

CREW'S SUCCESS EXTENDS TO THE KIDS

Columbus emphasizes its youth program, with Development Academy and Crew Juniors teams supplemental by Brad Friedel's Premier Soccer Academy

BY JOSEPH D'HIPPOLITO



THE COLUMBUS CREW KNOWS THAT SUCCESS is more than MLS Cup trophies, like the one it captured in November, or MVP honors, such as Guillermo Barros Schelotto's award after his dominant 2008 campaign.

True success runs deeper, and for the Crew it includes a youth program that develops potential in a winning environment.

In less than three years, the Crew's development program has made a significant impact. As one of the charter members of the Development Academy that U.S. Soccer founded in 2007, the Crew Soccer Academy (CSA) succeeded at the under-16 and under-18 levels in the Great Lakes Conference.

The U-16 squad finished its first season with a 19-4-7 record, placed two players on the conference's Best XI and four in national team camps. Two players, midfielder Victor Garza and defender Joel Nash, train with the national U-17 residency program in Bradenton, Fla.

The Crew's U-18 side did even better. It became the first youth team in Major League Soccer to qualify for the Development Academy finals after winning its conference with a 24-5-5 record. Five players and former head coach Eric Nichols made the conference's best XI; four received invitations to national team camps.

Among the leading players were three Ohio state high school Players of the Year: Nick Blevins, Mike Green and Matt Wiet. Blevins just finished his freshman season at Indiana; Wiet will join him in the fall, and Green is a freshman at New Mexico.

Green also participated in national team camps, as did Crew teammates Chad Barson, Andy Lubahn and Ben Speas, Top Drawer Soccer's choice as the nation's leading high school player. Lubahn also trained with Belgian second-division club Cercle Brugge.

"The players who have been called into these camps, along with a handful of our other top CSA players, are MLS prospects," said Andrew Arthurs, the Crew's vice president for soccer business development.

Arthurs also serves as executive director for the Crew Juniors, which the club created in 2006 and encompasses about 3,400 players

and 150 U-8 to U-19 teams in Columbus, Cincinnati and Grand Rapids, Mich. The Worthington Crew Juniors in suburban Columbus and Cincinnati United Premier (CUP) are regional affiliates; the Grand Rapids Crew Juniors are regional partners.

Crew Juniors also maintains a relationship with Brad Friedel's Premier Soccer Academy near Cleveland. Friedel, star goalkeeper for Aston Villa, played two seasons with the Crew before heading to England's Premier League in 1997.

"Their (Crew) ownership is taking the right approach to developing talent, which fits perfectly within our vision and the programs we offer," Friedel said. "This is the main reason I helped set up PSA, so that other entities, such as the Crew, would put their time and money behind youth development to further the sport in the United States."

Desmond Armstrong, PSA's director and academy recruiter, joins Arthurs and Crew technical director Brian Bliss in administering the Crew's youth program. Armstrong amassed 81 caps for the United States and played with Bliss in the 1990 World Cup.

"Brad's commitment to creating a world-class player development environment is a great fit with our philosophies and standards," Arthurs said. "We feel strongly about creating a professional system that

replicates the experience of our senior team as closely as possible."

To achieve that end, Crew coaches serve on the Crew Juniors' administrative staff. Crew players often visit and help their younger counterparts.

"The ways we connect with our Crew Juniors players and coaches vary," Arthurs said. "This fall we hosted a day of friendlies between CUP Crew Juniors, Worthington Crew Juniors and Crew Juniors Gold teams at our Obetz training complex, where a handful of our senior Crew players attended and interacted with the young players.

"On other occasions, we've hosted sessions at Obetz or in Crew Stadium. Our technical staff ran them and, again, we had senior Crew players helping us. Our Crew Juniors youth coaches can attend out senior team training sessions to observe and interact a few times each season."

Hunt Sports Group, which operates the Crew, funds the entire operation with help from Glidden Paint, the team's sponsor. As a result, the Crew's youth program is one of the few that completely finances travel, lodging, meals and equipment.

"We've made significant progress on and off the field," Arthurs said. "That said, we're constantly searching for ways to provide more quality experiences and opportunities for our players and to help grow the sport at all levels in Ohio."

Perhaps such growth will lead one of Crew's youth players to do what Frankie Hejduk did: lift Major League Soccer's most valued trophy while wearing yellow and black.



The Crew's U-18 Development Academy team (above) won its conference and qualified for the national championships. Among the team's leaders were Matt Wiet (top) and Nick Blevins (opposite left, with Brandon Silva), who will be teammates at Indiana in the fall.