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Forced to Choose in Soccer: Club or Community

By HARVEY ARATON

MONTCLAIR, N.J. — If ever there were a picture-perfect day for high school sports, it was a sun-drenched Saturday afternoon in early September when the first intratown soccer showdown in a dozen years took place in this bustling suburb.

Next door to Montclair High School's soccer field, the football stadium was packed for the season opener. Parked cars lined otherwise quiet neighborhood streets. The late-summer air was heavy with anticipation as fans filled the soccer bleachers to see if Montclair Kimberley Academy, small in size but having grown in stature as an Essex County power, could beat its larger, public crosstown rival for the first time.

Peering into the stands at familiar faces from families of both schools and then to the other end of the field at several of the Montclair Kimberley boys he had played with on youth teams, the Montclair High senior midfielder Oliver Murphy could hardly contain himself.

"The kind of game you dream about," Murphy, one of his team's captains, would say. "You see your parents coming in with all these other people from town, you're with your teammates getting ready — that's why we play, for those kinds of moments."

From the moment he had seen the 2012 schedule, Murphy — Oli to coaches and teammates — had been counting down to the first of two showdowns with the school known as M.K.A. The night before the game, he was wound up — excited, nervous, restless. On game day he had difficulty keeping down the little breakfast he ate.

Murphy, 17, was not the only Montclair High soccer star grappling with his emotions that afternoon. Up in the grassy area behind the visitors' bench that Montclair Coach Jack Weber liked to call Heckle Hill — because students traditionally gathered to razz the opposition — Joseph Rodriguez, 16, was getting sideways looks and pointed questions.

Why wasn't he — Montclair's leading scorer as a sophomore the previous season — out on

the field? Was he injured? Academically ineligible? He tried to explain that he had quit the team but not because he did not want to play.

It is complicated, he said, and left it at that.

In addition to being Montclair High teammates last year, Murphy and Rodriguez competed together for Match Fit, a prestigious soccer academy boasting a cooperative relationship with the famed English club Chelsea. But when the United States Soccer Federation announced early this year that players in its 80 affiliated academies would **no longer be permitted to participate in high school soccer** in an effort to mimic the international player developmental model, Murphy and Rodriguez — like thousands of boys nationwide — were forced into the delicate position of choosing between club and community.

The United States has been able to produce world-class players in other team sports — like basketball and baseball — using schools as athletic spawning grounds. But national soccer officials have come to the conclusion that having young players split their time between schools and clubs will never produce enough world-class talent needed to compete at the top international level with countries that have had a huge training and cultural advantage. Hence, the decision to force teenagers into making profound choices that can be complicated — and costly — for their families.

In Montclair, the Rodriguez and Murphy families are vivid examples of how this issue — the increasing professionalization of youth sports — is playing out across the country.

“My first reaction when I heard about the rule was that I was devastated,” Murphy said. “I was really upset that I would have to even make that choice. But I thought it over, and there was no way I would miss my high school season, my senior year.”

A grade behind Murphy, Rodriguez weighed the attraction of his hometown team and friends against the benefits of academy training and playing against the best competition available, even if practices were more than an hour's drive away and game travel — along the Eastern Seaboard, stretching into Virginia — was typically much farther.

With a heavy heart, he pledged allegiance to the academy and left the team that admittedly was the more enjoyable social experience.

“I loved being on the high school team — these were the kids I played with all my life,” Rodriguez said. “But my dream is to have a chance at making a national team and playing professional soccer.”

Weber, Montclair's coach of 27 years, dealt with the blow of Rodriguez's departure philosophically and pragmatically. He knew that Rodriguez, with Match Fit's advocacy, had been invited to a national team camp in California in the summer of 2011. And while falling short of making a residency program in Bradenton, Fla., Rodriguez had aspirations of playing for the United States in the FIFA U-17 World Cup next fall in the United Arab Emirates.

"It became very clear that his longer-term goal from when Joey was a freshman was to be identified and get into the U-17 World Cup pool, and we talked about what he needed to do to get there," Weber said. "He was very passionate and wanted to do everything he could for the high school — and to this day I think it still tears at him — but let's face it: the coach that might identify him for that pool of players is not going to be watching M.K.A. and Montclair High on a Saturday afternoon. In his case, he's probably where he needs to be."

Grueling High School Schedule

Besides the benefits of being tagged and identified by national team officials and Division I college coaches at academy games and regional showcases, Rodriguez lamented the grueling, condensed schedule of the high school season, which plays out in about two months after workouts commence in mid-August.

"I got injured both years — hit in the head and a sprained knee ligament," he said. "High school soccer is very physical, not as much fun on a technical level."

Weber acknowledged there were specific developmental disadvantages, noting that his team began this season with five games in 10 days against formidable league opponents, leaving scant time for training.

"I often say that 90 percent of my coaching is done during the preseason because the rest of the time I'm taping ankles and putting on Band-Aids and being a cheerleader in getting them up for the next one," Weber said. "The high school rules don't allow us to put out the kind of program that they can put out at the club level."

That was the training rationale behind the federation's decision to create an all-in program that would directly conflict with the high school season, said Bob Montgomery, the academy director for Red Bull New York, one of four academies affiliated with U.S. Soccer in New Jersey.

"What we've learned from the rest of the world is that the ideal is three to four practices and

one game a week that tests how they're doing their work," he said. "But change is always difficult, especially where you have a situation where players have already been on a high school team for a couple of years and feel they are having something taken away from them. So this has created a lot of problems, a lot of controversy."

Most irritating to Weber and other public school coaches has been the willingness of some academies to grant waivers to a few players attending private and parochial schools. Red Bull and Match Fit each acknowledged they were allowing one academy player to compete for his high school this season.

Tony Lepore, the director of scouting for the national development academy, said "a few exceptions" were made for those receiving financial assistance to attend a particular school. While private and parochial schools have historically denied recruiting and providing athletic scholarships, Lepore said, "Whether they call it tuition aid or a subsidized scholarship, there's an understanding that they will play a sport."

When formulating or enforcing policy, U.S. Soccer has no interest in the outcome of high school leagues, he added. Whatever imbalances may have been created between public and private, the hope is that the next generation of elite players will accept the cultural shift and the need for them to separate, as is done elsewhere in the world. A planned expansion of the academy program will include 13- and 14-year-olds, meaning academy-caliber players would never play a season of high school soccer.

Weber said the issue on a larger scale was not so much the adoption of the international development ideal or even the arbitrary waivers. It was the question of whether the policy is casting too wide a net when looking for boys with national team or professional potential.

And how many might needlessly sacrifice the benefits — social and otherwise — of playing for their schools and communities?

Not Just for Future Pros

Noting that the academy operated by Red Bull not only has a direct affiliation with Major League Soccer but is the only one of the four in New Jersey that is free, Weber said: "If they're paying for a kid to have a 10-month experience, of consistent coaching, how can I argue with that? But some of the clubs charge for it. That's where I have a question: Are there that many kids at that caliber that the New Jersey area can support four teams at every grade level? I could make the argument probably not. What I worry about is the

possibility of parents buying false hope.”

Lepore contended that the academy program is not solely fixated on breeding professionals, or national team players.

“It’s about taking a player to the highest level he is capable of reaching, whether that’s professional, home or abroad, or into college,” he said, adding that parents can be assured that there is “a high level of accountability” because U.S. Soccer has selectively accredited its academies, graded them on a five-star scale and approved only three new applications out of 200 last year.

“That said, we do understand the academies are not for everyone. It comes down to a family decision.”

Yael Averbuch, who is arguably Montclair High’s best-known soccer player but who never played a minute for the school on the way to earning a spot in the national team pool and a scholarship at North Carolina, said the decision to pursue sports at the highest level was not different from investing in any talented child’s pursuit of admission to a prestigious conservatory or theater program.

In an e-mail from Sweden, where she is playing professionally, Averbuch said: “I do feel that I missed out on the social aspect of it, but I was very motivated to find other training environments for myself that I felt would better help me reach my goals. Yes, the academy system is guaranteeing that the player is getting the highest level of training and playing with and against the most elite players. It is also not the only way to get to the highest level, and nor is it every kid’s goal to get to that level. So this is one of those situations where there is no ‘right’ answer, really.”

Somewhat paradoxically, Murphy, the Montclair High senior, decided to embrace the more Americanized system that places a greater emphasis on scholastic sports despite playing his earliest soccer at the club level in his native England. His family moved to New Jersey in 2005 when his father, Tony, landed an executive position in human resources.

The club system in England was different, the Murphys said, in that costs were minimal compared with what most American families pay even for midlevel travel teams, much less the academy level. Liz Murphy, Oliver’s mother, recalled parents being “up in arms” when the club asked families for an extra 10 pounds, under \$20, for new uniforms. As a result, she said, the makeup of the team was more diverse than what they have typically been exposed

to in the United States.

“Here it costs a fortune,” she said.

According to Rob Leather, who coaches the U-16 academy team Rodriguez still plays for with Match Fit, the yearly fees are a “little more than \$2,000.”

“We try to keep the costs as low as possible with the economy being the way it is,” he said.

But the Murphys and Paul Rodriguez, Joseph’s father, said the financial requirements of traveling to games and showcases add up quickly, along with the weekly driving expenses for those not living near practice sites.

The Murphys occasionally car-pooled with the Rodriguezes and another Montclair family to ease the burden. But it was on those long drives to and from practice that Liz and Tony Murphy were able to help their son distill the issues.

“We had quite a few conversations with Oliver, and they started before the rule was implemented because they’d been talking about it for some time,” Tony Murphy said.

“When they finally enacted it, he was very low because of his emotional attachment to the Montclair team and the coaches. What I had noticed is that he responds so much more when there’s that close connection, which he didn’t really feel as much from at the academy.”

By last spring, Oliver Murphy dreaded the long weekday night drives to practice. He worried that the time commitment was detracting from his important junior year of academics. He liked his teammates well enough but did not feel the same galvanized spirit as he did in Montclair.

“Honestly, playing for the academy kind of felt like you were playing for yourself more than the team,” he said.

He preferred not only the passion of the high school matches but the age-mixing, the mentoring he received as a varsity sophomore — in particular from one of the seniors, Jake Goldberg — and the chance to do likewise for this season’s underclassmen. As a freshman, he had gone to the soccer banquet and told his mother on the drive home that someday he hoped to make the kind of heartfelt speech he had just heard from that year’s captains.

In fairness to the academy program, he never envisioned himself on any track other than

the one to college, with the hope that soccer would enhance his application to a strong school. And while he believed that he would have attracted the interest of college coaches had he not joined the academy, by attending showcases on his own or with a regular club team, there was no question that his Match Fit experience had put him on the radar of several good Division III programs to which he is in the process of applying.

Upon quitting the academy team, Murphy rejoined a club team that is also affiliated with Match Fit but is a level down from the academy. When the high school season is over, the demands will not be as rigorous, the practices will be in the Montclair area and he will have gotten to finish what he started.

Murphy also acknowledged that what was right for him was not necessarily the case for others, specifically Rodriguez.

"Joe's a great player; he's got his plan and his dream, and I really respect him for going after it," he said.

'He Just Can't Stay Away'

Even in leaving, however, it has been nearly impossible for Rodriguez to distance himself from the high school team. He was a frequent visitor on those sweltering days of preseason practice. When school began, he attended home games whenever he could and even some after-school practices.

"He just can't stay away," Rodriguez's father, Paul, said one recent weekday afternoon when his son watched the first half of a game against Livingston, cheering a goal by Alex Patel, his classmate, good friend and former teammate on a formidable club team known as the Gauchos.

Composed of boys from the Montclair area, most of whom expect to play in college, the Gauchos have served the kind of alternative path to an academy program that Averbuch, now playing in Sweden, referred to. Rodriguez played with the Gauchos for a few years but left the team three years ago to join Match Fit, recommended by Leather, who at the time was coaching in the Montclair area.

Early in the second half of the Livingston game, Paul Rodriguez called his son to say he was parked outside the field. It was time to leave for academy practice, and the roughly 50-mile drive to Mercer County Community College in West Windsor was likely to be extended to as much as two hours by rush hour traffic.

"I'm not going to kid you," Paul Rodriguez said. "I do this because I love my kid. It's a sacrifice, but he's incredibly dedicated."

He laughed at himself for being the designated practice driver — in his job as a research analyst for an investment bank he has been able to work at home and meet the weekday evening demands — while his wife, Ana, handles game travel (though the academy team travels by bus to distant out-of-state games). The family's Toyota Land Cruiser bears the mileage scars, 154,000 and counting.

After Joseph eased his lanky frame into the back seat, his father passed him a wrapped sandwich and a drink. On the crowded Garden State Parkway there was a Spanish work sheet to tackle. As with Murphy, Rodriguez said the hardest part of the academy commitment was maximizing time to get his schoolwork done.

"Last year I really had to try hard," he said, admitting that just getting to school the morning after a taxing nighttime practice could be a chore. "Sometimes you can barely walk. I don't know one kid who plays for the academy who loves the long drives and the practices."

But he quickly added that he loved soccer, watched it on television more than any other sport and believed the hard work — he is hearing from Division I colleges — would ultimately pay off.

With traffic surprisingly easing, Paul Rodriguez dropped his son by the soccer complex 40 minutes before the scheduled 7:30 practice and headed out for a quick dinner. More than food, the discovery of a local tavern had been crucial in recent years in providing shelter from the nighttime autumn chill that would be coming soon enough.

On this pleasant night, several parents watched comfortably in the stands as Leather, the coach, put his team through a brisk workout lasting more than two hours under the lights. Leather, an Englishman who grew up in the club system and never played for his school, said that Rodriguez — a left-footed attacking midfielder with slick ball and passing skills — "had just missed out" on the residency program in Florida.

Still living in Montclair and making the long commute, like the Rodriguezes, Leather said he could understand how clinical academy soccer might feel in comparison to the more tribal high school environment.

"These boys are not from the same towns — although they've all seen and played against each other somewhere along the way," he said. "They're thinking, I'm playing with the best

guys from all those other teams, which I know they feel good about. But I'm not going to lie; it takes time to build that team rapport. It doesn't happen overnight. As soon as we're done, they're back in the car."

Sweating in his practice uniform in the back seat, Rodriguez checked his cellphone for messages, discovering that Montclair had beaten Livingston, which made him happy. But as the ride dragged on, and Parkway construction slowed traffic to a crawl a few miles south of Montclair, he complained of thirst and hunger. It was a few minutes past 11. His father suggested he call home and ask his mother to have something ready.

"This can really wear you down, no question," Paul Rodriguez said. "But I think he knows how good this competition is for him, how much the academy has already done for him. I mean, I was with him in California and it was astounding how good those kids were, how fast the game was."

He paused a moment and said that while he believed his son could compete at that level, he was not sure that he would have been emotionally ready for full-time residency and might have subconsciously held back.

"It's a lot to take on at his age," he said. "To be honest, sometimes I'm surprised he's hung in there. But he's never once said maybe I should change my mind."

If that were going to happen, Paul Rodriguez guessed it would have been after the Montclair Kimberley game, the toughest of all to watch, as it turned out. In the oppressive conditions, the teams battled furiously through a scoreless 79 minutes with players on both sides — Oliver Murphy included — having to withstand waves of cramping.

In the opinion of Weber, his coach, Murphy played one of his best games as Montclair's midfield general, but that only made the result — a 1-0 defeat when Montclair Kimberley's Ryan Fennelly scored with 30 seconds remaining off a long ball that got behind the Montclair High defense — all the more crushing.

Murphy's cramping was so bad afterward that his teammates had to help stretch him out before he could drive home, where he was not yet ready to face his parents, or his younger brother, a Montclair High sophomore. He sat silently in the car with the engine turned off.

The Pull of High School Play

Sympathy and a good meal awaited him inside, but he wanted none of it just yet. He headed

straight to the shower, where he stayed “a very long time,” trying to wash away the pain that only got worse.

“After all that buildup, how hard we played, the result was devastating,” he said later. “It hurts just thinking about it, remembering the goal, and seeing Ryan, who I played with when I was younger, run away in celebration, and then all the tweets and Facebook messages of how M.K.A. runs this town.”

He shook his head in the retelling of the game’s aftermath but most certainly didn’t hang it.

“All those emotions racing inside me and it was just one game,” Murphy said, sensing that to be so pained for everyone on his side, including himself, also spoke to the beauty of high school sports. And that someday (even after losing the rematch with M.K.A. three weeks later by the same 1-0 score) the hurt would dissolve into memories to share and possibly even savor.

It was also a game that Rodriguez would probably never forget not playing in.

“He came back from that M.K.A. game so miserable,” Paul Rodriguez said. “It was just killing him.”

But Rodriguez, like Murphy, did not have much time to dwell, or sulk. His first academy game of the season was the next day, at home, or an hour away in Princeton. Sunday traffic promised to be light.