

## **“The State of Soccer”**

June 23. I was sitting in Seat #1, Row 11, midfield, Giants Stadium, East Rutherford, NJ. Great seat. Beautiful day. Perhaps a bit too hot for soccer players, but perfect for fans. I was anxious to see this game ever since I heard about it. USA vs. Brazil. Women's soccer. Another chance for me -- one of USA Soccer's biggest fans -- to see the Women's National Team. Got tickets the first day they went on sale. Figured there'd be a rush to get these tickets as our wonderful ladies are preparing for the upcoming Women's World Cup in China.

Alas, I was only one of less than 20,000 fans in the Meadowlands that day. And much to my chagrin, I learned right before kickoff that our men's Under-20, featuring the likes of Freddy Adu, Jozy Altidore and Michael Bradley, had played Chile on that very same field. While the boys were playing, I was in the parking lot, enjoying some tailgating fare with my wife. We both were disappointed to learn that we missed the Under-20 game.

What does all this mean? Well, it gets to my points here about the state of soccer in the good ol' USA.

### **Marketing**

I wish that the U.S. Soccer Federation (USSF) and the folks at Major League Soccer (MLS) would stop trying to market this game to me (adult males over 40!). I will watch a Men's Over-70 rec league game. You do not need to market the game to soccer fans like me.

Note to USSF President Sunil Galati: MARKET THE DAMN GAME TO THE KIDS PLAYING THE DAMN GAME! Make them want to come to the games. Make them make mommy and daddy buy tickets.

Several years ago I tried to develop a relationship with the New York/New Jersey MetroStars of MLS. I contacted their office and was put in touch with a young gentleman who was supposedly part of their youth marketing department. We met for lunch. I told him I was not doing this for monetary reasons but rather to help him market the MetroStars to youths. At that time, I was training seven teams for the Colts Neck (NJ) Soccer Club. After lunch, he invited me to watch a MetroStars training session, run by then head coach Bob Bradley, now the coach of the U.S. Men's National Team.

It was a great experience to see a pro team work out. But that was it. I did not get a chance to talk to Bradley or any of the players.

OK, no big deal. Well, not long afterward, I contacted the MetroStars again and was told the guy who I had originally been working with was gone and a new guy was in. A young man named David. We met. Had lunch. Talked. He was intrigued. So I invited him to come to one of my sessions.

I also told him to bring his boots. He did. He also came with gifts for the boys' team I was training. He took part in a keepaway game. Dave had a blast. The boys, although they would have preferred one of the MetroStar players, had a good time playing with Dave. He gave out the gifts. I called him several days later and told him that several of boys' parents had bought tickets to an upcoming game. Mission accomplished!

Mr. Galati, do you see how easy this is? Market this game to the youth. They are the ones who are going to be the future fans of soccer. Soccer will never outdo baseball or football as far as fan interest goes. And it probably will not get on equal footing with basketball, although I think watching a pro basketball game is about as exciting as watching a clock work. You don't need it to be up there with the big 2 1/2. But it certainly can compete with hockey and other sports. It certainly has a better television package than hockey and there are probably 10 times more kids playing soccer than hockey.

You should have seen all the little girls at Giants Stadium on June 23. Most of them still wearing the famous #9 Mia Hamm jersey. Imagine if the USSF would have done a better job of marketing. Imagine.

### ***Olympic Development Program***

ODP -- the good, the bad and ugly. That is about the best way to describe the ODP, which, in theory, is fantastic, but in practice, is horrendous.

*The Good:* our national youth teams do well in international tournaments and there are some outstanding players currently in each of our squads.

*The Bad:* It is an elitist program to say the least. Are we really identifying the best players in our country? Or are we identifying the best players whose parents can afford an expensive soccer experience?

*The Ugly:* We are not doing enough to get into the inner cities and offer this game to those potential customers. There are too many youngsters who are not part of an elite club system. We need to get to these kids. We are picking kids from the top clubs in our country. We need to go beyond that.

### ***The Women's Game***

Although I was not expecting Giants Stadium to sell out on June 23<sup>rd</sup> for the USA vs. Brazil match, I certainly did not expect a crowd under 20,000. I talked to a few folks I know and the most common response was: I didn't hear (or read) anything about the game.

Whose fault is this? There are many to blame: the USSF first and foremost. The mainstream media, for another. There are still too many sports journalists in this country who, in the same breath, will tell you a 2-nil soccer match is boring but a 2-0 baseball game is exciting. Look, there is no bigger fan of baseball than me, but please. I saw a baseball game the other day that took more than 3 hours to complete. Three hours! Zzzzzzzzz! And have you seen some of these professional baseball players who are incredibly overweight. Let me know the next time you see an overweight professional soccer player.

A soccer game is done in less than 2 hours. And on television, there is no stopping for commercials. Sooner or later, the media will catch on, but not before the USSF does a better marketing job.

### ***Youth Soccer***

I couldn't end this without something positive: youth soccer is alive and well in this country. There are more kids playing soccer than there are kids playing baseball/softball or football or hockey or basketball.

This could only mean one thing: the future is bright for the Beautiful Game.