

A sport for rich kids?

Denyce Kincer and her son, Chad, found out how expensive it is to play at the ODP level.

The Olympic Development Program (ODP) is elitist by intent. The idea, after all, is to choose the best soccer players in a particular district or state, then select the cream of that crop to progress through sub-regional and regional camps and competitions, until finally the best of the best players win spots on a national squad.

Along the way, young athletes receive training from the high-level coaches in the country.

ODP has also been criticized as financially elitist. It can cost thousands of dollars to attend ODP camps; even traveling for state events can burden some youngsters and their families. Most state associations, and the four USYSA regions, provide various forms of financial aid.

In theory, no one who wants to play ODP soccer should be turned away for monetary reasons.

Theory, of course, does not always match reality. Just ask Denyse Kincer. She lives in Yukon, Okla., a town of 25,000 west of Oklahoma City. She drives a school bus and sells Mary Kay cosmetics; her husband also holds two jobs. With many financial obligations, including child support, money is tight.

The Kincers pay \$40 a month in training fees and other charges

so that 16-year-old Chad can play on the Norman Celtic Soccer Club. Buying gas for the hour-long trip for twice-weekly training sessions further drains the budget. So do expenses that other players' families take for granted, such as in-state tournaments.

"People say, 'Well, it's just one night in a hotel in Tulsa,' but that's too much when you live on a fixed income," said Denyse Kincer. "So we drive 130 miles each way both days to avoid that."

The Kincers did all they could to support Chad's soccer experiences. Ever since he was first selected for the ODP program several years ago, they have come up with the extra money to cover travel, food and assorted auxiliary costs.

Living paycheck to paycheck

Last summer Chad was invited to a sub-regional event, and the Oklahoma Soccer Association picked up the tab. But when he was asked to attend a regional identification camp in Alabama, the OSA offered only a half scholarship because too many other players also needed funds. The Kincers could not afford another \$600 to \$900, so Chad stayed home.

Denyse Kincer believes there is something wrong with a system that allows that to happen. All mothers think their children are special, but she offers a compelling reason for Chad.

She said he began playing soccer at age 4. He was good with

both feet and loved the constant action. At 5, Chad got a virus that settled in his cerebellum. Doctors predicted he would never walk again. But after years of grueling therapy, he did, and he emerged a better player than before. Kincer, who was then a single parent, was thrilled.

"Chad heard of ODP the first year he played classic soccer," she said. "It was good coaching, more exposure, and better preparation for college."

The first tryout drew 150 youngsters. To Chad's surprise, he was selected for the program. He continued playing ODP every year thereafter. He was part of the team that won a sub-regional event in Kansas, and he was asked to continue on to the upcoming regional event in Alabama.

Kincer heard about OSA's scholarship fund. She submitted request letters, and promised "if Chad ever makes it big, we'll pay back every penny." However, she said, OSA's \$600 offer was not enough. "You can't come up with the rest of the money [\$1200 to \$1500, including plane fare] when you live paycheck to paycheck. We tried everything. My husband tried to see if businesses could sponsor him, but they won't do it if they don't know the individual.

"I know Chad's ODP coaches went to bat for him, but it didn't seem like anyone else cared. No one ever followed up. It seemed like because he needed money, they didn't want to know anything."

'More requests than we had money'

Sid Goodrich, executive director of OSA, responded to *Soccer America's* Youth Soccer Letter's query about the situation.

"We have a scholarship program for ODP players, based on need, the player's age group, and where he's going," he explained. "We give out between \$8,000 and \$9,000, which averages out to about \$500 a player. We offered to contribute half the costs for Chad's regional camp, which would have covered air and travel costs to Alabama. Unfortunately, last year we had more requests than we had money to give. No one received the full amount for the regional camp."

Goodrich said that USYSA Region III runs its own scholarship assistance program. However, that aid is available only after players have made the regional team; Chad needed funds to attend the identification camp leading up to that selection. Goodrich also said that if Denyse Kincer had followed up with OSA, "we would have looked at the situation a little differently. We try to be as inclusive as possible. In very difficult situations, our chairman will review the scholarship application and will usually find a way to get a child to camp."

"That's the first I heard of this," Kincer said when informed of Goodrich's comments. "There were plenty of phone calls, right up to the day they headed out. I promise you, I called and called and called."

Kincer believes her son lost an

important opportunity.

"I've been told Chad is talented," she said. "People tell me that he's at least as good as kids who went to the regional level. But it seems like only the rich kids go on."

She is proud of his reaction to last year's setback. "Chad has such a realistic outlook. He said, 'God just didn't want us to have money. It wasn't meant for me to go.' Well, God helped him walk again, so I know he's looking out for him."

This spring, Chad is playing only club soccer. He is not participating in ODP. Kincer believes that is wrong. "It seems like youth soccer today is just for kids who have money," she reiterated. "It's a shame. It really is."

She paused, collecting her emotions and her thoughts. "You know," she concluded, "looking back, I wish I'd done things differently. I wish when Chad was 4 I'd started him off in a sport that doesn't cost a lot of money."