

# Much Adu about something for U. S. soccer

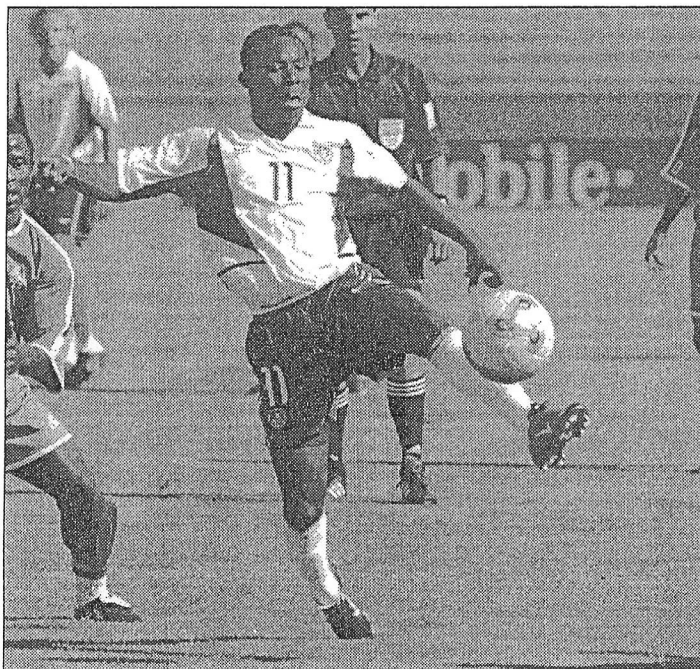
By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

**M**AJOR LEAGUE Soccer's recent signing of Freddy Adu, the 14-year-old phenom from Potomac, Md., is a sensitive subject for many of us who coach youth soccer. At issue is whether American youth are being exploited by U.S. Soccer in order to be more competitive on the world stage.

In 1998, U.S. Soccer, through its Olympic Development Program, embarked on a \$50 million initiative to identify the best young players in this country and develop them into an under-17 world championship team by 2005. It is hoped that that team will have the capability to capture Olympic gold by 2008 and win the World Cup by 2010.

Last month, the U.S. under-20 team defeated Ivory Coast, 2-0, in the first round of the World Youth Championship tournament to advance to the quarterfinals. Although the U.S. lost in that round to heavily favored Argentina, 2-1, Adu figured prominently in both matches. Look for him to be selected for next summer's Olympic team and to make the U.S. national team for the 2006 World Cup.

Adu's ability to play at the high-



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est levels is not the concern. Considered by many to be the best young player in the world, Adu, a 5-foot-8, 140-pound striker who will make his debut with D.C. United in June before he turns 15, appears to be the real deal. Some of Europe's top clubs, including Manchester United, expressed interest in him because of his blazing speed and remark-

able scoring ability.

There is also a precedent for signing very young players in this country, as the MLS inked Bobby Convey of Northeast Philadelphia in 1999, shortly before his 16th birthday. Convey, now 20, is a regular national team player. Adu, like Convey at the time of his signing, has an intelligence and maturity beyond his

age and should be able to handle the off-field pressures and demands of a professional athlete.

But how many other Bobby Conveys and Freddy Adus exist in this country? Of greater concern are the coaches and parents (especially "parent-coaches") out there who believe they are cultivating U.S. Soccer's next great prodigy.

Having coached at the high school and Division III levels and now coaching my own 7-year-old at the junior level, I have witnessed some of the most unattractive behavior by parents and coaches who think they know more than they actually do about developing players, let alone well-adjusted young people.

They push their kids into playing 120 or more games a year with club teams at the expense of competing in other sports or constructive non-athletic activities. The pressure has worked its way down to the junior level, where some burned-out kids quit soccer altogether by 13 or 14.

Too often, the motives of parents and coaches are skewed by ego: winning championships, securing college scholarships or capturing a coveted spot on a select team in the hope that their youngster will be recognized by

the Olympic program. Instead, they should be concerned about developing playing ability.

That is, concentrate on learning the game and making it fun instead of competitive at the youngest level. Teach 6-year-olds to try to use the entire field of play, for example, and to make an earnest attempt to pass the ball on offense and attack on defense, instead of hogging the ball just to score a goal.

As players grow older, teach them how to play well off the ball — by moving to open space, or making space on the field in order to create a goal-scoring opportunity for another teammate — and develop an attitude that emphasizes a team's standard of play instead of simply winning.

There are, after all, "well-played losses" as well as "poorly played victories."

This is the kind of development that the overwhelming majority of soccer-playing youth need in this country. While very few will ever possess the talent of a Freddy Adu, so many more can benefit from the intangible values of teamwork, perseverance and fair play. ★

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