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Prep Controversy | High-school teams missing stars who chose club squad

By Craig Smith

Seattle Times staff reporter

Many of the best high-school boys soccer players in the area aren't playing for their prep teams this spring.

Some might say they are caught in a Crossfire.

Crossfire Premier Soccer Club, which fields under-16 and U-18 teams in the new U.S. Soccer Development Academy Program, told players they had to choose between high-school soccer or Crossfire. The ultimatum has sent shock waves through area high-school soccer and forced players to make a decision. The issue also has focused attention on the often-strained relations between club and school sports.

For Josh Petosa of Snohomish High School, choosing Crossfire wasn't a tough decision, even though he was going to be a co-captain of his high-school team this spring.

"It wasn't that hard," said Petosa, a Gonzaga recruit, of his decision. "I was going to pick the club over everything. This gets you more ready for college with high-level soccer."

A player who thought otherwise is Tyler Klein, a senior at Eastlake High School who will play for Washington next season. With his Huskies scholarship offer confirmed, he said "no thanks" to Crossfire. Klein switched soccer clubs to Emerald City and is captain of his high-school team.

"I had committed to my high-school team and I had captain responsibilities and I felt I had to fulfill those," Klein said Tuesday after his defensive prowess helped the Wolves from the Sammamish Plateau shut out Juanita 1-0.

Crossfire's ultimatum has upset high-school coaches.

"This is where the kids have fun," said Eastlake coach Adam Gervis of high-school soccer. "This is where their peers are. This is their community. This is where people come to watch. This is where they learn social skills. This is where all those things occur. To take that away?"

"Having said all that," Gervis continued, "they [Crossfire] do an incredible

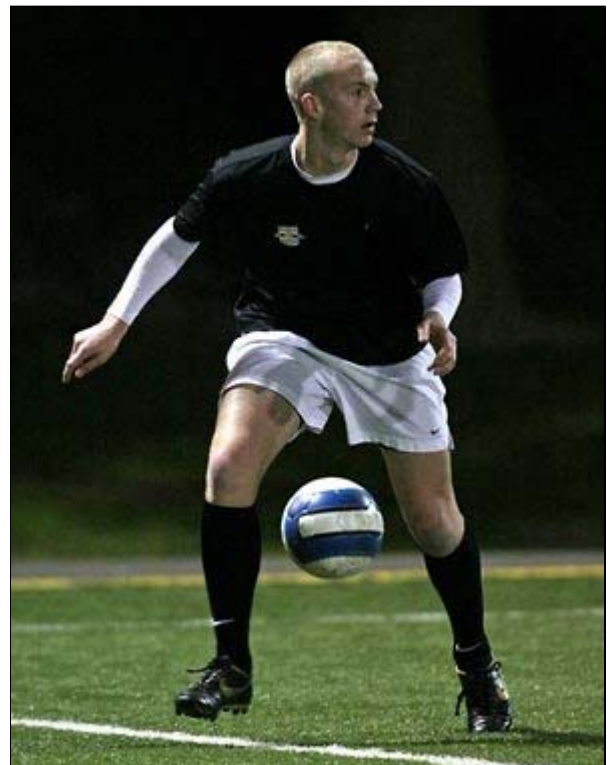


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Crossfire coach Bernie James says club soccer is the best option for players who are "dead serious."



Tyler Klein decided to remain with Eastlake.



job of coaching."

Snohomish coach Dan Pingrey lost his two co-captains and goalkeeper to Crossfire.

"I think it's extremely unfortunate that these kids are being put in a situation where they have to choose between one or another," he said.

No one pretends for a moment that the caliber of high-school competition compares to what Crossfire offers. The high-power club program amounts to an all-star team training under top coaches and competing against elite teams throughout the West.

"If you're dead serious about soccer and you want to play in college or professionally, this is a better option for you," said Crossfire coach Bernie James, a former Seattle Sounders defender and coach with national-team experience.

James knows that high-school soccer is fun and that the decision to skip it can be tough. He played at Seattle Prep and Bellevue and coached the Roosevelt girls team in 2000 to a second-place finish in the Class 4A state tournament.

"I enjoyed high-school soccer," James said.

Clubs decide what months to take off from the schedule. The other Washington club in the program, Washington Premier Football Club of Tacoma, is taking spring off and its players are playing high-school soccer.

Crossfire officials say they chose to play in the spring for three reasons: 1) To have momentum heading into tournament play in June; 2) Less chance of high-school seniors losing focus or missing games and practices late in spring if they don't have to regroup; 3) Better weather.

Neil Bueth, a spokesman for the U.S. Soccer Association that oversees the academy development program, said no more than six of 63 clubs in the national program prohibit high-school soccer.

President Brian Klein of Crossfire said there is "no right or wrong decision" when a boy chooses between high-school soccer and Crossfire.

Klein said one advantage of players not participating in high-school soccer is the diminished risk of injury.

"High-school soccer has a significant amount of injuries," he said. "It's very physical. It's a different game from what we play."

Bradley McIntosh, an Eastlake sophomore who chose Crossfire, believes high school is far rougher.

"High school is definitely dangerous," he said. "Here, guys tackle harder but they are smarter about it."

Crossfire permits its players to participate in other school spring sports such as track with the understanding that Crossfire prevails if conflicts arise.

The disappointing performance of the United States in the 2006 World Cup is generally viewed as the impetus behind creation of the Development Academy Program. The goal is to improve elite players and pump the best of them into the U.S. soccer pipeline.

A Development Academy Program news release says the program "aims to shift the focus of our young elite players from an

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Josh Petosa, shown here at a Crossfire practice, says his decision wasn't very hard to make.

Players to watch

Tyler Bjork, F, Juanita, Sr.: KingCo 4A co-MVP as sophomore and a two-time all-league selection.

Kevin Day, F, Decatur, Sr.: Washington recruit is smooth with powerful shot.

Alex Ferguson, G, Kentridge, Jr.: First-team SPSL 4A talent ticketed to Fordham.

Darwin Jones, F, Mount Rainier, So.: Off to fast start with eight goals and four assists in four games.

Tyler Klein, D, Eastlake, Sr.: Shutdown defender is Washington recruit.

Andrew McDonald, G, Shorecrest, Sr.: Security blanket for the Scots' defense.

Raymundo Pelayo, F, Hazen, Sr.: Scored five goals in first two games this year for 2007 state 3A champs.

Kohl Schoening, D, Woodinville, Sr.: Washington recruit who can also produce goals and assists when needed.

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overburdened game emphasis model to a meaningful training and competition model."

Crossfire players pay \$2,500 a year to play for the team, but financial aid is available for boys who can't afford it.

The caliber of play on Crossfire teams, which usually practice four nights per week, is impressive. Pinpoint passes, acrobatic saves, goals zipping into the upper corners of the net were on display at practice Monday at Starfire Sports Complex in Tukwila.

The program is so appealing that two players who live in Pasco try to make one or two practices a week. Another, Zack Sampson, a junior at North Kitsap High School in Poulsbo, is a regular at practice, although he sometimes doesn't get home until after midnight.

"This is way better for college coaches to see you, and it's a lot better than high-school soccer," Sampson said. "High-school soccer is a big joke, I think."

Tyson Sykes, a junior at Auburn Riverside High School, quit the Crossfire program months ago, then quit his high-school team this month to rejoin Crossfire.

"Leaving this opened my eyes to what I was missing out on here," Sykes said. "The level of players out here is unlike anything else. There's no better place in Washington to get better at soccer."

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