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SDA MAGAZINE

ALUMNI
INTERVIEW
WITH
MADISON
GATES

SDA'S
DOM PAOLINI
COMMITTS

INTERVIEW:
SDA BOYS
COACH
MIKE DRAKE

UNDEFEATED BOYS
MLS NEXT

2009
NATIONAL
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SDA BOYS COACH MIKE DRAKE

COACHING SDA'S OLDEST AND YOUNGEST PLAYERS SIMULTANEOUSLY

On any given week, Mike Drake might spend one evening tying the shoes of a five-year-old and the next challenging a 17-year-old about whether he's truly ready for college soccer.

He coaches the youngest boys in the club — a mixed pool of 2018, 2019 and 2020 birth years, kids between five and seven years old — and he also leads the U19 boys, the 2007–2008 group preparing for their final season before moving on. It's a rare vantage point, seeing both the very beginning and the near end of the development path inside the same organization.

"It's night and day," he says — and he means it. But what makes it meaningful isn't just the contrast. It's the continuity.

The youngest group isn't just another assignment for Mike. His own son is part of that pool.

When you're coaching five- and six-year-olds and one of them calls you Dad, the responsibility feels different. You aren't thinking about league tables or tournament brackets. You're thinking about first touches, about confidence, about whether the game still feels joyful.



At that age, the sessions are about comfort on the ball, about learning to run with it instead of chasing it, about lifting your head before you pass. They are small details, but they are the details that often show up years later — or don't.

Coaching his son has sharpened his patience and, in some ways, his urgency. He knows how quickly time passes. He knows how easy it is to skip steps. He also knows what he sees on the other end of the spectrum.

Coaching the two groups: It's night and day," he says — and he means it.

Working with the U19s has given Mike a clear understanding of what happens when foundational pieces aren't fully built. At the older level, deficiencies become harder to hide. Decision-making slows. First touches get exposed. Confidence under pressure matters more.

So when he's with the youngest players, he isn't just filling an hour with games. He's thinking years ahead. The same core messages travel across both age groups, even if the tone shifts: competitiveness, intensity in training, and treating every match like it matters.



Mike has always been competitive. He talks openly about having a chip on his shoulder and about the mindset that shaped him as a player.

"I just wasn't going to let anyone beat me," he says.

He played at Pfeiffer University in North Carolina before moving into coaching at multiple levels, including collegiate programs. The common thread throughout has been that internal drive.

That edge can be demanding, but it's also honest. He wants his players to feel the weight of competition in training so they aren't surprised by it later.

The Weight of U19

The final club season before college is complicated. Commitments are happening. Futures feel real. Sometimes, once a player secures his next step, the urgency dips.

Mike sees that clearly. He also knows what's at stake. He spends significant time speaking with college coaches, answering questions, giving assessments, advocating for players. When he recommends someone, he's attaching his reputation to that recommendation.

He wants those players not just committed, but prepared. College soccer isn't built around comfort. It's competitive and direct. If his players arrive expecting something softer, they'll struggle. His job is to make sure they understand that before they get there.

Why SDA Feels Different

Mike has coached in other environments, and he doesn't hide that comparison. He says plainly that SDA has been his most positive experience.

What stands out to him isn't a marketing pitch. It's the decision-making. He understands the realities of running a club, but he values that decisions are made with a lot of care and understanding. In his experience, when there's a crossroads, the conversation returns to what is right for the players.

That alignment matters deeply to him — especially as both a coach and a parent inside the same organization. When your own son is part of the youngest pool, you pay attention to those things. You notice whether development is prioritized. You notice whether long-term growth is valued over short-term optics. You notice whether the club is willing to make choices that protect players first. From the first dribble at five years old to the final season at U19, that philosophy shows up.

For Mike, that's what makes the work meaningful. His coaching time begins with his own son and extends to young men heading off to college. It's a challenge, but the standard remains the same: Do what's right for the players.



DOM PAOLINI COMMITS TO MISERICORDIA UNIVERSITY

When Dom Paolini talks about committing to Misericordia University, he doesn't make it sound dramatic. There wasn't a grand reveal or a drawn-out decision day. It came down to trust, comfort, and a feeling that the people there genuinely believed in him.

After narrowing his decision to two schools he confidently knew his next step. He had built relationships with both staffs, but Misericordia separated itself in a way that mattered. The Misericordia coaches were the biggest factor Dom mentioned and it really solidified his decision.

They were consistent. They were honest. They made it clear where Dom fit into their plans, and that clarity gave him assurance.

"They just really believed in me," Dom said — and for a player who values work and accountability, that belief carries weight.





SEVERAL COACHES AT SDA PLAYED MAJOR ROLES IN HIS DEVELOPMENT. HE MENTIONS BO JELOVAC, JUKKA MASALIN, MIKE DRAKE, JEREMY PETERS, AND TOMMY TANNER AS INFLUENTIAL FIGURES. EACH OF THEM SHAPED A DIFFERENT PART OF HIS GAME AND MINDSET.

A Foundation Built at SDA

Dom has spent nearly his entire soccer life at SDA, growing up inside a culture that values competitiveness and loyalty just as much as talent. He talks about the club in terms of people — the teammates he has played with for years, the road trips, the training sessions, the shared goals.

Several coaches at SDA played major roles in his development. He mentions Bo Jelovac, Jukka Masalin, Mike Drake, Jeremy Peters, and Tommy Tanner as influential figures. Each of them shaped a different part of his game and mindset. Some pushed him technically. Some demanded more consistency. Others helped him understand the tactical side of the game and how to compete at a higher level. ALL were instrumental in his soccer journey.

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For younger players coming up behind him, his advice is clear: don't take your time for granted, and work harder than you think you need to.

SDA MAGAZINE INTERVIEW



A Father's Guidance

“Obviously my dad,” Dom says without hesitation when asked about his parents influence. Having his father involved in his soccer journey has been both grounding and motivating.

From connections to perspective, from practical advice to steady support, his dad has been there through every phase. “He’s helped me all throughout the way.” That support wasn’t about pressure. It was about presence — someone who understood the landscape, who could offer advice when needed, and who believed in him even on the days when things didn’t go well. Dom makes it clear he couldn’t have done it without him. He also makes it clear that there was always a focus on being my own player and part of the greater good for each team he was on.

A Mother's Perspective

If his dad helped guide the soccer side, his mom reinforced the big picture. She consistently reminded him to work hard at whatever he chose to do and to focus on being the best person he could be. It wasn’t just about wins or commitments. It was also about character.

That influence shows in how Dom carries himself. He doesn’t exaggerate his accomplishments. He talks about team success, about learning, about effort. His mom’s message — work hard and be a good person first — clearly stuck.

When asked about his approach to the game, Dom keeps it direct: “If talent’s not there, hard work beats talent.” That line isn’t just something he says. It’s how he plays. If he has a rough stretch, he leans into effort. If he makes mistakes, he responds with energy and intensity. He believes work ethic can close gaps, and that belief has shaped his growth over the years.

That mindset helped fuel two State Cup championships, including a win over rival Rush in the final, followed by another title run the next year.

Those experiences — and the regional runs that followed — reinforced what steady work and team effort can accomplish.

Looking Ahead

At Misericordia, Dom plans to study Sports Management and can see himself staying in the game long term, possibly as a PE teacher or a coach. Given the influence his own coaches and parents have had on him, it's not hard to understand why he wants to give back in a similar way.

For younger players coming up behind him, his advice is clear: don't take your time for granted, and work harder than you think you need to. The small daily habits add up. Dom's commitment reflects years of guidance from coaches who pushed him, a father who helped navigate the path, and a mother who kept his priorities grounded.

Misericordia is gaining a competitor — but just as importantly, they're gaining someone shaped by strong leadership at home and on the field.





JOIN THE SDA FAMILY

Know a passionate soccer player eager to expand their game or a family who wants to learn about the world of SDA?

Share your SDA experience with them and encourage them to reach out to us. Have them email us at syracuseda@gmail.com for an in-depth exploration of what SDA has to offer.

Your involvement could make a positive difference in their soccer journey.



**NONSTOP
GOALS!**



SDA PLAYERS INVITED



GOTHAM FC SHOWCASE



**CONGRATS TO LEXIE FRAGNITO AND
MADISON TRUAX ON BEING INVITED TO THE
GOTHAM FC WINTER TALENT ID SHOWCASE!**

**PROUD OF THE WORK THEY'VE PUT IN AND
THE WAY THEY REPRESENT SDA. THIS KIND
OF RECOGNITION DOESN'T COME EASY.**

CAMDEN FARRELL LEBANON VALLEY



“YOU CAN LEAD BY BEING YOURSELF,” HE SAYS, “JUST GIVE IT YOUR ALL.”

Camden Farrell is set to take the next step in his soccer journey. This fall, he will attend Lebanon Valley College, where he plans to study marketing and sports management while continuing his playing career as a member of the Dutchmen.

His time at SDA was filled with unforgettable highlights. Among the biggest were winning the State Cup in back-to-back seasons, finishing first at a prestigious tournament at the ESPN Sports Center in Florida, and traveling to Arizona this past December to compete against top-level talent. Those moments weren't just about trophies — they were about shared experiences, growth, and competing at the highest level alongside teammates who became close friends.



“Since starting soccer at just five years old, his love for the game has steadily grown. He joined SDA in seventh grade, reuniting with several teammates he first met playing together in middle school. From there, the bonds strengthened and the results followed. He credits SDA as one of the best decisions he’s ever made, pointing to the coaches and teammates who helped him develop not only as a player, but as a person.

Beyond the wins, SDA instilled lessons that will carry into college and beyond. Learning how to balance practices, games, and academics built discipline and time-management skills that will be essential at the collegiate level. More importantly, he learned the true value of teamwork — understanding how special the game becomes when you’re competing alongside players who trust and support one another.

As he prepares for this next chapter, his long-term goal is to build a career in the sports industry, combining his passion for competition with his academic focus. Continuing to play in college is a major milestone, but it’s also part of a bigger vision.

For younger players coming up through the program, his advice is simple and direct: be physical, don’t be afraid of the ball, and remember that leadership doesn’t require being the star. “You can lead by being yourself,” he says, “just give it your all.”

2009 GIRLS NATIONAL CHAMPS CELEBRATE!



THE 2009 NATIONAL CHAMPS WERE CELEBRATED IN STYLE- MARKING THEIR INCREDIBLE ACHIEVEMENT WITH A SPECIAL TEAM GATHERING AS LOCAL MEDIA CAPTURED THE MOMENT. COACH BROOKE AND PROUD PARENTS SNAPPED UNFORGETTABLE PHOTOS, HONORING A CHAMPIONSHIP RUN THAT WILL BE REMEMBERED FOR YEARS TO COME.

NATIONAL CHAMPS



MADISON GATES



Blitz Quake wins fifth straight State Cup

The Syracuse Blitz Quake Under-16 girls soccer team won the prestigious State Cup championship in West Seneca, near Buffalo.

This is the fifth consecutive year that the Quake won the State Cup, a feat few other teams in the country are able to accomplish.

Coached by Godwin Iwelumo and Liverpool native Michael Paolini, the Quake features players from Syracuse, Baldwinsville, Skaneateles, Oswego, Camden, Marcellus and Liverpool.

The Quake have advanced to the Region 1 Tournament, to be held in Rhode Island on the first week in July, where it will compete against other state champions from the eastern United States for the right to go to the National Outdoor Championship later this summer.

Meanwhile, the Quake continues to seek talented local players who are willing to compete at a high level. Those interested can contact Michael Paolini at 727-3138 or e-mail paolinimp9@hotmail.com.



ON TOP AGAIN: The Syracuse Blitz Quake Under-16 girls soccer team, winners of the State Cup for the fifth year in a row. Front row, from left: Erica Main, Brooke Barbuto, Madison Gates, Emily Mahar, Allison Mayo. Middle row: coach Michael Paolini, Marissa Dauria, Emily Zurschmit, Justine Ravas, Amy Ware, Shay Lawrence, team manager April Sherman. Back row: Lynn Schrayshuen, Jerrica Lovett, Amber Lattner.

My soccer journey really began with the Syracuse Development Academy, formerly the Syracuse Blitz Quake, when I was about 10 years old. I had been kicking a ball around since I was three or four, while also playing just about every other sport and activity I could — ice skating, karate, dance, violin, piano, lacrosse, and volleyball throughout junior high. But some of my favorite memories in the game came with the Syracuse Blitz years. We played at a high level, but more importantly, it was fun. We were playing alongside our best friends, and there was a chemistry on that team that you don't always find — we just clicked. Those years brought incredible success, including five State Cup titles, an indoor national championship, and several national tournament wins, most of them under



the leadership of our coach, Mike Paolini. But what stands out most to me now isn't the trophies — it's the joy of competing together and the friendships that came from it.

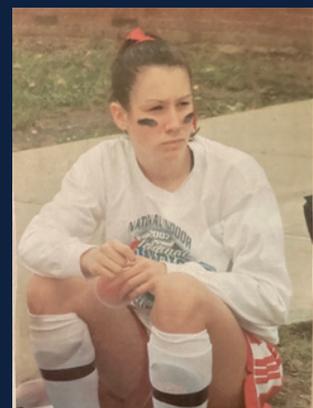
The Blitz laid the foundation for everything that came next in my career. It taught me discipline, accountability, and how to compete while still loving the game. I learned early that success wasn't just about talent — it was about consistency, teamwork, and showing up for the players around you. Those lessons carried me through my time as a Division I goalkeeper at the University of Michigan and later into coaching and my professional career.

One of the biggest things I took from my playing experience was learning how to lead, especially as a goalkeeper. You see the entire field, and you learn quickly that communication, trust, and resilience matter just as much as technical ability. Mistakes happen — what matters is how you respond and how you lift up your teammates in those moments.

After graduating from Michigan, I stayed connected to the game by coaching youth players for nearly a decade — first at SDA and later with clubs in North Carolina — while earning my MBA at Lenoir-Rhyne University and helping coach the team to three Division II conference championships. Coaching became a way to give back to the sport that gave me so much.

Professionally, I've built a career in marketing and leadership across franchising, automotive, home services, fitness, and now youth sports as the head of marketing for i9 Sports, the largest youth multi-sport organization in the U.S. I also run my own consulting business focused on empowerment and team development in the business world. Soccer continues to influence how I lead and how I approach challenges every day.

If there's one thing I'd share with younger players, it's to enjoy the process. The friendships, the travel, the hard practices, and even the setbacks all become part of your story. Soccer can open doors far beyond the field — not just in college or careers, but in the confidence, discipline, and relationships you carry with you for life.



UNDEFEATED



THE SDA 2015 PRE-MLS NEXT BOYS AT THE PY FUTSAL EVENT AT BROCKPORT COLLEGE. WE ENTERED TWO TEAMS AND ALL THREE TEAMS WENT UNDEFEATED (ONE JUST MISSED THE FINAL ON GOAL DIFFERENTIAL)!

WATCHING OUR TEAMS GO HEAD-TO-HEAD IN THE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME WAS AMAZING AND WE HAD A LOT OF PROUD FAMILIES ON THE SIDELINES.

SHOUTOUT TO COLE BENZ FOR EARNING TOURNAMENT MVP — WELL DESERVED AFTER A BIG WEEKEND.

2013 & 2014 GA TEAMS SUPPORTED NATIONAL GIRLS & WOMEN IN SPORTS DAY ROCKING THEIR FAVORITE SDA JERSEYS AT SCHOOL





GIRL POWER



GIRL POWER





GALLERY



UPCOMING EVENTS

MARCH:

**KICKOFF FOR GA AND MLS NEXT AD
LEAGUE MATCHES.**

**MANY TEAMS ATTENDING JEFFERSON
CUP GIRLS AND BOYS COLLEGE
SHOWCASE**

FOLLOW ALONG:

**[HTTPS://JEFFERSONCUP.STRIKERSTOUR
NAMENTS.COM/](https://jeffersoncup.strikerstour
namentals.com/)**




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