

AND THE SEARCH IS ON

Give US Soccer officials this much -- at least they didn't wait until the final minute to sack Greg Ryan as the coach of the Women's National Team (WNT). This was a no-brainer as far as decisions go. Incredibly, Ryan had amassed quite an impressive record with 49 victories against one defeat with nine draws (although it should be noted that one of the draws was actually a loss -- to Germany in the Algarve Cup final which was settled by penalty kicks with Germany winning; but the international rule records this as a tie for some strange reason!).

Ryan did indeed coach the women to a lot of wins but as always with sport, it came down to "what have you done for me lately." In Ryan's case, he did not win the 2007 World Cup despite having, arguably, the deepest squad as far as talent goes.

His downfall was the Brianna Scurry/Hope Solo goalkeeper fiasco. The fact that the US Women lost to Brazil 4-0 with Scurry in goal was overshadowed by the fact that Scurry was between the posts in the first place. Anyone who claims to be a fan of the USA WNT is certainly fond of Scurry, yours truly included. But Solo was the team's No. 1 leading up to and in the first round of the World Cup and should have been in goal for the Brazil match. Ryan's reasoning was that Scurry was more athletic and was better suited for Brazil.

The move shocked the soccer world and became front-page sports news. Although the US Women maintained a professional silence in regards to the move, Solo was quite outspoken about it. The four goals allowed by Scurry certainly didn't help the situation.

Scurry indeed, looked indecisive at times. Would Solo have stopped any of the four Brazil goals as she herself claims? Perhaps. No, definitely at least two of them.

Still, replacing Solo was the wrong decision. Although the team responded positively to the change, many were left wondering why the decision was made. After the World Cup there were rumblings from within the squad.

Ryan committed the ultimate no-no as a coach -- he lost his team.

That alone would have been enough reason to send him packing. But the main reason was this: under Ryan, the USA Women played absolutely UGLY SOCCER! They played the way Greg Ryan played in his NASL days. Rough. Physical. Technically deficient. Direct...BORING!

On SoccerAmerica Magazine's website, Soccer America Daily, Mike Voitalla, one of the best soccer writers around, wrote: "A game plan of out muscling opponents when the USA should be outplaying its foes, and hearing Ryan defend that style, was the most distressing aspect of the USA performance."

Spot on, Mr. Voitalla.

In the October 23 issue of USA Today, in an article by Beau Dure, Victoria Svensson, captain of the Swedish national team, was quoted as saying: "Six or seven years ago, with Mia Hamm and Julie Foudy in the team, (the USA) would try to play the ball on the ground a lot more and pull teams apart that way. Now they just try to bang it up to Abby (Wambach)."

Direct kick, Ms. Svensson.

In that same article, Cat Whitehill, USA's starting sweeper, understanding US Soccer's decision to fire Ryan, said: "With the standards our team has set, if you don't win, it's hard to keep your job. Nothing against the way Greg Ryan coached, but we didn't play as well as we should have."

Goal. Whitehill.

So what's next?

Well, US Soccer President Sunil "One of these days I really am going to make a good decision for soccer in America" Gulati, has put together a three-person panel whose job will be to search for the new coach.

Unfortunately, Gulati is one of the three. But at least the other two are solid soccer citizens: US Soccer Secretary-General Dan Flynn and the best soccer player to ever lace up a pair of boots, my all-time favorite soccer player, MIA HAMM-Garciaparra.

"We've got a time issue," Gulati, master of the obvious statement, said in the USA article. "I would think it would be someone with American experience and someone who is involved at the National Team level whether with US or abroad."

Advice: interview and then hire, or should I say, re-hire, Tony DiCicco. If he says no, interview and then hire the person you should have hired when DiCicco stepped down in 1999; the person whom you should have picked over April Heinrichs who may have been a worse coach than Ryan. Interview and hire Lauren Gregg.

MORE HOUSE CLEANING

A couple of days after bidding farewell to Ryan, US Soccer decided that John Hackworth would no longer be the coach of the US Under-17 Boys National Team. Here again was a case of "what have you done for me lately."

In the 2005 World Cup, Hackworth guided our boys to a first-place finish in Group Play but then lost to the Netherlands in the quarterfinals. It was a disappointing finish but the fact that they placed first in their Group certainly was a positive.

But then came the 2007 World Cup. The boys opened play with a 4-3 loss to Tajikistan. That was followed by a 3-1 setback to Tunisia. No offense to the players and coaching staffs and fans of Tajikistan and Tunisia, but there is no way the US should be losing to those teams. Although Hackworth managed to get his troops back on track, recording a two-goal clean sheet over Belgium, he was not able to advance in the knockout phase, losing 2-1 Germany.

Hackworth is a good guy and a darn good coach but like Ryan, his team just did not play a good style of soccer.

Unlike the case with Ryan, though, US Soccer has acted quickly and decisively and named Wilmer Cabrera as the new U-17 Coach.

Who?

Wilmer Cabrera!

Who?

No, folks, this is a good hire. An excellent hire.

Cabrera is former player for the Columbia National Team, having represented his country in the '90 and '98 World Cups as a defender. Recently, he's been working for Major League Soccer as a manager for fan development. His job was to bring the MLS into the Hispanic community, specifically targeting young Hispanic players.

He's got a good coaching background and an impressive playing background and will definitely get the attention of the millions of Hispanic players in the country. Visitors to this page know full well how I feel about the way US Soccer goes about "identifying" the best youth players. Simply put, US Soccer identifies the best youth players whose parents are able to afford to send their kids to elite academies and the Olympic Development Program.

I've said before we need to get into the inner cities where millions of terrific young players are knocking the ball around, playing what the great Pele described as the "Beautiful Game."

Hiring Cabrera is the first step. Good luck to him.

And if this keeps up I just may have to say something nice about Gulati.