the same time. Kids cannot come through in that environment.

They need a steadiness. They need a guiding hand. They need discipline.

Talented kids come out of Los Angeles, and you can't coach them -- if you have a staff with zero tolerance. They get kicked out. They generally don't make the grade.

I think we've got too strict an approach. Perhaps we need a system with a bit more tolerance because of the society thing that's going on.

We're aware of it and we want to do more.

We send kids to Bradenton [U.S. Soccer's U-17 Residency Program] who are ill-disciplined. They're going to get thrown back, because it's zero-tolerance, and rightly so.

But without understanding why that kid is misbehaving. Why has he got an attitude problem? Why is he late for training?

We're fighting it here. By the time they get to our Academy they should have all of those problems worked out, but it takes a lot of man-power to do that when you're not full-time residential.

Not every player behaves himself. **Eric Cantona** was a nightmare early on in his career. He would never have made it as a youth player here.

We need a little more tolerance and more structure for our better players. And we need special people to help them.

All of that happens in Argentina. They get these kids and they look after them, and put them on the right track.

**SA: You're saying socioeconomic issues are a factor ...**

**ARMSTRONG:** I deal with those issues everyday, particularly with the Latino community. I just looked at the tax returns of our Academy players' families -- incomes of \$17,000, \$21,000.

The family has two jobs. They hardly have time to look after the kids. It's such a big subject.

So we've got families earning \$17,000 a year. How the hell can those parents come to every game, come to every practice. What spare time have they got to work with their kids? They haven't got any spare time.

If we're going to have a kid make it, we're going to need his parents' help. We can't do it alone.

**SA: Being from a low-income family isn't a roadblock for talented children in other countries ...**

**ARMSTRONG:** At foreign clubs, which have residency programs, the staff becomes his mom, it becomes his dad.

In a situation where he goes home every night, I need the help of the mom and dad.

When you've got parents working two jobs, parents who are limited financially, getting kids from one part of the city to the other, three or four nights a week, to train them, is a problem -- all of those things contribute what makes up a special player.

**SA: You mentioned Bradenton, the residency program for U.S. U-17 boys that was launched in 1999 ...**

**ARMSTRONG:** The Federation is doing it for 40 kids in Bradenton. But look at the size of our country.

I went to France in the summer and I went to Clairefontaine [the French federation's youth Academy].

They're not doing this in one place where all the best come to. They regionalized it. They're a much smaller country and they've got [12] of them.

We've got to have that in the United States. Where's the special place I can send my special players to?

I think the only way we can do it is regionalized centers for excellence whereby we've got experienced senior staff at the helm so that they're aware of these problems and they can guide these kids and look at their daily life, and see what the package is. If they're good enough technically, then I think we have to invest in them.

Invest in them as a person and see if we can make them into better people. I don't think we have to wait for that perfect Mr. Nice Guy who comes around, like [Nomads alum and U.S. World Cup veteran **Steve Cherundolo**], who will never give you a problem in your whole life.

**SA: Any final words on looking back at 30 years of American youth soccer?**

**ARMSTRONG:** We've made fantastic progress but we're nowhere close to where we want to be. And there *are* young players with the talent. We need to try harder.