

# Youth Soccer in the United States

## A Short Guide for GVSA Parents

March 17, 2006

### Introduction

GVSA, USYSA, WMYSA, MSPSL, FIFA – what do they all mean? If you are the average person involved in youth soccer you probably know the name of your child's team and club. You may know that they play in the Grand Valley Soccer Association (GVSA) league, but that's about it. This guide will briefly explain the youth soccer structure in the United States, from the top on down and how GVSA and your club fit into it.

### FIFA

FIFA is the governing body for most soccer in the world. It issues the *Laws of the Game*, organizes the World Cup and Olympics and governs all sanctioned soccer in the world, down to the local kid's league.

Unlike other sports, all professional leagues in the world play under the same set of rules and are governed by FIFA. The rules for everyone are the same.

FIFA also sanctions one form of indoor soccer, Futsal, and runs a world championship for it. All other indoor soccer play (e.g. with walls at Soccer Zone) is unsanctioned.

### USSF

FIFA recognizes a national federation in each country of the world. The United States Soccer Federation (USSF) is the national federation in the USA. USSF licenses referees and coaches, sanctions professional leagues (e.g. Major League Soccer), and recognizes adult amateur and youth organizations. USSF also organizes all national teams, including youth national teams.

### USYSA

The United States Youth Soccer Association (USYSA) is the major youth affiliate of the USSF. It has over 3,000,000 registered players and is the only youth organization that supports USSF financially (other organizations pay a nominal annual fee to be associated with USSF, but do not have the same status).

USYSA organizes **National Cup**, which recognizes national champions in the U14 through U19 age groups. The McGuire Cup, given to the U19 Boys champion has been in existence for over 70 years. National cup is far and away the strongest and most prestigious event in the United States for youth teams.

USYSA also organizes the Olympic Development Program (**ODP**), which is the main means in the USA of identifying potential national team players. Players on the National and Regional ODP teams all typically will play Division I College or Professional soccer.

USYSA divides the country into four regions. Michigan is in Region II. USYSA recognizes a state affiliate for each state. In a few cases (California, Texas, New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio) there are two state organizations, each covering a different part of the state.

### MSYSA

The Michigan State Youth Soccer Association (**MSYSA**) is the USYSA affiliate for the entire state of Michigan. It has about 90,000 players registered.

MSYSA organizes **State Cup**, whose winners move on to the Regional Cup tournament. The winner of State Cup is generally recognized to be the strongest team in the state. There are currently three champions from GVSA, the Grand Valley SC U12,U14 and U18 boys, while the GVSC U18 Girls were runners-up.

MSYSA also organizes ODP in Michigan. The purpose is to identify the strongest players in each age group from within Michigan. There is a state ODP "team" which represents Michigan at

Regional ODP competitions and camps. A state team player will usually play Division I or Division II college soccer.

MSYSA also sponsors teams in the Midwest Regional League (**MRL**), which is the strongest regional youth soccer league in America and starts at the U14 age group. Teams gain admission by being at least a semi-finalist in their State Cup tournament. There are presently three MRL teams in our area, all from GVSC: U14, U15 and U18 boys. Teams in the MRL usually play games in a tournament style over three weekends spread throughout each season

Finally, MSYSA also organizes a state wide league, starting at the U13 age group, the Michigan State Premier Soccer League (**MSPSL**). Member leagues, including GVSA, may sponsor teams for play in the MSPSL. The Top Division of the MSPSL is the strongest league in Michigan, although most of the very best teams play in the MRL, not the MSPSL. Other than the top two Divisions, the MSPSL is basically a select league for Detroit area teams.

MSYSA's members are various leagues throughout Michigan, including GVSA.

### GVSA

The Grand Valley Soccer Association (**GVSA**) is a member league of MSYSA. GVSA currently registers over 5,000 players and 350 teams each year with MSYSA. GVSA is affiliated with MSYSA to offer its benefits to the league's members: ODP, play in the State Cup, MRL and MSPSL, insurance, tournaments, coach and referee licensing.

GVSA is the strongest league in the state after the top division of the MSPSL. The top Division in GVSA is comparable in playing strength to the second division of the MSPSL and clearly much stronger than the lower premier divisions. GVSA teams have made it to the State Cup Finals on occasion, without ever playing in a "Premier" league.

GVSA covers U9 through U19 age groups and extends throughout West Michigan. Age groups typically have 2-3 different divisions, formed by team strength. All teams in GVSA must be formed through an open tryout process, which means GVSA is a Select League.

A major goal of GVSA is to keep the cost of soccer low – it is the least expensive select league in Michigan. It costs about \$13 per player for an entire year to register.

GVSA has one full-fledged Premier club affiliate, the Grand Valley Soccer Club (GVSC), whose teams play in the MSPSL or MRL, with one younger team playing in GVSA. GVSA also sponsors strong club teams into the MSPSL on a case by case basis. This is done to keep the cost down and allow teams to retain their community identity.

GVSA is run by an independent Board of Directors and its members are its various clubs.

### GVSA Clubs

GVSA is composed of club members. New clubs are always welcomed to help expand the opportunities for playing competitive youth soccer in West Michigan. Basically, any club willing to try to form four or more teams will gain automatic admittance into GVSA, as will any new community club in an under-served area, regardless of size. GVSA has approximately 30 clubs stretching from south of Grand Rapids to Traverse City.

While most GVSA clubs are community based, there are several clubs in GVSA that are run as businesses.

Individual players are free to choose where they wish to play. Clubs hold tryouts each year, on or after June 15.

### Great Lakes Co-Ed Soccer League

GLS is also an MSYSA affiliated league stretching from Spring Lake to Manistee. However, it is basically an entry level and recreational league and has no connection to GVSA. Players wishing to play in both leagues need to "dual register", as do players playing in the MSPSL and GVSA.

### Other Youth Organizations

USSF is not entirely a nice, neat hierarchical structure as depicted above. There are other smaller youth organizations that compete with USYSA.

Note that players can play in several different organizations, if they like. A USYSA league or club cannot forbid its players from playing in AYSO or the SYL, and vice-versa. Any club or team that

threatens to sanction or "cut" players for playing on any team in these leagues cannot do so, and GVSA should be notified immediately.

In no case is Dual Registration required to play in GVSA and any of these other leagues.

#### AYSO, SAY and the YMCA

These organizations are basically entry level, community organizations whose numbers are mostly in the U6 through U10 age groups. Most players have their first experience with sanctioned soccer in one of these groups. AYSO and the YMCA are both active in West Michigan and are basically feeder programs for the clubs in GVSA, although in some cases clubs have a very close affiliation with AYSO leagues.

These leagues basically operate in a small area and are quite inexpensive.

#### US Club Soccer (USCS)

USCS is a relatively new national organization. It is radically different in that the organization is privately owned and run, as are many of its member leagues. There is a single USCS league that operates in the West Michigan area, the Michigan Champions League (MCL). The MCL is privately owned and has about 70 teams spread throughout Michigan and Indiana. It is more expensive to play in than GVSA. Due to its small number of teams the quality of its divisions is quite variable. Again, like AYSO, players may play in both GVSA and the MCL.

#### Super Y League (SYL)

The SYL is part of the United Soccer Leagues (USL), which is mostly comprised of minor league adult professional and amateur teams.

The USL is a for-profit organization and teams play in the SYL at their pleasure and for their profit. While the SYL was originally started so that the USL's adult teams could have a U19 feeder team, it rapidly grew to U13 through U19 ages in order to provide a major revenue source for the USL.

The SYL sells itself as a group of high-level regional leagues, although it is weaker than the MRL in most areas, including the Midwest. It is very expensive (the team fee in GVSA is basically \$50 per year; in the MCL it is \$100 per season and the SYL is \$1,000 per season) and spread over an enormous geographical area. Grand Rapids area teams play in a Division stretching from Toronto to Pittsburgh to Louisville to Milwaukee. This entails more travel than an NBA, NHL or MLB team typically has within its division. The recently announced 2006 schedule has West Michigan teams playing in Pittsburgh one day, then Louisville the next (they are about 7 hours apart).

In our area there were originally two SYL clubs: the Kalamazoo Kingdom and West Michigan Edge, which were allowed to form teams by virtue of having PDL teams. The Edge lost the right to form teams to GVSC, which this year withdrew from the SYL due to the cost, travel and the lack of a club voice in the SYL. Their position was taken over by the West Michigan Fire Juniors.

The SYL primarily plays in the late Spring and early Summer.

Again, GVSA players may also play in the SYL without any restriction or dual registration. A player for a West Michigan Fire team in GVSA may play for the Kalamazoo Kingdom in the SYL, or vice-versa.

#### Recreational Leagues

West Michigan also numerous programs formed through schools and Parks and Rec Departments. These are all unsanctioned and typically for members of their local communities. They are generally very inexpensive, reasonably well organized, and a very poor place to learn to play.

#### Indoor Leagues

Various indoor soccer facilities exist through our area. All of them are for-profit businesses and make their own rules. Again, all their leagues are unsanctioned and players are typically uninsured.