



High school and club ball can mix

South Side High School's girls soccer success is legendary. The Rockville Centre, N.Y., squad recently won its 10th New York state championship in 15 years, finishing 23-0-0 for the second consecutive season. The lady Cyclones ended the year atop the NSCAA/adidas national fall rankings, one spot higher than last year's finish. Lisa Jaffa and Nina Nanavrakis were named All-Americans, the fifth and sixth such selections in six years.

Refreshingly, Coach Bob Bigelow — South Side's first and only girls coach, who retired this year after 15 straight county championships — refuses to take credit for the team's success. Even more unusual, in a youth-soccer world rife with power struggles among high schools and clubs, he goes far out of his way to recognize the contributions of the local Rockville Centre Soccer Club.

"They created the players," he says firmly of the Long Island Junior Soccer League powerhouse. "If you drive around town, you'll see every soccer field in use — and it's been that way since the late '70s. Kids here start at a very young age, and by the time they're in high school, they've been taught well already."

The heart of this year's team played for the five-time Eastern New York Cup champion RVC Dynamite.

How does Bigelow see his role?

"I just try to bring all their skills together and help provide some unity," he says. "I can't teach them how to kick a ball. I can't even demonstrate. Whenever I need to show something, I use the girl

A cooperative relationship between club and school created New York's best high school girls team.

with the best particular skill."

Bigelow is a late convert to soccer and has no hesitation admitting he knew nothing about the game until he became a coach by default. A member of the New York University basketball team that reached the NCAA Final Four in 1960, Bigelow taught physical education and guided the Cyclones' boys basketball team to a number of county championships.

"Growing up in a small town in Massachusetts, soccer was the last thing on

Rockville Centre SC's Royals, finalists at the U-12 WAGS tournament, offer a glimpse at South Side High School's future.

SOCCER AMERICA YOUTH SOCCER LETTER

BY DAN WOOG

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South Side High School of Rockville Centre, N.Y., captured its 10th state title in 15 years last fall, going 23-0-0 for the second successive season.

my mind," he says.

But when the high school initiated a girls soccer program in the early 1980s, no one

wanted to coach, so he stepped up. He learned the game by watching videotapes and attending other high school matches. He often applied basketball concepts to what he was seeing, but he never read a soccer book.

"You can't understand much that way," Bigelow says.

He transferred many basketball theories to the soccer field. For example, his teams always play man-to-man defense, not zone. That way, he says, "every player has to be responsible. No one can

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— South Side High School coach Bob Bigelow

say 'It wasn't my fault.' If every player does her job right, we'll win."

He enjoys experimenting with new ideas.

"If it works, we keep it; if it doesn't, we don't," he says. "Too many coaches over-coach. You can't get bogged down on the sidelines. It's really the players' game."

Bigelow's philosophy is simple: "You don't coach sports; you coach people." He laughs that he still does not know the game — or even the rules — but clearly he knows

enough to get his girls playing together.

"Maybe because I don't know much, I tell the kids it's their team, not mine," he says. "I turn it over to the captains. They're the ones who maintain the traditions. Unity on and off the field is so important."

Despite his acknowledgment of the role the Rockville Centre club has played in South Side's success, Bigelow seldom talks with their coaches — many of whom are soccer parents.

"They occasionally let me know if they think a girl is capable of playing here or there," he says, "but as soon as you allow them to tell you one thing, they start telling you who to cut or keep, and that leads to even more, like coaching kids behind my back."

How does he keep his distance?

"It's hard for them to give advice, because we don't lose very often," Bigelow says. "They pretty much leave me alone."

Still, Bigelow is grateful for the club's help.

"This is a special town," he says. "Parents have spent so much time creating good players. They're the ones who take them to games all over the country. All I can do is hope that when they're with us in high school, they have a good time and are good people."

Although Bigelow has retired, the future looks bright. Seven members of this fall's varsity played on the very successful RVC Hot Shots. And looming on the horizon, waiting for their shot at high school soccer are girls from four more LIJSL Division I teams, from U-10 to U-13. Several play on the RVC Royals, finalists in the U-12 WAGS tournament and 2000 state cup champs. ■

