

What happened to U.S. soccer?

William C. Kashatus

coached varsity soccer at the Episcopal Academy, Penn Charter, and Haverford College

Team USA's recent victory over Panama in the Gold Cup quarterfinals at Lincoln Financial Field was a boost for the local soccer community, which hasn't played host to the national team since 1968. But it's a far cry from where the U.S. Soccer Federation expected to be 12 years ago when it introduced a grand scheme to field the world's best team.

Known as "Project 2010," the \$50 million plan aimed to improve player development, the sport's infrastructure, and its image. The objective was to identify 1,000 young stars at age 13 by the end of 1998. The most talented players would then be enrolled in the Olympic Development Program (ODP), where they would be cultivated into an under-17 world championship team by 2005. The USSF anticipated that these "soccer prodigies" would go on to win the Olympics in 2008 and the World Cup in 2010.

Project 2010 was a dismal failure.

While the Americans have performed well in the recent Confederations Cup — defeating top-ranked Spain and then holding a 2-0 lead against Brazil in the final before losing — they were blown out of the last World Cup tournament in the first round and are nowhere near the team they were expected to be when competition begins next year.

So, what went wrong?

First, there were serious problems with player development. The ODP coaches responsible for developing our nation's soccer talent tended to promote midfielders as the best "all-around" players, ignoring position-specific qualities, such as the pure goal scorer or the exceptional defensive marker. In Eu-

rope, those are the players who ensure the success of the top teams.

In addition, the ODP coaches were identifying players who just entered puberty and did not always consider changes in physical and mental development. As a result, "late bloomers" were cut before they could demonstrate their true potential, and some who showed exceptional talent early on did not have the mental or physical endurance to perform at a higher level of competition.

The maturation process is not as much of a concern in Latin America and Europe, where soccer is an inherent part of the culture and where there are vastly greater numbers of soccer-playing youngsters from which to select.

Second was the failure to develop the sport's infrastructure. Those players who were selected for the ODP came from the youth level where parents shoulder the operating expenses. In Europe, each town has a feeder system, and teams are almost always supported by local and national businesses.

The USSF was naive to believe that it could invest a mere \$50 million to develop the talent to compete effectively on an international stage.

The Olympics and World Cup are for professional players. That means national team players must be professional players. And the business of developing professional players belongs to Major League Soccer, not the colleges, or the youth clubs.

Had MLS been allowed to pay for the identification, recruitment, and development of national team players, it would have ensured professional talent and avoided the maturation problems.

Finally, USSF still needs to improve its image. An entire generation has passed since soccer claimed to be the "Sport of the

1980s," and it's still no closer to competing with basketball, football, or even baseball for popularity.

While there are more youngsters than ever before competing at the amateur level, professional soccer is not a popular spectator sport. Americans enjoy high-scoring contests that are played with the hands, while a good, competitive soccer match is low-scoring and played primarily with the feet.

If USSF hopes to improve the sport's image, it must create a closer bond between its players and the fans through community-service opportunities, coaching clinics, and speaking engagements. The expansion of MLS to Philadelphia will offer an opportunity to do this locally.

Until these issues are properly addressed, the United States will remain a Third World soccer nation.

E-mail William C. Kashatus at bill@historylive.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Sunday, August 2, 2009