

## **Q&A: GIRLS' DEVELOPMENT ACADEMY DIRECTOR MIRIAM HICKEY**

*The U.S. Soccer Girls' Development Academy kicks off its inaugural season on September 2 with 6,000 players and 69 member clubs set to compete this year. Opening weekend will see 108 games played, highlighted by the Girls' Academy's first feature game in Somerset, N.J. between Sky Blue – PDA (Somerset, N.J.) and FC Virginia (Chantilly, Va.), streamed live at 11 a.m. ET on the [U.S. Soccer Development Academy Facebook Page](#).*

*The launch of the Girls' Academy is the culmination of months of work for Miriam Hickey, the Director of the Girls' Academy. Hickey joined U.S. Soccer this February with 25 years of coaching experience, working as a Women's Football Instructor for FIFA, a National Development Officer for the Netherlands Football Federation (KNVB), and most recently as the Girls' Director of Coaching at Troy Soccer Club in Michigan. She sat down for a Q&A to give her thoughts on the start of the Girls' Academy and her visions for the program. Hickey will also be interviewed during the Sept. 2 live stream.*

### **What are some of the main goals of the Girls' Development Academy?**

**MH:** “We want to make sure that every youth player is given the opportunity to develop and we do not want any talented player to be overlooked. It is critical that we don't fall behind those countries that are fully supporting the women's game financially, and have put structures in place to identify the best players and develop them in professional environments, which in the past were only accessible to boys.

We must continue to raise the level of the game in the U.S., so we can continue to win World Cups and Olympic gold medals, and that means we must not only develop the players, but also the coaches and get them ready for the demands the international game places on them.

The DA will assure that the elite players train and play with and against like-minded players and are coached by top level coaches who have committed to continue to educate themselves. The structure of the 10-month program with a higher training to game ratio will help prepare players for these international demands. Playing in games where the international rules are used will force players to learn to manage the game on a weekly basis.”

### **You were hired last February, what were your motivations for taking on this position at that point in your career?**

**Miriam Hickey:** “I have always been interested in getting the most out of players and the staff I work with. Being in the club environment you get to work with and develop a limited number of players and coaches. In this position, in cooperation with the U.S. Soccer staff, I have been given the opportunity to influence a large group of players and high-level coaches and help shape the future of our sport. In addition, being able to continue to grow as a person and a coach while working together with great soccer minds were certainly important factors in my decision to accept this role.”

**As a long-time club coach, what do you value in the player development pathway and how will the DA foster those values?**

**MH:** “Soccer is a players’ game, and at the top level where the speed of play is extreme and the details matter, the decisions on the field need to be made by the players. To achieve this, coaches need to create a learning environment in every training session where players, from a young age and as they move up, develop skills and decision-making abilities which relate directly to their specific game environment.

Learning to play multiple positions in different team organizations will also ensure that players learn different skills sets, learn to recognize the different soccer situations and learn how to successfully solve the soccer problems they face. The DA will put forth a structure and guidelines that will assist the clubs in creating an enhanced development model in which the elite level players compete with and against each other on daily basis.”

**How can we make sure our players are in the best environments in such a big country?**

**MH:** “By helping create excellent club environments that will attract the best players, which means there needs to be a consistent and transparent player development structure within the clubs. The DA will be the top of the pyramid, where elite players compete for an opportunity to perform at the international level. Our U.S. Soccer Technical Advisors in each region will work closely with the clubs and study and analyze trends to assure player and coach development pathways are optimized.”

**What is your response to some of the complaints regarding the requirements of the DA, including training, no re-entry and limited outside competition?**

**MH:** “To develop optimally, it is in the elite players’ best interest to be part of a consistent learning environment, with as few distractions as possible. Becoming an international-level player requires that the games are played with the international demands and rules placed on them. The work/rest ratio will not be optimal if players compete in other environments. To benefit the most from each activity, it is essential that players are 100% recovered before each training session and game.”

**How can the DA impact the club level in order to be more effective in helping to foster more young talents?**

**MH:** “Youth players join soccer clubs because they want to learn the soccer skills needed to play this game. Clubs will benefit for years to come if these players, during this journey, are trained and guided by experienced and qualified coaches who understand the needs of these players in age-appropriate environments.

Youth players need lots of touches on the ball in meaningful soccer activities, during which players can discover how to deal with the different challenges they face. Coaches who help players learn to love the game will ensure that these players stay involved and become the

future female coaches, referees and managers, in addition to professional and National Team players.”

**How important is it for more women to get involved in coaching?**

**MH:** “It is essential that former and current college, professional and Women’s National Team players get involved at the youth level as coaches, referees and managers. The knowledge and experience these women have must be used to benefit the future generations of girls and women in our sport. Mentorship and educational opportunities must be created to encourage these females enter the soccer workplace. The future of soccer for girls and women is bright, and even more so when we foster that talent both on and off the field.”