U.S. Youth Soccer, the largest member of the U.S. Soccer with about 3 million players under its umbrella, began the year with a new CEO. **Skip Gilbert** arrived from the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, where he served as managing director of operations, marketing, and development. He has also worked for U.S. Soccer (vice president of marketing in 1997), the United States Tennis Association, USA Triathlon, USA Swimming and as the chairman of the National Governing Bodies Council. He was an All-American goalkeeper at the University of Vermont and was on the NASL’s Tampa Bay Rowdies 1983 team. His Rowdies teammates included **Sam Allardyce**, **Tatu**, **Glenn Myernick** and **Hugo Perez**.
SOCCER AMERICA: What was your introduction to soccer?

SKIP GILBERT: My first experience was in 4th grade, at Friends Academy on Long Island. It was a new school for me, we played soccer in gym and I had no idea what to do when I was put on the field for a scrimmage. But I took to the game and my passion for it expanded every year. As much as I enjoyed soccer and scoring goals, it was in 7th grade where my complete focus changed by playing in goal before practice. It was not long after that did the coach see something in me, put me in goal, and I never looked back.

SA: Who were your soccer role models?

SKIP GILBERT: Hard to beat watching Peter Shilton, Dino Zoff or the classic American keeper, Shep Messing.

SA: What inspired you to pursue the higher levels in the sport?

SKIP GILBERT: After my sophomore season at The Lawrenceville School, JV coach Fred Gerstell wrote in my Report Card that they expected great things from me when I would join the varsity the next season. He then ended my report that I had “absolutely no regard for my own personal safety.” It was at that point I became and always will be a goalkeeper. From that point forward, I had coaches, teammates and my parents who believed in me and paved the way for me to succeed.

SA: Did you play other sports growing up?

SKIP GILBERT: I did. I played baseball and ran track on a competitive basis, but also played flag football, floor hockey and broomball recreationally.

SA: What were the highlights and fondest memories of your playing career?
SKIP GILBERT: Wow, that’s a tough one. I’ve had so many great experiences in the sport from playing and giving back as a volunteer youth coach. If I had to go with any, it would be my “firsts.” The first high school state championship (we won), my first collegiate match (we won), my first NCAA playoff game (we lost), my first NASL match (we lost), and my first playing for my country (we lost).

After All-American honors at the University of Vermont and an NASL season (1983) with the Tampa Bay Rowdies, Skip Gilbert joined the Columbus Capitals of the American Indoor Soccer Association. While with the Rowdies, whose starting goalkeeper was German Jurgen Stars, Gilbert made one NASL appearance.

SA: If you met someone from a foreign country who was unfamiliar with our soccer structure, how would you describe the role that U.S. Youth Soccer plays?

SKIP GILBERT: US Youth Soccer is the largest youth sports organization in the U.S. and the largest member of U.S. Soccer through our 55 member State Associations and 3 million players, coaches, referees and volunteers. Our pathways open doors for all players through competitive, recreational and disability programming, all utilizing intra-state, inter-state and international play.

While many look at our elite level of competition as our focus, our core foundation is built on the premise that we support soccer as a healthy activity through recreational and small-sided game programming. These programs emphasize fun and de-emphasize winning. Every child is guaranteed playing time and the game is taught in a fun and enjoyable atmosphere. We at US Youth Soccer recognize that every kid is different, with changing physical, social and psychological needs and our programs are aimed at meeting the needs of all kids.

SA: What were the main reasons you wanted to take on the job of U.S. Youth Soccer CEO?

SKIP GILBERT: There are two. First, I’ve had great business success in sport with incredible organizations like USA Swimming, the Arena Football League, USA Triathlon, US Tennis and the US Anti-Doping Agency. Yet with soccer, I will have one thing that I did not have at those other organizations: a strong personal passion and commitment to the sport. This is a role that I felt like I’ve spent my career preparing for and could not be more honored to have been offered it.
Second, I firmly believe that every child in this country should have an equal opportunity to fulfill their personal performance goals through soccer regardless if that goal is to just go play to have fun or, to go have fun helping the U.S. win a World Cup.

Being able to have an impact on millions of kids, coaches, referees, parents and other constituents who love the sport of soccer is to me, the ultimate form of giving back and will help shape the path of soccer in the US for decades to come.

**SA: Are there areas of priorities for you to address during the first phase of your tenure?**

**SKIP GILBERT:** Absolutely. We are immediately building a Strategic Plan to ensure that our overall vision and mission are aligned with our key Stakeholders; our 55 State Associations, U.S. Soccer, MLS, NWSL, USL and every child who wants the opportunity to play.

This process will allow us to reflect on what we have done incredibly well while identifying future needs and aligning resources to deliver to those core constituents while developing new programming to address key issues like cost/value, access for under-served communities and the overall changing culture of youth sports.

**SA: What would U.S. Youth Soccer need to achieve to make you feel satisfied with the job you've done?**

**SKIP GILBERT:** We have a tremendous opportunity to leverage World Cup ’26 and LA ’28 to positively impact the overall state of soccer in the U.S. That’s important from a global perspective. The core benefits from those events and what we are trying to achieve includes things like, establishing a shared strategic vision for youth soccer; supporting growth and diversification of soccer participation; and, expanding our collaboration and alignment with MLS, NWSL, USL and U.S. Soccer. If we hit those marks, I'll be satisfied.
SA: What do you think would be the optimal relationship that U.S. Youth Soccer could have with the U.S. Soccer Federation? How confident are you that the entities will work well together?

SKIP GILBERT: We have a healthy, transparent and collaborative relationship with U.S. Soccer and I come to this role with already strong ties to a few of their staff. This partnership will only continue to expand and deepen through our shared interests and strategic alignment, and we see that continuing given that we all are motivated by the same vision. That’s to make soccer the preeminent sport in the U.S.

SA: In general, what role should U.S. Soccer play in the youth game?

SKIP GILBERT: Every sport is a pyramid. The wider, deeper and stronger your base means that you will have a better pipeline to great players for international competitions.

U.S. Soccer has a huge responsibility to find the best 11 to win at the World Cup, the Olympics and a host of other competitions. Having an incredibly strong pyramid base for which to find those women and men to represent our country is vital. So, we all need U.S. Soccer to help set the tone that covers all aspects of the youth game to help manage expectations and ensure that we provide equal opportunity for all players to succeed.

SA: How do you feel about the current state of ODP, what is its main objective, and how do expect it to evolve?

SKIP GILBERT: It’s easy to recite that the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program was formed in 1977 to identify a pool of players in each age group from which a national team would be selected for international competition. The ODP provides high-level training to benefit and enhance the development of players at all levels; and, through the use of carefully selected and licensed coaches, develop a mechanism for the exchange of ideas and curriculum to improve all levels of coaching.

To specifically answer your question however, I’m here but a few short weeks so I’d need to gather much more information back from our State Associations, coaches, U.S. Soccer, MLS, NWSL, USL, players and other core constituents to be able to provide a specific state of the ODP. It’s absolutely a great program and we will constantly evaluate its place within the soccer development eco-system to ensure it best serves the needs of the players to represent our country in international play.
SA: Can you tell us anything about U.S. Youth Soccer's relationship with MLS?

SKIP GILBERT: I know a few of the staff at MLS and look forward to strengthening and enhancing our already positive relationship. We share a love of the game and a vision to help make soccer the preeminent sport in the U.S.

The partnership with MLS allows us to collaborate on a range of activities such as hosting MLS scouts and talent ID teams at our events. We believe our size and scale, along with national prominence and reach across all geographies, presents MLS an opportunity to canvas the entire spectrum of youth talent to better identify candidates for their clubs. The league plays an important role in the communities it serves and we will continue to learn from each other about ways we can collectively make a difference.

SA: If a club is deciding between affiliating U.S. Youth Soccer or U.S. Club Soccer, how would you make the case for U.S. Youth Soccer?

SKIP GILBERT: First, it’s disappointing to me that we are in a position where we have to ask players, coaches, clubs and parents to make a decision. It’s hard enough today to separate yourself from other players on a performance-based scale. But to add an additional level of stress in where they play is unfortunate and likely not something you see in other soccer-developed nations.

But that’s where we stand in the U.S., so I’d simply say that at the competitive level, U.S. Youth Soccer offers a comprehensive suite of opportunities and experiences for coaching, player development, competition, scouting/recruiting and access that is on par with, and often exceeds, the most elite non-affiliated clubs and leagues. Our range of programming, diversity of programming, size and scale can provide opportunities unlike any other.
SA: Is there anything that U.S. Youth Soccer can do to address the high cost of youth soccer/i.e. pay to play, and the inclusion of players from under-served communities?

SKIP GILBERT: The cost across all youth sports continues to skyrocket and it is vital that all of us work diligently to ensure every player gets an equal chance to play and fulfil their performance goals regardless of their economic or demographic standing. No child should ever be left out of a sport they want to play, period. That is a non-negotiable imperative for me yet also the hardest challenge for any sport organization to actually deliver.

USYS and our 55 State Associations do offer a tremendous value for families across our recreational, grassroots and competitive programming. As a non-profit, we dedicate our resources to improving all aspects of the game at all levels by constantly seeking new ways to add value to our experiences and that will continue. We provide thousands of dollars in grants every year to our State Associations as they develop and implement innovative and broad-based programming to serve new and/or underserved communities.

Cooperative partnerships between federal, state and local governments, U.S. Soccer, corporate partners, and the community of youth soccer associations can drive costs lower and we need to explore all options. A single unifying national vision can and will provide a North Star for all ships to sail by and unite all aspects across all sports, for the good of our country.

SA: Any experiences from your previous jobs that you think will be particularly valuable to your U.S. Youth Soccer CEO position?

SKIP GILBERT: All absolutely contributed and have prepared me for this role. From a discipline perspective, my past has given me dynamic experience within sales, marketing, event management and executive leadership. My work within the Olympic Movement helps
me to understand the political nature of sport domestically and globally while valuing the often under-appreciated work of our volunteers.

Last, being elected chairman of the National Governing Body (NGB) Council and the Association of Chief Executives of Sport (ACES) has ingrained in me the importance of a cooperative and collaborative need to share best practices across all sports so we can collectively grow and shape the overall culture surrounding youth sport.