

The U.S. Men's National Team is gaining success playing to its own strengths

By Jay Martin, Ph.D.

American soccer has an inferiority complex. We have been told for so many years that we are not good enough that we now believe it. We don't have Brazil's technique, Germany's savvy, France's awareness, England's pace or Holland's youth system. We really think we are no good.

Maybe the week of Feb. 26 will help dispel that notion and change some minds. That was the week the U.S. Men's National Team defeated Mexico 2-0 in Columbus, Ohio, then lost to Brazil 2-1 in Los Angeles. While the results were great, they were not as significant as the way the team played. Are we defining an American style? Have we found a way of playing that is "American" in every aspect?

In Columbus the Mexicans found very cold weather and a pretty good team. A team that faced some adversity (after the top two players went out with injury), played together well, defended well, worked extremely hard, did exactly what the coach wanted (and the team needed) and used athletic ability to win the game. These are all characteristics of American athletes. In fact, in the post-game news conference, coach Bruce Arena said, "We thought the speed and quickness of (Josh) Wolff would be a factor in tonight's game."

Aren't these the characteristics of the American soccer player? Aren't these the characteristics of the American athlete? The U.S. team used these same characteristics to play tough against a very good Brazilian team later in the week.

You would not call Team U.S.A.'s style in Columbus Brazilian, German, Dutch or French. You would not say the American team overly possessed the ball, or that great technique carried the day. You would say the Americans earned three points and beat their biggest rival for the third straight game. You would say the Americans worked hard, defended, used athleticism, were disciplined and used speed to score two good goals. You might say the team won "the American way."

That same day the Germans lost 1-0 to France on an early goal by Zinedine Zidane. His comments? "It is true that it could have been a more spectacular game, but you have to win the game physically above all. We stopped them from playing their game and didn't give them much room."

The French have their game, the Germans have theirs. Do we finally have ours?

Evolution of U.S. soccer

The history of U.S. Soccer is one of imitation. We have tried to imitate almost every soccer-playing nation at one time or another. We imitated them because we were not any good. Coaches from all over the world told us we were no good.

It is true that the soccer-playing world takes lessons from every World Cup. Nations analyze the winning team, trying to determine if there is something that will make them better. In many World Cup tournaments, such as 1958, 1966, 1974, 1998, there is something good to find; in others (1978, 1990) there is not too much to glean. Still, most nations have tried the 4-4-2, the 4-3-3 and the 3-5-2 as displayed by different Cup winners. However, most soccer-playing nations have a very definable style within their

tactical alignment. The classic documentary of the 1982 World Cup, "Gole," clearly depicts these styles both visually and musically. These nations never had to imitate each other. U.S. soccer did because, well, you know, we were not any good.

In the early 1970s, we tried to be Brazilian as we learned to juggle. We tried to be English when Charles Hughes told us to direct four quick passes into the POMO in order to score. We tried to possess like the Germans under the direction of Heddergott and Cramer. We tried to be Dutch, doing Coerver moves so we could be comfortable on the ball. We tried to copy youth systems from everywhere. Nothing worked.

In fact, most of these "soccer fads" hurt the evolution and growth of American soccer. Many of these aspects of soccer (juggling, Coerver moves, etc.) became an end instead of the means to an end. We spent our time discovering what we cannot do instead of what we can do, behavior that is very un-American.

Soccer experts from around the globe spent a great deal of their time and our money telling us why we are not good soccer players and what we could not do. From the 1950s through the 1980s, we changed methods, tactics and styles. We actually were surprised if we won an international match. We were no good. Our inferiority complex grew larger.

Even U-20 coach Wolfgang Suhnholz, when asked about U.S. player development in a recent interview on internetoccer.com, said, "We went through a lot of stages here; we were trying to copy everybody. Brazil was world champion and we tried to play Brazilian. Germany was world champion and we all looked to Germany. We forgot that we have to create our own environment. We have to use our own players. We have to use the attributes of American players, and we have been doing that now for a few years. Success has shown."

The fact is we are Americans. We are not Brazilians, Germans, Dutch or French. We cannot play the style of those countries. It is simply not possible. We cannot replicate the Brazilian culture and society. These factors influence — no, dictate — how the Brazilians play. Social, economic, political and cultural forces directly impact how any national team plays. Nor can we replicate the club systems of England and Germany or the youth system of France and Holland.

American soccer is unique. America is unique. We can and should learn from other soccer nations, but we should develop and play an American style. There is no question that there is a great deal to learn from other soccer-playing nations. We should, however, take these lessons and use them in the context of an American style.

Defining the American style

What is an American style? That is hard to define, but that style is beginning to develop.

A recent and very unscientific survey asked the following question to more than 500 soccer people: "What are the top three or four most positive characteristics of the American soccer player?" The respondents covered all aspects of soccer from a variety of countries — fans, players of all levels, coaches, administrators and journalists.

The results were interesting and somewhat predictable. Soccer people from near and far agree that the top four characteristics of the American soccer player are:

- Athletic ability (speed, fitness, strength etc.)
- Attitude (competitiveness, desire, enthusiasm, toughness, etc.)
- Work rate (effort, aggressiveness, hustle etc.)
- Coachability

There were other characteristics mentioned, such as teamwork, technical ability and goalkeeping, but the aforementioned are the top four in rank order. If a similar question was asked of Brazilian or German soccer players, the results would be different. These attributes are found in all American athletes, not just soccer players. The American athlete is unique. That should make American soccer unique. These attributes should serve as the common denominator for an American soccer style.

A recent ODP Region II symposium specifically addressed these issues. When reviewing the performance of each regional team, the list included such attributes as listed above. One emphatic addition was a strong desire to play well and to WIN! That is very American.

The win vs. "good soccer" dilemma

That suggests another American soccer problem — the win versus (perceived) good soccer dilemma. At the sport's higher levels (college, club, international, etc.), winning is the goal. In a recent article in Soccer America, Paul Gardner described the Brazilians as soccer's standard because "They have done it on the field, with a record of (winning) world championships at all levels and versions of the game — from futsal and U-17 World Cups up to the big one itself — that no other country comes close to matching." He did not say how the Brazilians win; he said they win! Winning, then, dictates how a team is ranked internationally.

Youth soccer should not emphasize winning. Hans Westerhof, the director of youth coaching at Ajax, agrees: "... from (ages) 8 to 15 is (the) time to develop youth players — and only develop — but at 16 you must win."

We do just the opposite. Win, win, win in youth soccer, then emphasize the way we play as the players get older. Often losing is justified because "we possessed the ball for 60 minutes" or "we played better soccer, but were unlucky." No other post-game comments in American sport are defined in that manner. Have you ever heard the Super Bowl loser say, "We really outplayed them and they were lucky to win?"

American soccer has searched for "good soccer" or "appealing soccer" or "internationally acceptable soccer" at the expense of winning. We have been apologetic about the way we play. But if Brazil sets the standard by winning, then winning is important. The Men's National Team defeated Mexico using American strengths. American soccer will earn international respect when winning becomes commonplace.

Away with technique?

Does this mean we discard all technical work in training and have the soccer athletes run all day? Of course not. The technical aspect of the sport is essential. The American player is technical. The American player can compete technically with players from all over the world in the U-12 to U-18 range. Still, we will never play technically like Brazil. In order for American soccer to move forward, we must realize and accept this fact.

Euro 2000 clearly showed that soccer at the highest level is changing. According to the FIFA summary, the speed of play increased, there were more long passes, physical

demands increased and the buildup is gone. The days when four backs possess and build up slowly against two front runners is behind us. Today soccer at the highest level demands that the ball be played forward quickly and over a distance.

This does not suggest that possession is dead. It has been replaced by "vertical possession" — get the ball forward and possess in your attacking half. This demands even better (quicker) technique, not less technique. This is exactly what the Men's National Team did against Mexico and Brazil. Americans are aggressive; we like to attack. So let's attack!

The style of play Team USA used in previous international competitions has been the classic defend and counter. As recently as 1998, the Men's National Team played a 3-6-1. Sit in and counter — this, too, is decidedly un-American. We did not play to our strengths. It is difficult for Americans to "sit in." We are aggressive in all aspects of our culture. Where was that good old American arrogance? We are starting to see it now.

The Brazilians did possess the ball in Los Angeles against the U.S. team, but the possession most often was in the back against the forwards. When Brazil went forward, the U.S. defense did a pretty good job containing one of the best teams in the world. When the Americans won the ball, they went forward quickly. The goal against Brazil was a classic example of the U.S. team moving forward with possession and putting pressure on the Brazilians.

Both Paul Gardner (in an internetsoccer.com article about how the French combine athleticism and skill) and Aime Jacquet (in a FIFA interview) concede that the new demands of the game include becoming more tactical and more athletic. This is soccer at the highest level. American soccer should continue to improve technique, but also emphasize the physical/athletic element. If Americans can match up physically and athletically first, there is a chance to be successful. At the international level, success means winning.

The training session

Possession is not gone, but possession "in the back" with the slow buildup is gone. Possession must be practiced, moving the ball forward with speed. Possession must have a purpose. Training sessions should incorporate the following:

- Improvement in all aspects and types of passing, with emphasis on passes of 20 yards and more.
- Switching the field of play quickly and accurately.
- Possession in the attacking half. That means possession sessions should be closer to even numbers and not situations where the attackers outnumber defenders by as much as 2 to 1.
- Continue to emphasize and develop American athletic attributes (i.e. attacking mentality, hard work, defending, etc.).
- Practice technique in tight spaces or by manipulating time and space to add pressure.

American soccer is better than most of the so-called experts think. It is time to eliminate the inferiority complex and begin to define an American style. Coaches should develop an open mind and understand that there are many ways to be successful (win) in soccer. When we listen to world-class coaches like Carlos Perriera of Brazil or Roger LeMerre of France talk about the Brazilian or French system, we must ask what of this

information can we use to make our players better. We also must understand that the information will not make our players play like the Brazilians or French. The time is here to define an American style. Bruce Arena and the U.S. Men's National Team have started the process. It is now up to each coach to continue the process.

Editor's note: Jay Martin is men's soccer coach at Ohio Wesleyan University and a former NSCAA president. He recorded his 400th career coaching victory in the 2000 season. He is active in providing youth coaching courses in Ohio.

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