

# U.S. Soccer's New Vision for Youth Development: An Astronomical Ask

Based on reporting by Henry Bushnell, The Athletic – September 2, 2025

## A New Era Under Matt Crocker

When Matt Crocker arrived in the U.S. as the federation's sporting director, his early priorities were clear: stabilize the national teams and get "our own house in order." But soon, he zoomed out — and saw the bigger problem.

American soccer wasn't consistently producing top players. On the men's side, Crocker bluntly told a room of coaches that the U.S. had produced zero top-50 players in the past decade. On the women's side, data showed a "slow decline."

His conclusion? To get different results, the system itself has to change.

*"Do what you've always done, and you will get what you've always got." – Matt Crocker*

## Introducing The U.S. Way

Crocker's response is a philosophy branded as "the U.S. Way." It focuses on:

- ⚽ Put the player first – prioritizing development over wins
- 📊 Shape environments at every age – from 5-year-old rec players to elite prospects
- 🎓 Educate coaches – providing better tools, resources, and training at all levels

## The Challenge: 95% of the Game

Unlike England — where Crocker helped build the successful England DNA system — the U.S. landscape is sprawling, fragmented, and highly competitive. With 54 state associations, multiple sanctioning bodies, and elite leagues, alignment is incredibly complex. Instead of mandates and sticks, Crocker's approach is about influence, inspiration, and collaboration.

## Building Relationships, Not Just Rules

The old U.S. Soccer Development Academy relied on strict standards and enforcement. Crocker is taking a softer but broader approach:

- ✓ Traveling coast-to-coast on a “roadshow” to build trust
- ✓ Piloting digital platforms to connect coaches and track player development
- ✓ Envisioning coaching education hubs in every state
- ✓ Helping coaches and parents focus on touches, fun, and safety

## An “Astronomical Ask”

The vision is exciting, but the scale is daunting. Even U.S. Soccer leaders stress: “A presentation and a document is not a plan.” Operationalizing this vision across thousands of independent clubs could take years — even decades — and require millions of dollars.

Still, there’s momentum. Stakeholders from US Youth Soccer, USL, ECNL, and MLS Next are noticing unprecedented collaboration and new energy.

## Why It Matters

At its core, this vision challenges everyone in youth soccer — coaches, parents, clubs, and administrators — to rethink priorities.

👉 Player first. Development before winning.

This shift matters because:

- **For coaches:** It reframes success from “Did we win?” to “Did every player grow?” Coaches are asked to create training environments that value touches, creativity, and problem-solving — even if that means sacrificing short-term wins.
- **For parents:** It encourages patience and perspective. A parent’s role becomes supporting their child’s love of the game, rather than measuring progress only through trophies or scores.
- **For clubs:** It demands alignment. Clubs that embrace this vision will focus less on recruiting players away from rivals and more on developing the ones they have — investing in coaching education, age-appropriate training, and long-term pathways.
- **For administrators and governing bodies:** It requires building structures that reward development, not just winning. Scheduling, competition formats, and recognition systems all need to support the idea that the journey is just as important as the outcome.

The impact of this cultural shift could be profound. Instead of burning out or dropping out, more young players might **stay in the game longer**, enjoying soccer as both a sport and a lifelong passion. Instead of producing only a handful of elite athletes, the U.S. could develop a **wider pool of creative, confident players** who are better prepared for the demands of the global game.

Ultimately, “the U.S. Way” is not just about producing national team stars. It’s about reshaping the entire soccer experience so that **every child who steps on the field feels valued, improves, and falls in love with the game.**

Bushnell’s reporting makes clear: while the task is massive, it may also be the most significant opportunity in decades to unify the American game.

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