

Exploratory Essay: Understanding the influence of pay to play soccer on LatinX youth in North
Carolina

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Soc 264: Latin X's in the south

April 20, 2020

Soccer, Fútbol, “the world’s game”, is so common throughout the world that the most followed individual on social media is Cristiano Ronaldo, a soccer star. One reason the game is so popular is how simple it truly is, yes there are rules, but at its core soccer is about having two feet and a ball. It is because of this reason that many of the game’s legends, Cristiano Ronaldo, Luis Suarez, Ronaldinho, and countless others, can remember playing barefoot on their cities favela streets with plastic bags banded together to form a ball. The reason soccer fans know these names by heart is because European teams paid for their entire youth training and competition. A fact not lost when you note these men come from Portugal, Uruguay, and Brazil. So, while you may associate children running around barefoot with a worn-out ball for most countries, you don’t picture it with American Soccer. Interviewing for an article in 2016 Doug Andersson, a previous head of the US Youth Soccer Diversity Task Force, stated “The system is not working for the underserved, Its working for the white kids (Carpenter 2016).” Andersson is referring to the “pay to play” system in the United States, where the highest level youth soccer is played through clubs that require fees often reaching upwards of 1 to 3 thousand dollars every year (Woitalla 2015). In North Carolina there are three aspects to consider analyzing the relationship between soccer and the LatinX community: the role of soccer in the latinX community, the current procedures of club soccer in North Carolina, and the future role soccer can play in the LatinX experience of the South. Gaining an understanding of the LatinX experience with soccer in North Carolina can provide insights into other larger scale socioeconomic challenges within the state.

North Carolina does not have the largest population of LatinX individuals, but it has one of the fastest growing populations since the 1990’s (Hamann 2016). Along with the rise in the total LatinX population, A large portion of the current population is aging into the right to vote

(Yee 2016). As the Hispanic youth population grows in North Carolina, it will begin to have an influence on numerous aspects of culture, politics, school, music, and soccer. While not trying to generalize too much, Fútbol plays an important role in the cultures of many Latin American countries. Playing the sport allows individuals to maintain a relationship with their heritage, while also providing an outlet to connect with other members of a community (Chan 1999). Adding to this idea of community inclusion, in an interview with Hickory High School soccer coach Brian Jillings, he explained how public school and recreational soccer in Hickory are often sites of diverse crowds and rosters, different than football or baseball (Jillings 2020). He was careful to mention recreational and school soccer, as travel soccer clubs often do not resemble this same pattern of diversity.

This lack of diversity is where a problematic divide enters the arena of youth soccer in North Carolina. While public school programs and local recreational leagues harbor areas of inclusion for the soccer community, private clubs located throughout North Carolina often have high yearly fees and are predominantly white (“TESC Fee Structure”). The main issues with these clubs in the pay to play system are the advantages provided to the players who can afford to play for these clubs. These advantages include the chance to play in front of coaches at tournaments and games all across the country. Coaches who are paid for by these clubs often have connections to the best collegiate programs. Individuals who are able to pay for that club associate their name with the brand of that club, so when a team wins a tournament for that club, everyone in the organization benefits. Coach Jack Winter highlights these benefits of explaining his preferences when scouting for the Division II program Lenoir Rhyne, “If I go to a tournament in rural North Carolina, I will see less teams and less players and have to offer more scholarship incentives, when if I go to a tournament in Raleigh or Charlotte I see more players and know that

I will have to offer each of them less money to come play soccer for me (Winter 2020)". His point highlights two major detrimental components of pay to play soccer for latinX individuals in North Carolina, he seeks players in urban areas and through a private school lens, where he would like to offer less money. This trend is scene in cities like Memphis, TN where researchers divided the group into 5 geographic regions and highlighted what percentage of a sports athletes came from which region. The trend showed that the highest income region produced 75% of the youth soccer players, while the lowest income region only produced 5% (Wilcox 2003). While the largest populations of LatinX individuals in North Carolina are located in Mecklenburg and Wake counties, counties with the highest percentage Hispanic populations are typically rural ("North Carolina's Hispanic Community: 2019 Snapshot" 2019). If the trend overlaps to NC a disproportional number of LatinX youth will not be awarded the same soccer opportunities.

Although Coach Winter's insight does add perspective to the inability of private colleges or universities to ignore the socioeconomic status of their recruits, it does highlight the role that athletics play in academic progress. The connection between soccer and academics is established in middle school when you first can play a sport for your North Carolina public school. Coach Jillings clarified the need of a high school student to maintain a passing grade in all of their classes, reach the schools requirement of attendance, and remain out of disciplinary action in order to compete for a schools team (Jillings 2020). One flaw in the academic disciplinary component of sports, is that players often don't realize the benefits of academics as soccer is the priority. Winter elaborated on the problem of this system, "I receive more scholarship money from the NCAA if my team and recruitment class has a higher GPA, that will push me to take player with a higher GPA over one with possibly better skill (Winter 2020)." These hidden barriers of high school GPA and test scores deciding a soccer players opportunity to gain a

college scholarship disproportionately affect the LatinX community through the same barriers as college acceptance. This population is overwhelmingly more first generation college students than white Carolinians and have a lower household income (“North Carolina’s Hispanic Community: 2019 Snapshot” 2019). Due to these discrepancies, soccer in the United States lacks the same ability to produce talent as well as social mobility than the rest of the world.

While the pay to play system is currently in existence in North Carolina there are some positives coming in recent years. State schools in North Carolina have the ability to utilize specific scholarship for LatinX players, meaning teams like University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are increasing their in state recruiting to almost 60 or 70% (Winter 2020). Also, recently the US soccer association decided to disband one of the predominantly pay to play high level leagues with multiple teams in North Carolina. This move will send players of notice back to playing public high school soccer allowing more individuals to be recruited through the high school system which does not require payment (Jillings 2020). Soccer’s popularity is growing in the United States through the success of the MLS and teams like Atlanta United. Three expansion teams are set to start playing in 2021 and with these expansions and success is the opportunity for club sponsored youth soccer in America (“Paul Breitner: USA Needs a Club Culture” n.d.). The club system could be influential on the LatinX population as it would focus predominantly on skill over socioeconomic status.

North Carolina’s youth soccer pays to play travel programs present an opportunity to disproportionately negatively impact the LatinX community. Adversity towards low socioeconomic standing, lower academic performance, and focus on urban areas will reduce the number of high-level youth soccer opportunities for Hispanic kids. However, the rise in the young generation of LatinX in North Carolina along with a turbulent time in the pay to play

system of North Carolina youth soccer provide an opportunity to change a sports and academic culture. Through soccer LatinX in North Carolina have a new channel towards community presence, cultural experience, and academic success.

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