



Secrets of a Soccer Mom
by Kathleen Clark
A Study Guide by Kylie McCormick

I. Author

Kathleen Clark has written *Secrets of a Soccer Mom* as well as *Banner* and *Southern Comforts*, which were both developed at the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference. *Southern Comforts* was published in 2007, and the action takes place around a couple, Gus and Amanda, who are both in their seventies. The six scene play reveals their growing relationship in a comedic love story that is distinguished by the characters and their situations. Gus, a widower for five years, has not sought to remarry at all when Amanda comes to his door for Church collection one night. Amanda was widowed and left with a young child long before. Their love story is unique because of their age and the subjects that crop up during their relationship, including burial arrangements.

Both *Secrets of a Soccer Mom* and *Southern Comforts* take characters and groups who have been given an "old cliché" and given them new salt for their names. In *Southern Comforts*, Amanda is an older Southern Belle, and Gus is an introverted, tidy retiree veteran. Throughout the development of their relationship, however, nuances from and between the characters develop, revealing past passions and dissonance from the old cliché. Similarly, in *Secrets of a Soccer Mom*, Lynn envelops the "super mom," while Alison covers the "younger mother" type, and Nancy can be seen as the traditional soccer mom figure. However, throughout the bumps of the play (and the soccer game), more unconventional things are revealed about each character. Nancy used to be a model. Lynn was a social worker, and her mother had high standards of balance for life. Alison's mother left when she was thirteen. Despite the surface level of these characters, Clark takes old molds and complicates them, adding weaknesses and power in unexpected places.

Secrets of a Soccer Mom was first produced at Fleetwood Stage in Westchester, New York.

II. Plot

Three mothers of various ages attend a mother-son soccer game on a Sunday afternoon. Alison, Lynn, and Nancy are all homemakers who all seem to be a bit winded by the game as they enter the stage for the first time. Alison comes off as overly competitive to the two other mothers, who are surprised at her desire to score and her knowledge of the game. Nancy suggests throwing the game by playing badly but making it look like they're trying to play well, which makes Alison confused and angry. Lynn on the other hand quickly gets on board with Nancy's idea, and together the two mothers press Alison into agreement. As soon as Alison agrees, a single black cloud covers the sun, plunging the three women into darkness, and Nancy wanders off looking up at the sun. The scene closes with Nancy receiving a soccer ball to the head.

The second scene opens with Alison and Lynn looking after Nancy, who is using an icepack. The scene is punctuated by the mothers' attention directed towards their children, yelling advice or admonishment towards the field, despite the conversation and stage business taking place on the side lines.

Lynn takes out PTA work, which she apparently carries around with her to work on whenever she gets a few minutes. Alison clarifies the shift-based game, which works on a rotation of teams (A, B, C, D), leaving the women on the sidelines. Meanwhile, Nancy spreads the news of throwing the game to mothers on the other teams, thus allowing their children to win the game. Nancy also takes out her camera to photograph the game.

Alison reveals some trepidation in her marriage life before she is interrupted by a phone call. She learns that the woman who was supposed to watch her children cannot due to a situation with Chicken Pox. As soon as she gets off the phone and checks on her daughter sleeping in the car, she asks Lynn if she can watch her children for all of the next week. Lynn is shocked and asks for an explanation. With some hesitation, Alison finally explains to Lynn that she had a revelation. On the way to her car, a man, looking right at her, said, "What'd ya need?" After he repeated what he said, she explained, it "felt like a curtain had lifted." Oddly, the man was actually yelling down a hole at another construction working, and he didn't even know Alison was there. Before she has a chance to complete the story, Nancy re-enters.

When Alison exits to check on her daughter again, Lynn fills Nancy in on Alison's strange behavior. They wonder if her husband might be cheating on her, causing her need to go "away" for a week. As the conversation continues, Nancy moves into her disturbing experience with the soccer ball, where she "went from being fine to being on the ground." When Lynn presses her to help with the PTA work she has spread before her, Nancy continues by saying the experience

was “disconcerting.” However, moments later, when her husband asks her about the incident, she screams off-stage, “It’s nothing. I forgot all about it!”

Nancy then gives Lynn a glimpse into her life by explaining that Kevin didn’t want to watch Sally during the game and that he was terrified of playing Barbie. When Alison re-enters a few moments later, she confuses them both by saying the day is “so important” to her and she’s angry her husband is at the office. Of course, Nancy and Lynn consider her husband in the office on Sunday as another sign that he is cheating on her.

When Alison notices the young grocery guy, she proceeds to tell Lynn and Nancy a story to connect to them as parents. She never thought of herself as a scary mother, yelling at her children, yet sure enough, one day, this man had run away from her when he saw her yelling at Aaron. Nancy attempts to tell a story about her lighthearted days, but she is so involved with her children’s play that she loses the thought before she can complete it. Before running off to help her daughter, Nancy points out that it is impossible to have a conversation. She says that “I am now responsible for keeping two human beings healthy, safe, and happy twenty four hours a day,” which translates to having no personal time, even to speak to other adults coherently!

As she runs off stage, Lynn explains to Alison that Nancy used to be a model. When they reflect on yelling at their children, they both admit that they don’t like it and are not “yelling” people. However, as Lynn points out—yelling is the only way most people (and especially their children) will listen to them. When Nancy re-enters, the three women notice that the boys seem rather intense and competitive. Resigning to wait, the trio stare out as the scene closes, bored.

At the opening of scene three, the referee is brought up. Alison explains that his name is David, and she sees him jogging in the morning. She is very friendly towards him, while Nancy and Lynn seem to think he’s showing off during the game. When Lynn presses Nancy to help with the Bronx Zoo trip, Nancy tries to evade the conversation by claiming that something is “killing her.” Alison offers to help Lynn, who soon discovers a major problem with the PTA work she has been doing, which gives her a headache. As Nancy and Lynn commiserate over *The Happy Man and His Dump Truck*, they both recognize that they are “drowning here,” especially given the book they are speaking of.

However, they soon discover that Alison’s book, which turns out to be *Soccer for Dummies*, has a note within it—a “joke.” While it is not particularly funny, it is a sexy joke, and Nancy returns it to the book quickly.

A series of family and person information is revealed. Lynn used to be a social worker. Nancy remembers some of her mother’s toughest advice—to live a balanced life. Alison’s mother left when she was a young girl. All of this spirals into the major problem proposed by Lynn, “Makes you wonder what we’re doing to them that they’ll talk about some day on a soccer field.”

The referee leaves the game early, and Lynn speculates if it is his wife giving birth. Before he leaves, Alison goes to give him the joke that Nancy and Lynn previously discovered. When she returns, she confirms that his wife is going into labor and he needs to leave. Ron,

Alison's husband, has finally come to the game. He takes their daughter to the other side of the field without speaking to Alison at all. Her frustration is apparent as she notes that "it would never occur to him" to greet her or ask her about the game. Finally, Team A is needed back on the field, and the three mothers try a bit of a pep talk and hand-slapping to get them ready for the field.

The fourth scene picks up with the end of their second round of playing. The mothers seem more together and less winded, and Nancy suggests that they might be making it "too easy" for the children to win. Alison agrees, and she points out that the children aren't likely to get a handicap in real life. They need to learn sometime that they might lose, even to their mothers. Furthermore, would the fathers provide the same handicap for their sons in this situation? The women doubt it. After Lynn agrees, Alison gives out a lot of soccer tips for playing better.

Nancy tells Lynn that she wants to run the soccer game next year, and Lynn informs her that it probably won't happen. She doesn't think Nancy pulls her weight, and since she doesn't help out at all during other events, how can she possibly coordinate an entire event? Nancy finds her remarks unfair and explains that she has a hard time being extroverted, even with children. She also is taking time to work on her photography, which she claims is the reason she doesn't help Lynn out more often with PTA work. When Lynn says she hasn't seen a photo that Nancy has taken, Nancy pours out undeveloped film from her bag. She doesn't develop her photos, and she generally blames this on being too busy with her children. When Lynn presses her for more information, Nancy explains that she feels like she needs something for herself, something that is separate from her children. Her existential crisis has formed out of the death of a close friend and a relative within a six month period; both of them expressed different priorities and regrets right before their deaths.

Alison re-enters and points out that people are laughing at, no—worse!—feeling badly for the mother's team, since they're not performing well. When Lynn and Nancy are firmly riled up for the game, Alison changes into her sporty gear and lays out a game plan. She also explains that she was a star athlete in high school and that she gave it up because Ron disliked her playing sports because it made her "too aggressive." With more enthusiasm, and more coordination, the mothers pep up and run to play.

As the women return from the playing field, Nancy apologizes for running over a child while playing. Alison thinks of some ways of improving their performance for the next round, since it is now half time. In the end, she proposes an all-star mom team that could play at the end of the game. When she suggests that all three of them should be on the team, each of them doubts their own ability. Soon, however, they come to an agreement and Nancy suggests that Alison coaches the all-star team, too.

Ron tells Alison that he wants to leave soon. While Lynn goes off to pitch the idea of an all-star team, Alison confides in Nancy that she had feelings for David, and she suggests that she "almost" had an affair with him. The extent of their relationship – physical and emotional – is

never fully explained by Alison. She married Ron when she was very young, and she thinks that she is the only mother who doesn't know what's she's doing or what she's gotten herself into. But, as Lynn points out, no one knows if they are raising their children "right." All three of them agree that their husbands don't listen very well. Lynn reveals her intimate life by explaining a "deal" she made with her husband Lennie. Nancy and Alison are both surprised that Lynn has such a happy, active sex-life compared to theirs.

Meanwhile, Alison confesses that she doesn't feel part of a community at all. Nancy agrees with her, saying that everyone feels like no one understands their particular thing. She then reveals her trip with her husband to St. Martin. She takes a long walk on the rocky beach where she rediscovers her ten-year-old self, and then she finds herself on a separate, nude beach. She continues on and climbs up and manages to find some perspective from the spectacular view, which she lost while submerged into her hectic life. She concludes the story by leaving the beach because of angry dogs, and she realizes that her choices led her to her life, so she must find perspective there instead of on far-flung nude beaches.

Alison and Nancy both agree to help out on the Bronx Zoo trip, relieving Lynn quite a bit. At the sound of the whistle, Alison gives both Nancy and Lynn some advice about playing to their strengths. Lynn becomes the all-star goalie, and Nancy is told that her strength is scoring. Alison then stands up to her husband about leaving early, and both Nancy and Lynn try to get their other children to watch the game while they play.

The soccer dance is the one part of the play where the action is not on the sidelines. After some daring soccer moves, the mothers win the game, cheering. In the next instant, however, they're shocked that their children have lost and become worried about their feelings. They are greatly surprised to see that their sons are very proud of them, bragging about their mothers to one another. It's something they simply never considered before. As they leave the field, they pick up where they left off as mothers, with a bit more under their belts than before.

III. Setting

Most of the play takes place on the sidelines of a soccer field, except for the "soccer dance" near the end of the play which represents the mothers playing. The choice of the sidelines being the place of action for the play is symbolic of the feelings of the mothers, who remark that they see their lives flashing before their eyes. Parents' lives include tons of anxious waiting periods, where the only thing they can do is watch. Similarly, people on the sidelines might be invested in the game, but they are still watching, which is essentially what these women are doing while they talk.

As the game plays on, they remain watching their children, talking about their personal lives, which constantly are interrupted by yelling at their children on the field. This represents the frustration these women experience in their daily lives, which are subject to their children's schedules and well-being. Coherent conversations are a rarity because each mother is invested

so much in their child's action. As Lynn says, "Ever fiber of your being focused on every fiber of their being. It's exhausting."

The soccer sidelines are also symbolic of the stagnant and isolated feelings that these women have about community and themselves. During the "soccer dance," they are performing actions and working as a team; whereas, during the rest of the play, they are often miscommunicating with one another and commenting on others' actions.

Although a specific location is not mentioned, it is clear that these mothers are somewhere near New York City, where the Bronx Zoo is located. It is possible that they are in Long Island or Westchester.

IV. Characters

ALISON is a mother in her twenties with two children, Aaron and Adele. Ron, her husband, works all the time, and she questions her love for him. In high school, she was the star athlete, but she gave it up at her husband's request. She develops a crush on David, with whom she runs each morning, because she finds him to be a good listener. While she never elaborates on her full relationship with David, it is suggested that she has had a "sign" of interest from him at the least. Alison thinks that the reason for her situation with Ron is that she was married at a young age, but Lynn and Nancy explain that there are plenty of others in her position, regardless of age.

Over the course of the play, Alison learns that she has to be an active participant in the solution to her personal problems. If she waits for Ron to make a move, she could be waiting forever! However, she can require that part of the "deal," part of her marriage to Ron, is that he has to listen to her and know her needs. By the end of the play, she takes a stand against her husband and insists that they talk, and she also makes a move to stake a claim in the larger community by helping Lynn on the Bronx Zoo trip.

LYNN is in her thirties and is the mother of Larry and twin daughters. Her husband, Lennie, and Lynn seem to have a good relationship, although family pressure from the in-laws seems to put strain on Lynn. As a former social worker, she is drawn to helping others and works diligently with the PTA for children. However, she feels her work is unappreciated and that other parents look down on her for being a "Blimpie lunch mom." She is surprised to discover that her work is very much appreciated during the play.

Learning that her work is appreciated pushes Lynn to assert herself more. She takes on the job of goalie, which earlier on in the play she conceded was a "tough" job on the field, and she also insists that her son get his own water bottle rather than run and get it for him. She had already admitted that she's "tired of being the one who is so understanding of everyone," implying

that she picks up the slack for everyone else at her own expense, but it is also made clear that no one is there to be understanding of *her*. Now, however, she has more perspective on her life.

NANCY is in her forties and is the mother of Jack and Sally. She used to be a model, but she gave it up when she married Kevin. She has taken up photography as a job, and she pushes herself at it because she wants to see “what she has been missing.” After having spoken with two women close to dying, she felt as if she was missing a part of her life, a part of her life separate from her children. She, too, feels like no one understands, and she attributes this to a lack of perspective. She also feels like she needs to find more perspective in her life.

While Nancy seems to be a very put-together woman, she has drawn away from friends (and possibly family) recently due to her emotional crisis. Lynn accuses her of never picking up the phone, and Alison points out that she “doesn’t like to talk.” In reality, beyond being introverted, Nancy has been dealing with large, life-sized issues that she doesn’t quite know how to tackle. While the audience never sees the resolution of Nancy’s problems, the exposition of its decline becomes apparent after her confidence in Lynn and later her story about perspective.

Supporting characters are prevalent in this play. Though they never appear on stage, they’re important to the plot and characters of the play, too.

GORDON GRANT is the child who kicked the ball that hit Nancy at the end of the first scene. He also later becomes the goal keeper between scenes three and four, replacing Alison’s son, Aaron. Lynn calls him a “smart-aleck,” and he apparently smirks when he prevents the ball from going in. According to Alison, as a goalie, he is no good on his right side, so kicking the ball to his right gives a player a better chance of scoring.

JEREMY NOLAND is the child who tackles his mother at the end of scene three. He is referred to by Nancy as a “wild man” because he’ll “go after” other people, too, not just his mother.

COACH BOB is the boys’ soccer team coach. He calls Lynn over during the fourth scene to mock her and the other mothers, insisting that they end the game and that he simply get the win (“W”). It becomes very clear that the mothers do not have a very high opinion of Bob, who they mock in private and later, openly. He provides a catalyst that Lynn needs to play her best in the next round of soccer. Nancy is also delighted to see Bob “huddling with the boys” more near the end of the game due to the mothers’ better playing.

MARY & JOANNE are two important figures in Nancy’s life. Mary is a close friend of Nancy, and Joanne is her sister-in-law. Mary died about a year before the setting, and in the last

days and months of her life, all she wanted to do was watch her children. Joanne died more recently, within six months of Mary, of breast cancer. She insists to Nancy that she wished she had something of her own – something besides her children – but now she doesn't have the time! Between the two of these characters, Nancy is put into a huge crisis. She asks herself: What will I regret before I die? What will I want?

V. Themes

Motherhood

One of the central themes of the play is motherhood. Although it is not overtly discussed, there is an idea of a "healthy" parenthood and an "unhealthy" parenthood. Nancy points out that she has to keep her children healthy, safe, and happy twenty four hours a day. Lynn remarks that every fiber of her being is focused on every fiber of the children's being, even children that are not hers! When Alison says she's in over her head, it's because she believes that all other mothers know what they're doing, and she's left in the dark in an unhappy marriage.

A central theme that runs through this discourse is *balance*. How much of yourself can you give to your children while not giving up yourself? In Nancy's beach story, she relates that the parents simply cannot get away from discussing their everyday lives, despite all the beauty they could ask for. But they're exhausted by the topics – but they simply have nothing else to talk about. Her realization is that she needs *perspective*, a view of life, that is not bogged down by the business of everyday life. She doesn't want to leave anyone, but she does want to maintain her own self, her own person. She wants to enjoy beauty when it is in front of her, without being roped back into materialism, her children, taxes, and other day-to-day subjects.

Both Nancy and Alison have to run off the stage to assist their children for either injury or misbehavior (or in some cases, both). Nancy is constantly losing her train of thought and being interrupted by the actions of her unseen children. This is just a microseism for their lives, which are constantly being interrupted by their children's needs. However, when your child is injured, can you really not rush to their aid? When your child is calling "MOM" loudly, can you ignore them? How can parents draw the line? Or even have a coherent conversation?

While the play does not give a single answer, it does give a series of possibilities. *Balance* and *perspective* are two important ones, but there is also simply being active in solutions to problems in your marriage and with your children. Developing confidants or friends is also an important solution, as is developing community.

Development of a Team, a Community

During the fourth scene, Lynn claims that her biggest trouble isn't work or children, it's "the other *parents*" that "look down their nose" at her for doing the work that she does. Alison expresses her feeling of isolation in the fifth scene, when she points out that all the parents are in the same boat, so why doesn't she feel part of anything? When Nancy pulls away from Lynn, she

inquires, “Why do you think you’re dealing with anything more than the rest of us? Yeah, it’s lonely and isolated...”

Over the arch of the play, the women develop themselves into a team. In the first four scenes, the women often pair off and gain up on the third, or the third woman is apparently alienated from the other two. For example, in the first scene, Lynn and Nancy combine forces to challenge Alison’s competitiveness so that she will agree to throw the game. However, by the end of the fourth scene, it seems the women have developed into a unit, a team, and work together to help one another. This comes to fruition at the end of the final scene as the women play together as a team. This team is representative as a larger community—they all chip in to make things work.

The women start off disjoined and even confused by one another in the first scene, but by the end of the play, they have confided major secrets in one another, causing a new camaraderie to be created from this one game.

Hitting the Ball vs. the Ball Hitting You

In the final scene of the play, Lynn says, “You want *me* to bounce a soccer ball off my *head*...” to which Alison replies, “And be aggressive. Don’t let the ball hit you, you hit it.” At the beginning of the play, Nancy is hit *by* the ball and is completely knocked down. She later describes the experience as “disconcerting” because she didn’t see it coming. However, Lynn, during the “soccer dance,” is able to *hit* the ball, forcing it away from the goal.

This symbolizes control in life. Nancy didn’t see the ball coming, she wasn’t prepared, so she was knocked to the ground. Lynn saw it coming and, despite using her head to do so, managed to exert control over the ball. Nancy was looking at the sky, at the sun, which is a factor in her getting hit. In short, paying attention to the wrong things can land you on the ground, just as Nancy was thrown by her two friends’ remarks before death. She had the wrong perspective, she was looking at or for the wrong things – and she was knocked down emotionally. Lynn’s defense of the goal at the end illustrates that it is possible to control certain uncertainties, so long as you know what you’re doing and looking.

Family Pride

Parents often express pride in their children, especially in their activities and accomplishments. In the first scene, Nancy insists on letting the children win, and Lynn points out that the team hasn’t won a game all season. She believes that allowing them to win a game, especially against “grown ups,” will improve their self-esteem.

It is a bit of a nasty discovery when people “feel bad” for the mothers in the game. Numerous people – including Coach Bob – suggest that the game should be ended to end the women’s “misery.” Lynn is shocked, and she asks, “What is happening to everyone today? It’s just a game!” The mothers did not anticipate the competitive edge coming out from the children

and even the other parents. That, coupled with the poor sportsmanship from some children and even their coach, move the women to push themselves to play their best.

When the mothers turn the tide and later win the game, they're surprised to hear their sons saying, "Way to go, Mom." They're surprised that their children are bragging about their mothers! It never occurred to them that their children would be proud of *them* for playing well. Even though they lost the game, it was an exciting game, especially near the end, and the children can each brag about their mother's abilities.

This theme also touches on an important gender split in parenting. Children often brag about their father's jobs and/or abilities. The quintessential children's fight is "my daddy can beat up *your* daddy." Such a situation for mothers is much less common, and it is certainly not as iconic as father's. Perhaps this is why the women are so surprised at their son's responses; however, it is also implied that the selflessness of these mothers prevents them from seeing this as well.

VI. References

The Happy Man and His Dump Truck is a 24-page children's book. A man in a dump truck drives by some animals walking down the road, and he offers them a ride back to their farm. The animals enjoy the ride so much that every time the man drives by the farm in his dump truck he greets the animals and they ride in the trailer. The dump truck also has a fun slide for the animals, too!

Good Night Moon is a popular children's bedtime story famous for its detailed illustrations and its calming, sleepy effects. The story centers around a bunny saying good night to various objects in the room before going to bed.

"**Blimpie Lunch Mom**" generally refers specifically to mothers who pick up snacks and lunch foods for children. Blimpie is a sandwich restaurant. Lynn indicates that this is some kind of honorary title, but it could also be a comedic job title from the PTA.

Bronx Zoo is the largest metropolitan zoo in the United States, residing in the Bronx borough of New York City. It spans 265 acres of land and is home to over 4,000 animals.

Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) is a national movement to connect parents and teachers over children and their needs. A PTA can be run locally at each school, but they are connected to the national PTA, which promotes community service opportunities.

St. Martin's Island is a small island in the Caribbean between the islands of St. Barthelemy and Anguilla.

Mt. Vesuvius (4,023 ft elevation) resides in Pompeii, Italy. It is considered one of the most dangerous volcanoes in the world, especially because it has a dense population surrounding it. Mt. Vesuvius is also associated with the hero Hercules in Greek/Roman myths.

Wilson is a very popular type of soccer ball, famous for having its name stamped across the ball.

A Quick Introduction to Soccer and Other Important Sports Terms

Soccer is a very popular sport in Europe, where it is known as Football. In the United States, it is a popular children's sport, known for its team-building. Two teams play each other, each with 11 members on the field. One player is the goalie for each team, and the other players work in various positions on the field, including offensive positions and defense near the goal. Only the goal keeper may use his or her hands to catch, block, or deflect the ball. If any other player touches the ball with her or his hand, there is a hand-ball penalty. However, players may stop or hit the ball with various parts of their body, including chest, head, and legs. Arms and hips are generally discouraged.

A handicap is a form of "evening the playing field." Generally this is done by giving the newer or less capable players through scoring compensation, but it could be done through other means. More experienced or better players are disadvantaged to maintain fairness of the game.

Passing involves one team member giving the ball to another, generally to move the ball down the field. Guarding is when a player from the opposite team seeks to stop another player from passing or scoring.

Referee/"Ref" is in charge of maintaining the integrity of the game and ensuring the rules are followed, including the rules of sportsmanship. The Ref also needs to be a person who is not bias to one team or another.