

COACHING THE 80%: RETHINKING WHERE WE INVEST IN YOUTH SOCCER



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Youth soccer does not have a participation problem. It does not lack passion, energy, or even resources. What it has quietly and consistently is a prioritization problem.

Across the landscape, we tend to concentrate our best environments, our most experienced coaches, and our greatest attention on a relatively small percentage of players. These are the players identified early, placed on top teams, and given access to the most visible pathways. This approach is often framed as development, and in many ways, it is. But it also reveals something deeper about how the system is designed.

It raises a simple but important question: who is youth soccer really built for?

The majority of players exist outside of that top tier. They are not always the first selected or the most obvious. Some develop later. Some balance multiple sports or interests. Many simply love the game without defining themselves by it. They represent the largest share of participants, and yet their experience often feels less intentional. Training environments can be inconsistent, coaching quality uneven, and competition structures unclear or disconnected. Not by design, but by default.

Over time, that lack of intentionality has consequences. Players do not always leave the game because they stop loving it. More often, they leave because the experience stops meeting them where they are. When the environment lacks purpose or progression, engagement fades. At the same time, early concentration of resources narrows the overall talent pool. The game has never been particularly good at predicting who will succeed later, and yet many systems still behave as if it can.

This is not a criticism of ambition or high performance. Those pathways matter, and they should. But they cannot be the only measure of success. If the game is to be healthy long term, success has to be understood more broadly. It has to include how many players are still playing at eighteen, how many remain connected to the game as adults, and how many find a place in soccer beyond their playing years. It has to reflect how accessible and relevant the experience is across different communities and different types of players.

That shift begins with how we think about influence. For all the conversation around player pathways, there is often less discussion about where coaching impact is most needed. The assumption has long been that the best coaches should work with the best players. There

is logic in that, but it is not the only way to think about development. If more players were exposed to high-quality coaching earlier and more consistently, the overall experience would change. Environments would become more engaging, standards would rise across the board, and more players would find reasons to stay in the game longer.

Improving access, then, is not just about cost. It is about design. It is about creating environments that feel purposeful, connected, and adaptable to the realities of players' lives. It is about offering meaningful competition, flexible participation, and visible ways to progress, even outside traditional definitions of "elite." When done well, these are not compromises. They are enhancements that strengthen the entire system.

Youth soccer sits in a unique space between sport, education, and community. That position brings with it a broader responsibility. Not simply to identify and advance the few, but to serve the many in a way that reflects the value the game can bring over a lifetime. The players who reach the highest levels will always be important. But so too are the ones who stay connected, who come back as coaches, who support the game as parents, and who carry it into their communities.







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They are not separate from the system. They are what sustain it.

There is, however, a growing recognition that this balance can be better. Across clubs, leagues, and organizations, there are conversations beginning to shift. There is a willingness to question long-held assumptions and to explore new ways of structuring programs, sharing resources, and aligning priorities. No single organization will solve this alone, and it is not a challenge that sits neatly within one league, one club, or one level of the game.

But that is also where the opportunity lies.

If the next phase of youth soccer is going to better serve the 80 percent, it will come through greater collaboration across organizational boundaries. It will come from a shared understanding that improving the experience for the majority strengthens the game for everyone. It will come from aligning not just on competition, but on purpose.

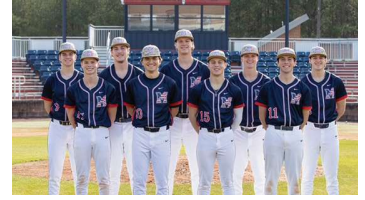
The solutions are not theoretical. They are already starting to take shape in different forms, in different places. The task now is to connect them, to support them, and to scale them with intention.

Because in the end, the future of the game will not be defined by how well we serve the few.

It will be defined by how deliberately we choose to serve them all.

Milton High School Baseball Class of 2026:

Photo by Nancy Daniels
Jackson Haug, Cooper Childress, Miller Pierce, Jude Green, Brady Schriver, Jackson Collins, Jesse Smalley, Davis Nichols, Weston Blevins, *Not pictured: Ellery Smith, Team Manager



Milton High School Lady Eagles Softball Fast Pitch Class of 2026:

Photo by: Andrea Rountree
Millie Morris, Elizabeth Wilkes, Amelia Wilkes, Addison Daily



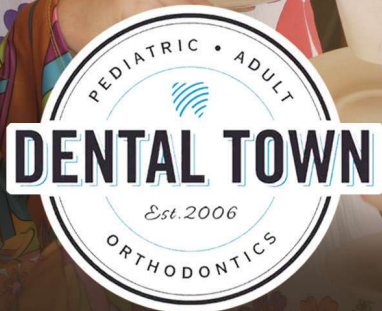
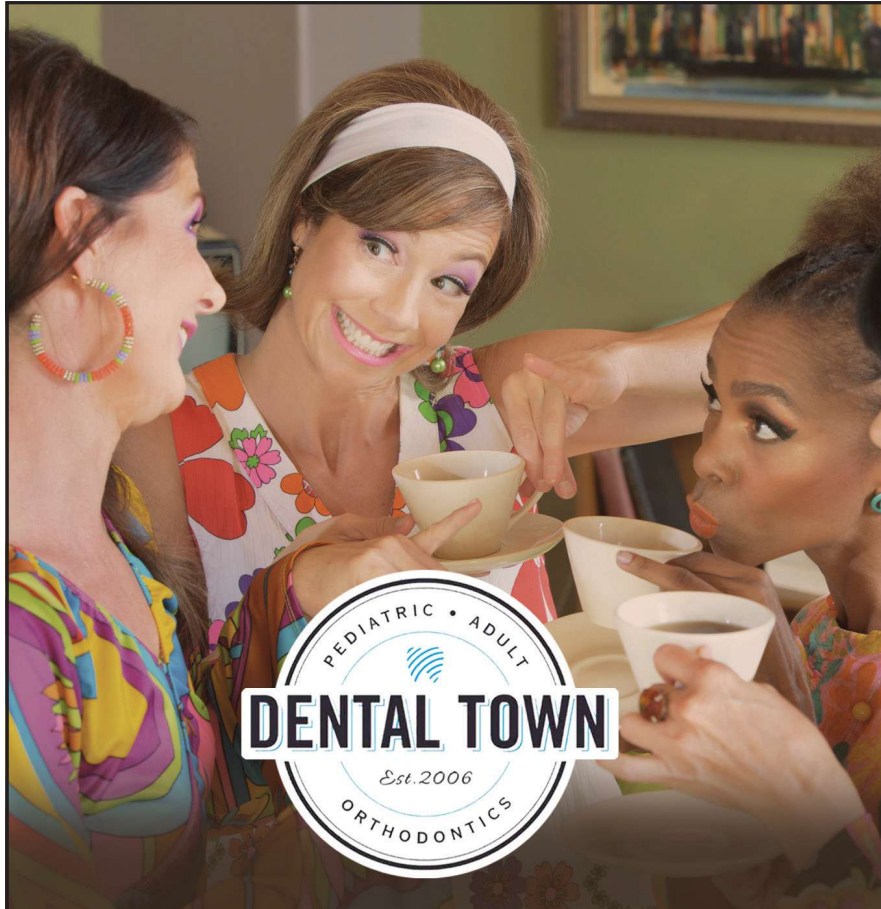
Milton High School Track & Field Class of 2026:

Photo Submitted by Coach Tama
Featured Athlete Record holder
Alana Calhoun



Track Seniors: Kelsey Anderson, Jayin Batra, Madison Bradway, Alana Calhoun, Ronan Crupi, Keira Dennison, Hughan Frederick, Ryan Greathouse, Beck Hamilton, Braxton Herndon, Alliyah Holmes, Elliot Johnson, Jackson Kaul, Everett Lawder, Jonathan Lynch, Keljen McCants, Gabrielle Michel, Jadyn Sevel, Caroline Spain, Masiah Wall

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