

A Not-So-Bright Tie

If that old saying that "a tie is like kissing your sister" is true, then the United States Men's National Team's sister is not exactly Tyra Banks or Carmen Electra.

Playing in front of 70,103 fans (70,003 which were rooting against them!), the US men escaped with a 2-2 draw against rival Mexico on Feb. 6. As usual, this claimed a moral victory by too many folks, but the fact is, USA was lucky to get the draw because they were outplayed in every way by the Tri-Colores.

After the contest, USA Head Coach Bob Bradley told Rob Stone of ESPN that there were some bright spots, but also some things "we" need to work on. Ya think!

OK, so I promised myself that I would not take my usual stand against the US Soccer Federation and try to pick out the positives from this game so...

...No way. Once again the USSF proved beyond a reasonable doubt that it is all about the green. Once again, they schedule a "home" game against Mexico in a city and state that is a direct kick away from Mexico. This time, the game was in Houston's Reliant Stadium and Mexico was clearly the "home" not our boys. Wouldn't it be nice, just once, the USSF scheduled a game where our boys have the majority of the crowd on their side? Just once. They deserve that.

Anyway...

Bradley was right in that there were some bright spots. So let's go there:

Bright Spot #1 -- Goalkeeper Tim Howard continues to prove that he is among the top 5 goalkeepers in the world. He made several outstanding saves and does a great job organizing his defense.

So now on to the not-so-bright spots:

Wait, you mean, that's all there was, one bright spot?

OK, one more.

Bright Spot #2: Bradley started 18-year-old Jozy Altidore up top with Clint Dempsey and Altidore rewarded Bradley with a great goal, a cracking header off an excellent Drew Moor cross. Altidore just may be the target forward to replace Brian McBride. He's a gamer.

Bright Spot #2a: Freddy Adu and Maurice Edu, both members of the USA Under-23 National Team (along with Altidore) also saw action, though limited. I would like to see more action for both in the coming weeks. They deserve it.

OK, that's it.

Now we go to the Not-So-Bright Spots (make yourself comfortable):

- 1) The US still does not have a true Left Back. Ramiro Corrales has started the last two matches and has been inconsistent. But for some reason, I like this guy and I think he can be that LB. Against Mexico he was, well, allow me to be nice and say it was a forgettable performance. But, in his defense, he wasn't helped at all by the play of Bobby Convey at left midfield.

- 1a) Bobby Convey at left midfield. Did nothing against Mexico.

- 2) Why Bradley plays Landon Donovan as a wide midfielder is a mystery to me. Donovan needs to be in the middle, either as a link forward (to Altidore or Dempsey) or as an attacking midfielder behind the two forwards.
- 3) Why Bradley started Michael Bradley (his son) and Ricardo Clark as defensive midfielders was really mysterious. They are the same player. Michael Bradley (another member of the US Under-23s) is the better player. Although Clark is faster, MBrad is just technically superior. With the two of them in the lineup, the US was left without a playmaking central midfielder. Neither one shined against Mexico though. Bradley once again showed his immaturity by collecting a yellow card on a stupid tackle. He seems to do this in every game. Clark was invisible.
- 4) Everybody is still in love with Oguchi Onyew. Don't know if I agree with that but then there wasn't much to choose from. So I guess Gooch was the best of the lot. He scored the first goal, heading a ball into the back post but if you saw the goal you had to be thinking the same thing as me -- what the heck was the Mexican keeper doing. He barely moved as the ball went over his head. Luckily for Gooch the ball bounced off the back post into the net. I'll give Gooch this -- he plays with passion. And, I know he is big and tough but he has the first touch of a tractor mechanic.
- 5) Drew Moor had a horrible match, despite his assist. He was beaten twice on the Mexican goals, both of which came off set pieces.
- 6) I like Clint Dempsey but he, too, did not play well. He scored a magnificent goal but it was disallowed because of offside. Dempsey being the offside player. But he does possess some great skill on the ball. Speaking of which...
- 7) Where the H-E double hockey sticks are our creative players? Mexico has so many more players comfortable on the ball than the US. The US has Dempsey and Donovan and, uh, you know, um, whatchamacallit, that other guy...yeah, exactly. Instead we have bulls like Onyewu and Bocanegra and Bradley and Clark on the field, while creative dribblers such as Adu and Benny Feilhaber were on the bench.

OFF THE FIELD NOT-SO-BRIGHT SPOTS

- 1) Nike unveiled two new things for the game -- the Total 90 Omni ball and the home kit for the USA men. The ball had been tested for two years before being released. Good gosh, it's a frickin' soccer ball! As for the new USA uniforms, not bad -- white with light red horizontal stripes. Looks like a polo shirt.
- 2) ESPN's broadcast was its usual average self. New analyst John Harkes teamed up with the always-solid JP Dellacamera (the best soccer play-by-play man in the biz). Harkes was objective, which is good but he doesn't yet have Eric Wynalda's charm. Perhaps he can grow into the role. And finally there was the halftime report by someone named Scott Reiss who, during highlights of the Italy vs. Portugal friendly, totally screwed up Italy Coach Roberto Donadoni's name and mispronounced Fabio Grasso's name. Total incompetence.

There are more Not-So-Bright Spots but rather than continue, let's look ahead. World Cup 2010 qualifying begins in a few months and Bob Bradley will have major decisions to make in the meantime. Let's help him.

Goalkeeper: Howard is the #1. Brad Guzan is the #2 (and he will push Howard for the top spot!). Who's the #3? Either Tally Hall, a 6'-4" monster playing in Denmark, or Chris Seitz who plays for Real Salt Lake of the MLS.

Defenders: Probably the position giving Bradley the most headaches as he continues to shuffle his back 4 lineup. Bocanegra is a lock. Who his partner in central defense will be is up in the air. Could be Onyewu (god of soccer help us!). Could be Jimmy Conrad (he's the same player as Bocanegra). Eddie Robinson (I say yes!). Michael Parkhurst (tremendous defender, smart and fast). How about the outside backs? Jonathan Spector has shown some promise as has Frankie Simek and Jay DeMerit. Jonathan Bornstein has proven himself in the MLS. I still like Corrales. Bradley likes speedster Marvelle Wynne (if Onyewu has the first touch of a tractor mechanis, Wynne has the first touch of the tractor! But man can he run!) My picks: Borstein at LB, Bocanegra and Robinson in the middle, Spector at RB.

Midfielders: Michael Bradley is a lock to be the defensive MF. He is a true ball winner and does well under pressure and when on the attack. No doubt DeMarcus Beasley, a.k.a. Run DMB, will make it. He's an exciting player with mad skills and speed. I love this guy. Clark will probably make the roster as well as Bradley's sub. Maurice Edu? Yes. Feilhaber? He better! Sascha Kljestan? Perhaps. Brad Davis? Has a cannon for a left foot. Pablo Mastroeni? I'd take him over Clark if he's healthy which is always a question. Eddie Lewis? Love him, but he's too old. Steve Ralston? Old but still the best server this team has. Justin Mapp? A creative dribbler with blazing speed, but the next tackle he makes will be the first tackle he makes. Chris Rolfe? A sleeper. Good technique. Sneaky quick. Keep an eye on this guy. Same for Jeremiah White. Watch out for this guy. Kyle Beckermann? Like Feilhaber, he's a true playmaker. Not very big but plays with a nasty disposition. Donovan? He's the team's best player and he's here or at forward. Same thing for Dempsey. He can play in the midfield as well as up top.

Forwards: Altidore. Donovan. Adu. Dempsey. Ah, what about old reliable Brian Ching? I like him. Taylor Twellman? No. No. No. Nice guy. Scores a ton in the MLS but in international matches...well, let's just say that in an international match, if the opposing team walked off the field, it would take Twellman about 12 minutes to score. If he finds the scoring touch in the next few weeks, Bradley will take him to the World Cup. Eddie Johnson? Began his national team career with some outstanding games. Great speed. Streaky scorer but gives up too easy and doesn't play a lick of defense.

NEXT WEEK: A look at the State of the Women's National Team