

US. soccer embarks on a 10-year odyssey Sunday when the Olympics kick off in Sydney. Not only is the U.S. hoping to be competitive with a select group of players under 23 years old — the most experienced at the professional level and youngest ever to compete for this country — but is predicting that many members of that group will go on to challenge for the World Cup title in 2010.

That ambitious goal is based on the faulty assumption that the United States can recreate, in miniature, a soccer environment that will produce world-class players.

Under the label "Project 2010," the U.S. Soccer Federation believes that it can identify the nation's best under-17 players and isolate them in a 15-month residency program in Bradenton, Fla., to develop a higher caliber of international competition than the U.S. has displayed in the past.

In fact, international respectability can only be generated at the club level.

Club soccer — not the Olympic Development Program — was responsible for cultivating two of the most exceptionally talented players in this country, Chris Albright and Bobby Convey. Both are now teammates on D.C. United, the Major League Soccer team in Washington.

Both attended Penn Charter, the Quaker school in Germantown. And both developed their exceptional talent on club teams in Northeast Philadelphia.

In 1994, Albright proved to be the key to Penn Charter's first Inter-Academic soccer title in more than 40 years. Only a sophomore at the time, he scored the winning goal in sudden-death overtime against archrival Germantown Academy to give Charter the title. He went on to become an All-America forward at the University of Virginia and, after his sophomore year, to play for D.C. United.

At 6-foot-1 and 175 pounds, Albright is a forward with size and the ability to finish with a goal; a combination that is extremely rare among U.S. players.

In 1998, Convey, only a freshman, led Penn Charter to another soccer title and was voted the league's MVP. He left the school at the end of the season to attend Bolletieri Sports Academy in Bradenton, Fla., to prepare for Olympic competition. Earlier this year, Bobby, just shy of his 17th birthday, turned pro, signing with D.C. United, becoming the youngest player in the MLS. He was recently named one of three alternates to the U.S. Olympic team.

During their years at Penn Charter, Albright also played for the F.C. Bayern and Convey for F.C. Coppa of Northeast Philadelphia — the real proving ground for local soccer talent. Penn Charter was only a beneficiary of the time and expertise those clubs invested in them.

Their confidence, inventiveness and determination were cultivated on the rough-hewn soccer fields of Philadelphia's working-class neighborhoods, which once pro-



Left: JOHN WHITEHEAD/HARRISBURG PATRIOT-NEWS
Above: KRT

The club route taken by U.S. Olympic soccer team members Chris Albright (left) and Bobby Convey (above) is the best route to international soccer success for the United States, the author argues

U.S. soccer: 2 Philly guys show the way

...nue was invested at the club level to hire coaches and staff to work with the 12- to 14-year-old players, developing their natural ability, tactical knowledge and psyches.

But talent wasn't enough, even for a country whose best

athletes play soccer. Only those players who understood that titles are built on personal sacrifice, an unyielding work ethic and humility made the cut.

The result? France also won the World Cup in 1998 with that very same generation of players they began cultivating eight years earlier. The United States, on the other hand, embarrassed itself that year. Not only did we perform poorly, but the older members of the team, who expected more playing time, feuded openly with the coach. It was that kind of arrogance that has set

this country back in its quest for international respectability.

If the United States wants to be a World Cup contender, our players need more than an isolated "professional environment." They need to be immersed in a soccer culture that emphasizes player development at the club level.

In a nation where the best athletes tend to play basketball and football, creating that kind of a culture is a multigenerational process which will take much longer than 2010 to accomplish.

If U.S. soccer even comes close to capturing bronze in Sydney, it will be on the wings of players like Albright and Convey. ■

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