The growth of soccer in the United States is one of the most interesting sporting, social and political phenomena of the past 20 years. From city to city, playing field to playing field, across most geographic and demographic lines, soccer has woven itself into the fabric of American family life. Right up there with apple pie and the pledge of allegiance is the now lemming-like procession to soccer practice, games and tournaments as kids are car-pooled to dusty, bumpy and overused fields to run, kick and play a sport that the world knows as “football”. Bewildered parents running lines, trying to understand the offside rule, look on as a game alien to everything they grew up with unfolds in front of their eyes. Mothers, Starbucks in hand, follow every play hoping for a “big kick” or the holy grail “goal” that will send them into joyous rapture while fathers look on with eyes on the game and an earpiece hooked into a radio broadcasting the local baseball or football match.

The simple beauty of a game that allows kids of all shapes and sizes to run around, tackling, passing, dribbling, occasionally heading and sometimes scoring appeals to the senses of new young American parents looking for a healthy, competitive and fairly safe alternative to the bruising reality of American football, the glaring individual spotlight of baseball and softball or the height restricted fairness of basketball. In soccer they have found a sport that embraces boys and girls alike and rewards persistence, effort and teamwork. In a country that gushes over the 250 lb high-school linebacker and 6 feet, 5 inch 13-year-old basketball players, soccer represents the ultimate physical equalizer for the masses and the merits and importance of team over the individual. American parents might not understand and appreciate the game but they absolutely embrace its attributes and the love their kids have for playing it. The numbers do not lie and the growth of soccer over the past 20 years has been nothing short of amazing. Participation has leveled off at an impressive 16–17 million players...
per year, meaning that in just three decades, soccer is nipping at the heels of both the 100-year-old American football and 130-year-old baseball as the national participatory pastime of a new America.

It would be a mistake however to believe that the sport of soccer in the USA is just a recreational pastime for the masses with little organizational structure or competitive fire. There exists in the USA a highly organized youth soccer network that ensures the sport is played in every city, town, village and suburb in America. The United States Youth Soccer Association alone, one of five major organizations that operate youth programs, has seen its registration grow from 100,000 members in 1974 to 1.7 million members in 1990 and then to peak at just over 3.1 million in 2006, testimony to the explosion of interest that has taken place. The youth soccer club structure in the USA, if recognized, would be the envy of many so-called sophisticated soccer nations and forms the bedrock on which the sport has been built. It is also a $1.1b to $2.5b business and that is billion.

So, apart from the fact that soccer is a fun, easy and inclusive sport, what has driven its growth? First, for 80 percent of the 18 million playing the sport it is just that, a fun, seasonal pastime they will play for 10 weeks and then move on the next in line, be it basketball, softball, lacrosse or baseball: never to think of it again until September comes around and their parents once again sign them up buy them a new pair of cleats and ball and send them out to have fun. For the other 20 percent however, it’s a different and more serious matter.

Driving this seriousness is the fact that soccer at the college level in America has undergone a tremendous growth spurt in the past 20 years with a 45 percent increase in those offering men’s programs (to 750) and a 220 percent increase (to 930) in colleges offering women’s programs. The startling growth of women’s soccer was fueled by a Title IX government mandated statute that requires any college accepting public funding to offer equal sporting opportunity to both male and female students. Soccer became a cheap and effective way to meet these requirements and colleges instantly set about issuing scholarships to fill their rosters. Between both sexes, over 40,000 American soccer kids now compete at the college level which is great for the sport and