

FFC'S OWN, KEVIN LEAHY, GIVES A GLIMPSE INTO THE GOINGS ON OF THIS YEAR'S UNITED SOCCER COACHES' CONVENTION

Once again Fredericksburg FC was well represented at the United Soccer Coaches Convention, with Technical Director of Coaching Mayowa Owolabi, Boys Director of Coaching Mitchell Alves, Youth Director Kevin Carmichael, Recreation Director Adrian Batchelor—who all also coach in the club—along with coaches Alex Rebeiz, Kevin Leahy and Peter Armatis all in attendance.



This year, “The Pitch” asked one of those who traveled to the event to give a firsthand account of what it was like to attend.

FFC 04 Boys Red coach Kevin Leahy is a veteran of the event and stepped up to give us all a little glimpse of what you get when you make the trip the what is billed as, “The World’s Largest Annual Gathering of Soccer Coaches and Administrators.”

BY KEVIN LEAHY FFC 04 Boys Red Coach

For five days, the center of the soccer universe—at least the U.S. version—was in Chicago at the United Soccer Coaches (USC) Convention and seven coaches from Fredericksburg Football Club got to experience it firsthand.

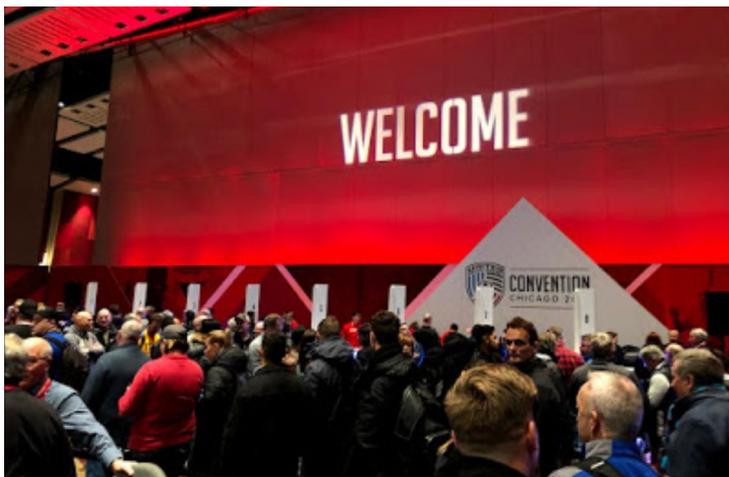
Each year the USC convention is held in January. I have attended four previous conventions, all either in Philadelphia or Baltimore, this year the convention was in Chicago. Now, some of you may be thinking, “Chicago, in January? That sounds cold,” and you would be right, especially first thing in the morning as you do your best Olympic speed-walker impression to cover the 200 yards to McDonald’s to get breakfast.

Despite the cold temperatures, Chicago was a great a venue for the convention. The food was excellent and although I didn’t get many chances to explore the city, I did get to see



Soldier Field, home of the “Double-Doink” [Fly, Eagles, fly!], from my hotel room.

Over the course of five days the convention brings together over 10,000 coaches, presenters and exhibitors in a Comic-Con like festival of soccer, but without the cosplay.



You are surrounded by a who’s-who of soccer. Hey, look over there, is that Kyle Martino? It sure is. There’s that guy I follow on Twitter, and another one, and another. Oh, I didn’t see you there Alexi Lalas, my bad. Hey Taylor and Darrell, hosts of Richmond, Va.’s own Total Soccer Show podcast, how you guys doing? This is what makes the convention so special, you never know who you are going to run into.

One night, Coach Peter and I were walking through the hotel lobby to meet with Coach Adrian to head out for dinner. We found him speaking with a gentleman who was also waiting in the lobby. Next thing I knew, Adrian was introducing us to the director of U.S. Futsal, who then introduced us to the president of U.S. Futsal and the head coach of the Argentine Men’s futsal team. No big deal, just another day at the convention.

The convention offers several hundred on-field demonstrations and lectures from some of the leading minds in soccer from all over the world.

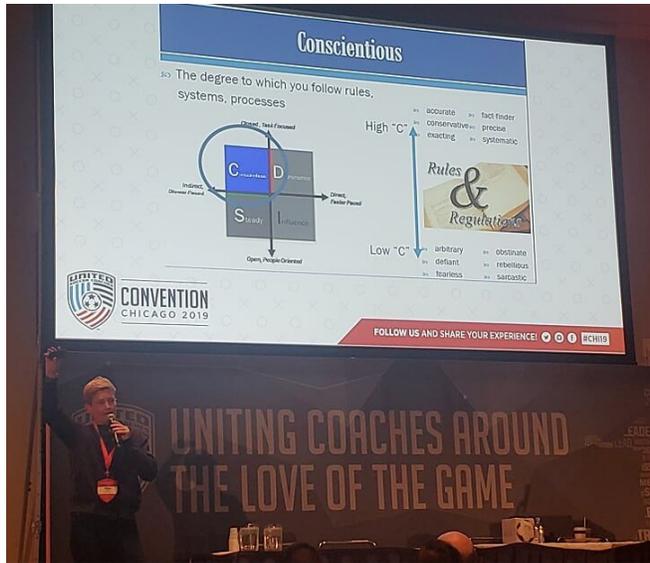
Want to know how to progress through the thirds in while playing a 4-2-3-1? There’s a session for that. Need to learn about fundraising and marketing? Yeah, there’s a session about that as well. How about using social media in referee retention? You get the point.



The most difficult aspect of the convention is trying to decide between multiple sessions that you want to go to at a given time. Before the convention, the seven of us met to go through the schedule and select the sessions we wanted to attend which would allow us to cover as much as possible.

I tended to gravitate to sessions that center around the “mental” corner of the four corners model of coaching—technical, tactical, physical and mental. I believe that this aspect of coaching is widely overlooked because it’s difficult to address it on the soccer field. It’s much easier to identify a poor first touch or a wayward pass and correct it. To understand

what a player is thinking, how that influences their feelings, and how those feelings impact their performance is much more difficult.



Over the last two conventions, this oft ignored corner has started to come into its own. USC has been able to bring in some of the best sports psychologist to present at the convention and this year was no different. Dan Abrahams presented multiple times to standing-room-only crowds. Dr. Tiffany Jones presented in the classroom and on the demo field, delivering the best field session that I saw during the week. I hope to use some of the techniques that she used to identify players' "red zones" in my own training during the upcoming spring season.

It wouldn't be a convention without the grand Exhibit Hall. If it has anything remotely, and I mean *remotely*, to do with soccer, you will find someone selling it in the Exhibit Hall.

Uniforms and equipment vendors are commonplace, throw a [free] squishy stress soccer ball and you'll hit one. I enjoy the vendors that are a little more...unique. In the market for a machine that will fling soccer balls in the air so you can practice volleys, headers and corner kicks? You are in luck, there are two vendors who are more than happy to sell you one!

The grand opening of this Taj-Mahal to all things soccer was on Thursday at 6 p.m. and people were lined up as if it was a Black Friday sale at Wal-Mart. You may be wondering if the market for a soccer ball flinger is so great that people would line up to rush in and be the first to buy one. I'm here to tell you that it's not.

What has people raring to go is something much simpler than that, it's the F-R-E-E schwag that is given out by the vendors. It doesn't matter what it is . . . a pair of soccer socks two sizes too small, a pen [so many pens], a brochure for a youth tournament in Idaho . . . people take it all and stuff it into their sack bag [also free]. I'd be lying if I told you that I didn't help myself to some of the free goods they were offering.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that the Exhibit Hall was a complete waste. There were plenty of worthwhile vendors offering some very useful products, two of which stood out to me.

One was Sparrow, a company creating an app that would analyze your kicking technique in real time and tell you what needed to be corrected. They were in the testing phase of their product and were working on adding other technical skills to the app. The other was a company called duKTinG that offers a line of notebooks for session planning, note taking

and player development. The player development notebooks are outstanding and I have previously bought them for the players on my team.



Overall, the convention was an excellent opportunity to get re-energized, be inspired and get focused for a new season. The added benefit of going with coaches from FFC was the time we got to spend together to get to know one another on a personal level. This tighter bond will only help to improve the quality of our coaching and the development of our players. We are also in the process of pulling all of our notes together to share with the entire FFC coaching staff so that the club as a whole can benefit from our experience.

Next year's convention is in Baltimore. I highly recommend that if you have the time to attend, even if for one day, that you do so. You won't be disappointed . . . and if you're lucky, it won't be as cold.