

THE GREAT AMERICAN SOCCER PLAN

*An American System for the World's Game — a Blueprint
for Rebuilding Soccer from High School to the National Team*



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1. Design Principles

This blueprint redesigns the structure of American soccer around one governing idea: speak FIFA's language wherever the system touches the world market, and stay distinctly American everywhere else. The global game gets full alignment on rules, calendars, and player-movement norms. The American parts — school-based sport, brackets, drafts, farm systems, a closed top league — are not compromises to apologize for; they are the country's proven sports technology, applied to soccer for the first time at full strength.

- **FIFA-aligned where it matters:** the laws of the game, international windows, transfer norms, and training compensation.
- **American where it wins:** high school and college as the development spine, a national cup bracket, MLB-style farm systems, and a draft as the floor rather than the ceiling of opportunity.
- **Every tier feeds the next:** free high school entry, a fully professionalized college game, a reformed MLS, and a national team drawing from all of it.

Speak FIFA's language wherever the system touches the world. Stay distinctly American everywhere else.

2. The Pyramid at a Glance

Tier	Role	Key Reforms
High School	Free, universal entry point	End academy bans; standardize seasons; state championships with real stakes
College	Primary development + showcase	Year-round FIFA calendar; FIFA laws; full funding; national team pipeline; transfer revenue
The College Cup	National open knockout competition	Open to every college team in America; qualifying rounds; Memorial Day final
MLS + Farm System	Professional apex	Fall-spring calendar; end single-entity; MLB-style affiliate ladder; simplified cap
National Team	The summit	Formal college pipeline; FIFA-window call-ups; collegiate national team

The player pathway: every player enters free through high school. At 18 they choose between signing into an MLS farm system or attending college — two legitimate paths competing on merit, exactly as in



baseball. College players may sign with any club in the world at any time (with training compensation flowing back to their school), enter the MLS draft, or pursue the national team. No path is a dead end.

3. High School: The Free Entry Point

Nobody funds high school football; the opportunity chain above it makes it matter. This blueprint gives soccer the same chain — high school requires no new investment, only the removal of two obstructions.

End the academy ban

MLS Next academies currently prohibit players from representing their high schools — the single rule that gutted high school soccer's relevance. Basketball proves coexistence works: AAU and high school ball share the same players, and the sport is stronger for it. In this system, academy players play for their schools in season. Every good high school team carries real prospects, and the games matter.

Kill pay-to-play at the gate

American soccer's deepest structural failure is a club system costing families \$3,000–5,000 per year, which skews the talent pool wealthy and suburban while enormous talent — especially in Latino and urban communities where the game is played constantly — never enters the system. High school is the one free, universal institution in every community. When college scouts recruit from high school games the way they do in football and basketball, the gate disappears.

Off-the-shelf infrastructure

State championships, all-state teams, recruiting rankings, local press coverage — none of it needs inventing. It needs stakes, and the college tier provides them. The one administrative fix: standardize the season nationally (the current fall/winter/spring state patchwork breaks recruiting calendars).

4. College: The Development Spine

College is America's unique sports asset, and soccer barely uses it. Four reforms turn it into the system's engine.

A year-round, FIFA-aligned season

Today's NCAA season crams roughly twenty matches into twelve fall weeks — two to three games per week, physically absurd for soccer. The reformed calendar runs fall through spring with a winter break: one match a week, like every serious league on earth, with pauses for FIFA international windows built in.



FIFA laws of the game

The countdown clock, re-entry substitutions, and other NCAA quirks make college a developmental dead end — players learn game management for a sport nobody else plays. Full adoption of FIFA laws makes college output legible to the entire world market.

Fund it like a revenue sport: the path to full-roster scholarships

The rulebook barrier is already gone. The House v. NCAA settlement, effective July 1, 2025, abolished sport-specific scholarship caps for opt-in schools — men's soccer's old 9.9-scholarship limit is dead, replaced by a roster limit of 28, every one of whom may be on full scholarship. What remains is making full funding attractive and affordable:

- **The money.** Twenty-eight full rides run roughly \$1–2.5M per year, and football and basketball absorb most of the revenue-sharing pool. The realistic sources are the ones this system builds: College Cup prize money paid per round, transfer fees and FIFA training compensation when players sign abroad, and endowed scholarships on the Stanford model — donors endowing a position in perpetuity. Soccer must become a program that generates revenue, so full funding is an investment, not charity.
- **Title IX — the binding constraint.** Scholarship compliance is program-wide, not sport-by-sport: total aid to women vs. men must be proportionate to their share of the school's athletes, with the mix within each side left to the school (this is how football's 85 scholarships have always been offset by women's rowing, soccer, and volleyball). So adding ~18 men's soccer scholarships requires offsetting women's aid somewhere — and funding women's soccer to its own 28 is the smart offset: same facilities and staff infrastructure, and women's college soccer is already the sport's stronghold, so the dollars buy competitive value rather than mere compliance. Two adjacent tests still apply: participation opportunities (barely affected, since the 28 roster spots already exist) and comparable treatment (a men's flagship's stadium and travel standards must be matched in aggregate on the women's side). One live caveat: whether House revenue-sharing payments count toward proportionality is unsettled — guidance was rescinded in 2025 and litigation continues — but scholarships themselves are unambiguously covered.
- **A first-mover coalition.** No school fully funds into a vacuum. The playbook is college hockey's: a cluster of 20–40 committed programs announces full funding together, creating a recruiting arms race that pulls others in. The U.S. Soccer/NCAA joint venture (Section 5) is the natural convener, and could tie Cup seeding or qualification benefits to full funding or a phased path to it.
- **Insurance against cuts.** House also lets schools trim rosters, and non-revenue men's sports are first on the chopping block in lean years. Cup prize money and the transfer-fee pipeline are the insurance policy: a men's soccer program that pays for itself doesn't get cut.

The sequence: opt into House → endow and fund both men's and women's soccer to 28 → join the coalition → let Cup revenue and player sales make the program self-sustaining within a decade.

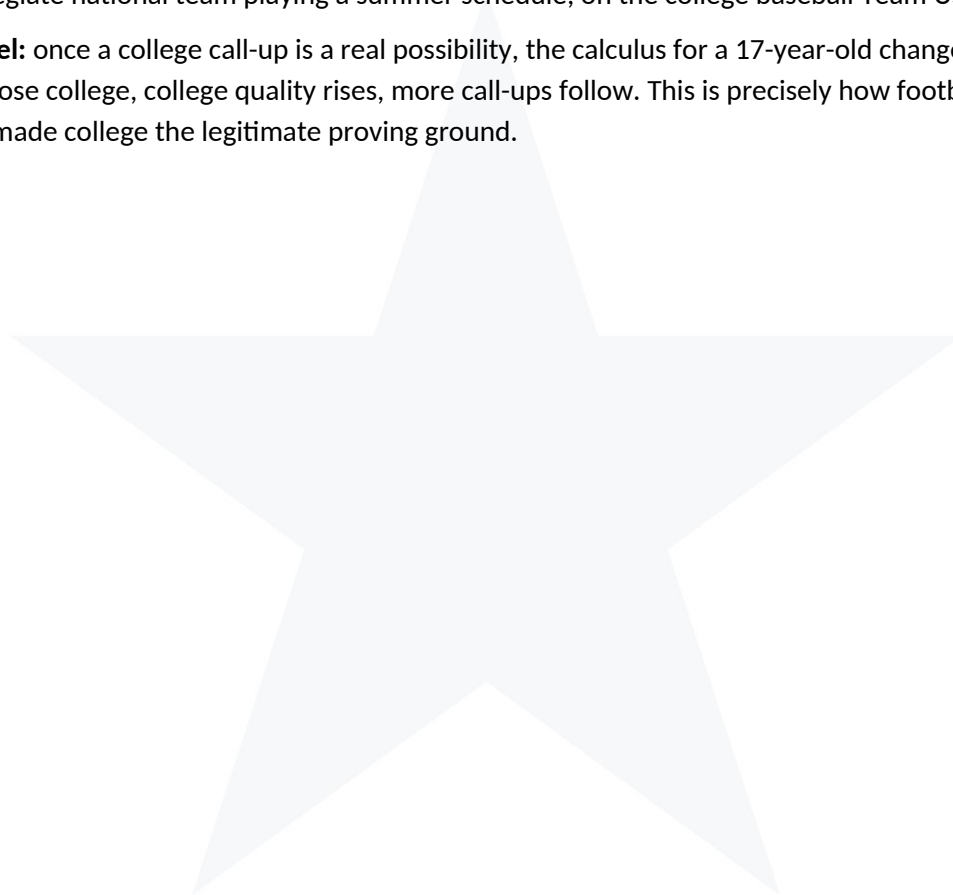


The national team pipeline

Any college player can play for the national team — the reform is making that systematic rather than theoretical:

- Federation scouts embedded in college soccer, with the College Cup as U.S. Soccer's largest annual scouting event.
- An annual January college-only national team camp, and U-20/U-23 squads drawn heavily from the college ranks (no club-release problems — schools beg for the exposure).
- A collegiate national team playing a summer schedule, on the college baseball Team USA model.

The flywheel: once a college call-up is a real possibility, the calculus for a 17-year-old changes. Better players choose college, college quality rises, more call-ups follow. This is precisely how football and basketball made college the legitimate proving ground.





5. The College Cup

The crown of the college game: a true national open cup, wearing American clothes. “College Cup” keeps the equity the NCAA already built, and “Cup” is soccer’s native word — every soccer culture on earth understands it.

Open to every college in America

Any institution fielding a team may enter — NCAA Divisions I–III, NAIA, junior colleges. Roughly 1,500 programs. This is more Copa del Rey than March Madness — a national institution that happens to be played by colleges.

Any college in America can win the College Cup.

Structure

Stage	Timing	Format
Qualifying Rounds	February–March	All entrants; regionalized draws on campus; 3–4 rounds reduce ~1,400 teams to 48 survivors
Main Draw (64)	April–May	16 committee seeds enter here, protected until the Round of 16; 48 slots for qualifiers and major-conference champions; open draw, live on TV
Rounds of 32 & 16	May	Higher seed hosts — or, in open-draw ties, the first team drawn hosts
Quarterfinals	Mid-May	Regional host sites
Semifinals & Final	Memorial Day weekend	Single showcase venue; semis Friday, final Monday afternoon

Match rules: single elimination, extra time and penalties per FIFA, no replays. A Cinderella bunkering for a shootout is both real soccer and great television.

Why the details matter

- **Campus venues:** a rocking 5,000-seat stadium at a small school beats a half-empty neutral site every time. When the small school is drawn first, they host — that Tuesday night against a seeded power is the whole product.
- **The draw show:** balls in the pot, live television. “Stanford will travel to... Messiah College.” Pure soccer theater no other American tournament has.



- **Prize money per round, paid to athletic departments:** a deep run funds a soccer program that might otherwise be cut. The Cup literally grows the game that feeds it.
- **Memorial Day final:** the great unclaimed American sports weekend becomes the Cup's permanent home, the way the Masters owns April.

Governance: a U.S. Soccer / NCAA joint venture

The Cup is run by an independent entity — “College Cup LLC” — on the College Football Playoff precedent (the CFP is not run by the NCAA). The board splits between U.S. Soccer and NCAA appointees plus independent seats, owning television rights and the prize fund separately from NCAA championship revenue.

- **The NCAA brings:** the schools, eligibility infrastructure, championship operations, media relationships.
- **U.S. Soccer brings:** FIFA sanctioning — results that count in the global ecosystem, referees on international pathways, and legitimacy for players transferring abroad off a Cup run.
- **Unified Cup eligibility:** enrolled student, registered player — a single standard overriding the NCAA/NAIA/juco alphabet soup for this competition only.
- **The Open Cup bridge:** the College Cup winner earns an automatic berth in the next U.S. Open Cup, testing the college champion against USL and MLS sides in a match that markets both competitions.



6. MLS Reform: The American Apex

MLS stays a closed league — no promotion or relegation. One reform is complete: owners voted in November 2025 to adopt a fall-to-spring calendar from July 2027, aligning with global transfer windows. The rest:

The distinctly American answer to development is not an open pyramid — it's the farm system.

End single-entity

MLS currently owns all player contracts centrally; clubs are franchises of one company. No other serious league works this way, and club-owned contracts are the precondition for a real transfer market.

Simplify the roster rules

Designated Players, TAM, GAM, U22 initiatives — a byzantine system nobody outside the league office understands. Replace it with a legible model: a luxury tax on baseball's pattern, or a straight floor-and-ceiling cap if parity is the goal.

The MLB-style farm system

Level	Baseball Analog	Soccer Form
MLS first team	Major league club	The parent club
MLS Next Pro	Triple-A	Reserve side, already owned outright by most clubs
Affiliated clubs	Double-A / Single-A	USL-level affiliates in mid-sized markets — Atlanta United's AA side in Chattanooga, A side in Macon

The affiliate ladder is arguably soccer's version of minor league baseball's greatest asset: a team in every mid-sized American town, cheap tickets, local identity, connected to a big-league parent. Europe has nothing like it. And because FIFA windows restrict transfers *between* clubs but not movement within one organization, the farm system is more FIFA-compatible than the loan chaos Europe uses for the same purpose.

- **Roster mechanics:** a protected-list equivalent of the 40-man roster, options to send players down, September call-ups.
- **A Rule 5 draft:** leave a prospect unprotected too long and another club can take him for a fee, but must keep him on the first-team roster. The anti-hoarding mechanism the model needs.



- **Sell players:** every club becomes a development business — college pipeline in, transfer fees out — instead of warehousing mediocre veterans.

Entry: the NHL hybrid

Player entry follows the NHL's precedent: the draft governs rights within MLS only. A college player is a free agent to the world — if Leeds wants the Wake Forest winger, they buy him, and FIFA training compensation and solidarity payments flow to his school and youth clubs. If no club signs him, the MLS draft is the floor, not the ceiling. At 18, a player chooses baseball-style: sign into a farm system now, or go to college and enter the draft at 21–22.

The USL question

USL is moving the opposite direction — promotion/relegation and its own Division One. Two coherent outcomes: USL becomes the affiliate network (as minor league baseball did with MLB), or it remains an independent rival pyramid. The second is also very American; baseball had exactly this fight a century ago.

7. The Unified Calendar

Period	College	College Cup	MLS
Aug–Dec	Fall regular season (1 match/week)	—	Season begins (late July kickoff)
Dec–Jan	Winter break; January national team college camp	—	Midwinter break
Feb–Mar	Spring conference play resumes	Qualifying rounds	Season resumes
Apr–May	Conference championships	Main draw of 64 through quarterfinals	Run-in and playoffs (ending late May)
Memorial Day	—	Semifinals and Final	Counter-programmed: college afternoon, MLS night
Summer	Collegiate national team tour; transfer window	Champion enters U.S. Open Cup	Transfer window; new season prep

FIFA international windows pause all competitions, so a junior at Indiana called up for a World Cup qualifier is a normal sentence.



8. Open Questions

- Prize fund economics: sizing per-round payments, and the TV rights strategy that funds them.
- The Memorial Day collision: coordinate or deliberately counter-program against the new late-May MLS playoffs.
- USL's role: affiliate network or rival pyramid.
- The women's game: this blueprint maps naturally onto the women's pyramid (college is already stronger there), but deserves its own pass.
- On-field product and presentation: broadcast innovation, matchday experience, and anything else distinctly American in how the game looks and feels — the next design phase.

