



COMMITMENT TO CULTURE Q&A WITH UNITED SOCCER COACHES CEO LYNN BERLING-MANUEL

On October 10, 2018, United Soccer Coaches unveiled the “Commitment to Culture,” a pledge to build a unique, positive soccer culture in America. Consisting of seven cornerstones, the Commitment to Culture was developed by coaches, for coaches, to build a culture that celebrates what is best about soccer and helps it transcend what happens on the field to what happens in the lives of players, coaches, administrators, referees, families and friends.

The seven cornerstones are the outcome of a strategic coaches’ summit held at the 2018 United Soccer Coaches Convention in Philadelphia. Coaches representing all levels of the game—pro, college, high school, competitive and recreational—came together to examine the soccer culture after the U.S. Men’s National Team failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup and amid reports of declining soccer participation numbers. They were tasked with developing a framework of fundamental beliefs that the coaching community collectively could support and strive to uphold.

The consensus from the summit and months of follow-up work was a commitment to create a unique, positive culture for soccer in America. As the unifying voice, advocate and partner for coaches at all levels, United Soccer Coaches is leading the effort to build that culture.

“We’re thankful and proud of the effort of the many coaches who participated in this process,” said United Soccer Coaches CEO Lynn Berling-Manuel. “This initiative will help create a soccer culture that ensures every player is part of our game for life. By taking ‘the pledge,’ coaches, administrators, referees, parents and players can begin to shape the culture within their own team or club. SOCCER UNITES US.”

“It has been widely reported recently that youth are quitting soccer in record numbers. In our Commitment to Culture Initiative, I strongly believe in THE RULE OF FUN: let the game be what keeps children wanting more,” said United Soccer Coaches Outgoing President Lesle Gallimore. “I believe this is how we cultivate fans and contributors to the game at all levels for life.” Gallimore is the head coach of the women’s soccer program at the University of Washington.

Coaches, administrators, parents and players who would like to view the Commitment to Culture promotional video, learn more about the Commitment to Culture and the seven cornerstones, or want to sign on to take the pledge and Commit to Culture can do so at UnitedSoccerCoaches.org/Culture. The online platform also contains a toolkit for programs to promote their commitment to creating a unique and positive culture for soccer in America.

United Soccer Coaches CEO Lynn Berling-Manuel joined host Dean Linke on the United Soccer Coaches Podcast, presented by TeamSnap, to discuss the Commitment to Culture, how it was born out of a coaches’ summit at the 2018 Convention in Philadelphia and months of follow-up work and what it means for coaches. Below is an excerpt from that podcast. Listen to the full interview online at UnitedSoccerCoaches.org/podcast.

Q: When you hear commitment to culture, what does that mean to you?

A: Well, I think one of the things we all want is to have an American soccer culture that’s clear and compelling and we’re really talking about a playing culture. Fan culture is extremely important in MLS, and the other pro leagues have done a great job of that, but the playing culture is the thing we’re really talking about today and we think it has to be a positive experience for all of our players and all of the stakeholders in the game.

Q: Why did you pick October 10 to unveil the Commitment to Culture?

A: Well, it is the one-year anniversary—October 10, 2017 was the day the US exited the World Cup and that was a difficult and dark day for many of us and I don’t want to make that a negative thing really, because I think in many ways, although soccer fans of every stripe were pretty discouraged for a little while, we really felt strongly that this was an opportunity to look in a very positive way at cultural development. We found that everybody was very quickly pointing their fingers at each other, you know, at coaching, at players, at player development, and all of those things are important, but we felt as United Soccer Coaches, the most powerful and positive thing that we could do was really look at cultural development. So the Commitment to Culture has really been created by coaches for coaches because we think coaches can be the agent of change. So on the anniversary of that difficult day, we felt it was the perfect day to do something really positive. And thus the rollout of the Commitment to Culture.

Q: The first cornerstone is Soccer Unites Us. Why did that get such a high priority?

A: You know, the gathering of coaches at the summit, almost without exception, people really embraced the notion that soccer is a game that really brings people together. It’s about inclusion and diversity. We’re a sport on the playing side that’s almost half and half boys and girls, but players, the game itself brings all people together. Players are of every color and size and shape and ethnicity and economic level, and yet in soccer



they find a common denominator and that's a very powerful thing. You know, all sports certainly have their ability to bond people together, but soccer is really unique in its scope to be inclusive and diverse and, frankly, United Soccer Coaches has long been committed to inclusion and diversity and we feel it's not just a reflection of our association, but a reflection of the game and we want coaches to be the leaders of being an inclusive and diverse sport.

Q: You already said why October 10 was picked and you know, a lot of the naysayers out there, they aim their frustration at U.S. Soccer player development pathways, but United Soccer Coaches approached it differently. Talk a little bit about that.

A: Like every other soccer person, we think player development is incredibly important, but the fact is that federations and leagues and teams around the world have spent millions, millions of dollars to find the secret, the magic secret to player development and no one has found that magic bullet. Everybody knows it's a process. It's finding the great players. It's bringing them up in a good way. Some, some luck, certainly some process. But the upshot of it is we don't want to diminish player development at all, but we felt that, collectively, coaches could serve the game best by really looking at cultural development rather than player development. There are other folks who were putting lots of time and attention into that.

Q: You're also asking coaches, players, parents, referees and administrators, as well as fans, to sign the pledge. Tell us all you can about that.

A: The website is UnitedSoccerCoaches.org/culture and we're asking people to take an action and it is really to commit to pledging to be an ambassador to this cultural change. We want the soccer playing environment to be a uniquely positive environment. You know, the game is tough, winning is important, players can be ferocious on the field and still create a really positive environment for everybody. We believe coaches can be the agent of change here; it really becomes part of the process for every stakeholder to commit to a changing culture. We're not about diminishing competitive fervor or reducing how tough the game can be, but we are about making sure that every kid at every level has a great experience and remembers their soccer experience incredibly positively. That parents really enjoy it. That every group inside the game has that positive experience.

Q: Tell us more about the coaches' summit in Philadelphia where the cultural cornerstones were conceived.

A: Sure. You know, what really inspired this whole process was really another sport to tell you the truth. We were incredibly impressed with what the NHL and hockey had done with its Declaration of Principles. A couple of years ago, little less than that, hockey was struggling with player declines and a wide

variety of issues. They actually brought together the NHL, USA Hockey, the players' association, and together they launched their declaration of principles. It wasn't the same as our cultural cornerstones in terms of the list, but it was a similar idea. It was those cornerstone beliefs that they felt were really critical for their sport to really move into the future and to attract and keep young athletes and really have them stay in the game for a long time. So that was the original inspiration.

After the US defeat—and again, that was a trigger event, nothing more—I don't know that any of us looked at that exit from the World Cup as long-term devastating. Frankly, we were in good company. If you think back to the list of countries that didn't make it into the World Cup, we were certainly in good company. And at any given moment, at any given time in soccer, if there's one truth, it's that anybody can lose on a given day. But it still gave us an opportunity to really think about what was the culture that we all wanted to create for our game. You know, actually probably more concerning to us than that loss, which was a one-off event, was really a longer-term concern that there were multiple reports of really solid research that our participation numbers in soccer in this country had been on the decline for some time. If you look at the registration numbers for American soccer youth organizations, collectively, that hasn't moved in almost a decade. The numbers sometimes move between organizations but it hadn't moved in total and to us that was actually the bigger issue, and that goes back to speaking, much like hockey did, about the culture our kids were playing in.

The summit itself was really an effort to get coaches to really think deeply about this issue because we believe coaches are the change agent here. So we invited a very wide swath of coaches—professional, college, high-level youth, mid-level, recreational youth, high school—to all come together to really explore this issue and look for those common denominators that everybody thought were really important for our game. That group turned out to be pretty lofty and, in general, we haven't named names to kind of protect the innocent, but it really was names you would recognize. It was coaches who gave a whole day during the course of the convention to really sit down. We had a professional facilitator, a gentleman named Jim Paglia who gave his time pro bono to lead the effort. It was only coaches in the room—all business people, including myself as CEO, were asked to leave. So this was really about coaches thinking deeply about the game. That's where the summit came from, that was the day. From all of the notes, all the discussion, all of the work that was done that day there has been much follow-up over the last year. So it wasn't a one-off event. There were months of work that really culminated in the Commitment to Culture and the seven cornerstone beliefs that we, United Soccer Coaches, are really asking all coaches to embrace and for their players, parents, referees and administrators to really help us manifest and bring to life.



Q: How do coaches, specifically, impact soccer culture?

A: I think they're the foundation of soccer culture in many ways. They sometimes don't think they have that power, they say it's parents or administrators, but the reality is every day coaches decide what their environment is going to be like. There's often a call for parent education, and in reality, we believe that coaches can take the responsibility directly to be good communicators, to create a great environment, to create a positive experience not only for their players, but for all the stakeholders of the game. So, for us, coaches are the change agent and we want them to really believe that they have the power to make this the culture we all want it to be.

Q: Do you expect haters on this?

A: Oh sure, oh sure. I think any time you roll out what is truly a big, positive, forward-thinking initiative, somebody is going say, "This is soft, this is everybody gets a trophy." That's just not it. That's just not it. Our coaches have actually talked to their players and there's a tremendous number of great organizations doing good work, like the Positive Coaching Alliance and the Changing the Game group that have research to back up exactly what we're talking about here. We've just made it very soccer specific. So haters are gonna hate and for every negative comment about why this won't work, we believe there are a thousand coaches behind it who will say, "Yes, this will work."

Q: We already heard about Soccer Unites Us. We're going to walk through the remaining six here in our final minutes and we're going to start with the second cornerstone. It says Character First.

A: Well, we found that coaches—and it was very consistent across the board—coaches believe we literally honor, teach and develop the core values of honesty, loyalty, responsibility, selflessness, compassion and discipline. Coaches develop and teach character, so that's a core cornerstone.

The third is The Rule of Fun and this might be my favorite actually. We all talk about how we need to make the game fun. Coaches are convinced that's actually the key to being successful, but they also thought widely about what did that actually mean, and in the end what they agreed to was this definition: Fun is the lens that can make every soccer player a success. Fun takes many forms and always concludes with "I want to do it again." It doesn't actually matter if you're six years old, 16 years old or you're a professional and you're 26 years old. We find that all players, if they're going to come back, if they're going to be successful, they may call it different things, but at the end of the day, in their heart, it has to be fun.

The fourth is The Game Is the Teacher. We are all responsible for ensuring that soccer teaches the skills of a well-lived life. Teamwork, leadership, hard work, communication and creativity are just the beginning of its lessons. It's one of the things I think

coaches felt very strongly about—that the game is the teacher and that kids who play soccer are really learning, every day, things that are so much bigger than just soccer skills.

The fifth is Well-being Counts, and that's an interesting cornerstone because it really says every athlete of any age really deserves a safe, healthy, welcoming experience. They deserve to have a safe space, certainly physically, but also mentally and spiritually. This is an opportunity for kids, and kids talk about it for the rest of their lives, about how being on their soccer team really created a safe space for them. Frankly, we also talked about it being a safe space for every soccer stakeholder. Parents should find it a really great experience, referees should find it a really safe experience, so it really counts for everyone.

The sixth and second-to-last cornerstone is We Are Family Strong. Family and parents certainly, but also team and the club and the community really are extraordinarily important. For soccer. We'd like coaches to really feel positive about communicating to parents. And, yes, everybody has—and frankly any group you're involved in, whether it's a soccer team or anything else, has—some crazy person who makes your life miserable. But most parents really only want to make sure their kid is having a great experience and the more coaches communicate, talk to parents, inform them and really take the time to connect and appreciate, the better the experience is for everyone. So we found that family, and that sense of family, was very important.

The final cornerstone is Soccer Is the Player's Game. That is what is so unique about soccer. When the game begins, everything else falls away—the coach, the crowd, parents. When they're on the field, the game is really all about the player. I think the reason soccer is so popular and so powerful around the world is because it's really creative. The player makes the decision, they get to decide, they get to create and they win or lose, nobody else does. It really is their game. I think we, as adults, always have to remember that and we, as coaches, definitely have to remember it.

So the cornerstones are: Soccer Unites Us, Character First, The Rule of Fun, The Game is the Teacher, Well-being Counts, We Are Family Strong and Soccer Is the Player's Game. Those seven cornerstones make up the Commitment to Culture. We are asking coaches and players and parents and referees and others to sign and pledge to help manifest these cornerstones to create a culture that's unique and positive for soccer. The website for the pledge and a unique video, which you might want to take a look at also, is UnitedSoccerCoaches.org/culture. ■