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Sami Kuykendall woozily came off the field at Madison High, a bulge of gruesome purple swelling under her right eye after she withstood a soccer ball to her face from point-blank range. She gripped her new front tooth between her index finger and thumb, spotted her parents in the bleachers and shot them a smile. With Kuykendall playing her fifth game in seven days -- and having been tested seven times in the past three years for concussions -- the signal provided her parents some needed reassurance on the April night.

A 17-year-old junior midfielder, Kuykendall has spent each of the past three spring seasons splitting time between the Vienna high school's varsity girls' soccer team and the under-17 McLean Premier Soccer (MPS) Dragons, the sixth-ranked club team in the country. The ball to the face, the concussions, the shattered jaw suffered in an aerial collision during a game last year (and subsequent tooth implant) are just a few notable entries on the list of injuries incurred during basically a year-round soccer season with a singular goal: a college scholarship.

"I made a decision, consciously when I was a lot younger, that this was the way to get to college soccer," Kuykendall said. That decision has meant she has played approximately 90 games in the past calendar year, including three club league schedules and a barrage of tournaments. By comparison, consider: D.C. United plays approximately 35 to 40 games a season, including exhibitions and club competitions.

This weekend, Kuykendall will be one of many area players at the Player Development Academy Girls College Showcase at Rutgers University. The club schedule -- combined with the high school schedule -- makes for year-round soccer and is especially intense during the spring, when Kuykendall plays for both teams.

That grind puts players at risk of short- and long-term injury, according to doctors. The social sacrifices are, Kuykendall says, countless. Her family's financial sacrifice is considerable. And the tension between club and high school team is omnipresent during the spring season.

Kuykendall said the conflicts and pressures have been worth it. She has committed to a 60 percent scholarship to play soccer at Virginia Commonwealth University in the fall of 2010.

Outside experts, however, warn of the potential costs elsewhere.

"We've really created an animal here," said University of Notre Dame women's soccer coach Randy Waldrum, the president of the National Soccer Coaches Association of America. "It's just way too much soccer."

'This Constant Chase'

There are 98 soccer clubs in Virginia, according to Gotsoccer.com. In the under-14 to under-18 age groups, there are 11 girls' teams and six boys' teams from Northern Virginia ranked among the nation's top 25.

Varsity soccer is a spring sport in Virginia, making this an especially intense time for the area's scholastic athletes. Public schools in Maryland and the District -- as well as most of the area's private programs -- play in the fall, and many of those players compete with club teams then, subjecting them to the same pressures.

"You have to try to get on the best club team you can so you can get seen, to get seen in the best tournaments you can, to get seen by [the colleges] you want to get seen by," said Robinson junior Brooke Curtis, who also plays for the under-17 Vista Shockwave. "And now, it's like people are committing [to colleges] earlier and earlier, so there is this constant chase."

The Shockwave will be at the Rutgers event, the team's 19th showcase in less than 16 months -- a stretch during which it has traveled from Las Vegas to Orlando, playing in as many as five games in a three-day period. Ranked ninth nationally, the Shockwave has players from 14 high schools in Virginia, Maryland and Delaware. Eleven of its players have accepted college scholarships; nine of those are full rides.

"Parents start thinking about college expenses, and they see soccer as a vehicle to do one of two things: either get a scholarship or to help [the player] get in a school," Shockwave Coach Bob Childs said. "Parents have the expectations and they want to get their kid seen [at college showcases] and you have high school going at the same time. So, what do you do?"

Curtis, Ali Heck, Audrey Barry, Kathryn Johnston and LeighAnne Baxter have decided to do it all, engaging in a time-share between the Shockwave and Robinson. Since February 2008, those five players have played in two high school seasons, three club leagues (Washington Area Girls Soccer League, two Region I Premier Leagues) and 19 showcases, totaling roughly 140 games.

"It's really hard, but you have to know it's a sacrifice you make when you play at this level," Barry said.

In the 13 days leading up to this weekend's event, Curtis, Heck, Barry, Johnston and Baxter played in four high school games. They are scheduled for four games at the Rutgers tournament.

A deep high school playoff run with Robinson could mean 13 games total between May 11 and June 6.

After a stretch like that, "You're like drained, physically you're sore and mentally you just want to sleep," said Heck, a William & Mary-bound All-Met who said she often takes ice baths after intense game-stacked weekends.

"I have to rest kids at high school practice because they have to go straight from a high school practice to a club practice in the same night. Then the next day they've got a club game, and it just goes on and on and on," Chantilly Coach Melissa Bibbee said. "There's just too much pressure to win club games and get exposure. . . . The kid is right in the middle of it and being pulled by both coaches."

Much of that pressure can come from parents. While the NCAA restricts college programs to 19 regular season games and the Virginia High School League regulates the amount of high school games (16 regular season), regulation of club teams such as the Shockwave is often left to players' parents.

The demand to win in Fairfax County by the parents is unbelievable," said Childs, 63, a full-time director with the National Defense University in the District. "These club coaches that coach four or five teams, they better win because that's what they're paid to do."

Clyde Watson, a full-time soccer coach with the under-15 McLean MPS Strikers, has seen the focus of parents, coaches and players evolve.

"The reality is that the pressure is there," said Watson, who led the under-16 McLean Freedom to a national championship in 2007. "If you don't win, chances are you are going to lose some of your better players."

That pressure on coaches to win has often made them demand more from their high-level players and required that they spend less time developing others.

"What's been developed at the club programs now is that those kids have to win or that coach is gone," said Waldrum of the NSCAA.

Waldrum added that club coaches "often are only really surviving because they can win games, so they're not as concerned in truly developing the player as in just trying to get the result. If that means [a club coach is] going to drop the bottom three or four players because he didn't win enough games this year and pick up three or four that's better, then, somewhere, player development is lost."

Not Doctor-Recommended

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, adolescent athletes should take one to two days off per week from competitive athletics, sport-specific training and competitive practices.

Cynthia LaBella, the medical director of the Institute for Sports Medicine at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago, said that pressures from parents, coaches and other athletes often cause players to over-indulge during such a critical developmental stage.

"It's that workout and then rest and then workout and then rest cycle that builds strong muscles and tendons and bones," LaBella said. "But if you keep pounding and keep working out without allowing any rest for those structures, they just continue to break down and they're not allowed to rebuild and get stronger and so kids are getting things like stress fractures and tendinitis and that may be short-term, but once those injuries start accumulating, they have difficulty recovering from them."

LaBella said the AAP will be issuing a new policy statement on soccer in the next few months, one that details the medical risks associated with playing schedules like that of many area players.

"Just getting a few days off here and there would be nice," said Baxter, a Richmond recruit. "I mean, it just gets to be so much it just wears you down, physically and mentally because you've just been out here doing the same thing."

Often there is a disconnect between high school and club coaches who are unaware of injuries to players that happen off their watch.

W.T. Woodson senior Niki Mercier, who also plays for the Shockwave, played through a knee injury last spring and scored 12 goals in 10 high school games. She was named the Liberty District player of the year and first-team All-Met.

"In my opinion, against my advice, she went back [to playing] too soon," said Childs, the Shockwave coach. He said he benched Mercier for the entire spring club season, but she played with her high school team. A Florida State recruit, Mercier is sitting out her senior season and just had her second knee surgery.

"When she came back last year, I let her go at her own pace and make her own judgment," former W.T. Woodson coach Sharon Andrulot said.

Chantilly senior Cortlyn Bristol, a William & Mary-bound midfielder and two-time All-Met, also plays for the under-18 Virginia FC Netforce. In late March she suffered a concussion during a Friday night high school game. She played in five club games that weekend before the concussion was diagnosed, forcing her to miss one high school game.

Last week, in Chantilly's victory in penalty kicks over Robinson for the Concorde District title, Bristol wore a pain patch and played through a nagging back injury that has caused her to visit a chiropractor twice a month since she was 13 years old.

The five Robinson players each estimated they spend 30 to 40 hours per week playing soccer during the spring season. Each of them said that, at some point during their high school careers, they have considered leaving soccer altogether, but that they would never actually quit the sport.

"Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to just go home after school and not have anything to do," Curtis said. "To finish my homework and just be done with it and not have to worry about being in bed at 9:30 on a Friday night because I have a tournament in the morning."

Staff writer Paul Tenorio contributed to this report.