

# SASH

## HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

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*The following article is the third and final installment of a paper that was presented at the American Soccer History Symposium last June in Oneonta. The author is a former United States Pan-American Games player, a SASH member, a current resident of Washington, D.C., and a recent inductee into the National Soccer Hall of Fame.*

### **The Ethnic Legacy in U.S. Soccer** by Len Oliver

#### **The Downside to the Ethnic Influence on Soccer**

Despite the massive contribution ethnic groups have made to U.S. soccer, there have been some downsides. Let's look at a few:

A "Foreign Sport". The continued identification of soccer as a "foreign sport" by our sportswriters and the public may have slowed the growth of soccer here. In a recent paper on soccer's "marginal" status among America's sports, the authors argue that the identification of soccer as "working class" and "foreign" dulled the sport's appeal to the American middle class. They compare soccer to baseball, a U.S. derivative of the English game of "rounders," and to American football, taken from the English game of rugby, both of which became rooted in the middle class while discarding the foreign label (Markovits and Hellerman, 1995).

We are still fighting the identification of soccer as foreign. I saw in one youth newsletter recently "Tips on Naming Teams," where the writer indicated that "names should not allude to a team's ethnic makeup or nationality." The perception of soccer as a foreign sport plagued us as long as we played, and may still be around, slowing our development.

The fact that soccer is ruled by FIFA (Federation International de Football Association) may also be contributing to the stereotype of soccer being foreign-dominated.

Lack of Media Attention.--Since the public perceived soccer as a foreign sport, the media paid little attention to soccer in my playing days. It was easy to ignore. Today, soccer is still relegated to the back pages of the sports section or to a blurb even when the event is big-time--Copa America, NCAA Finals, or MLS signing international stars.

In the 1950s, outstanding foreign teams played in Philadelphia, New York and Chicago. The stands would be packed with Germans watching Kaiserslautern, Italians watching A.C. Milan or Brazilians watching Santos--all contributing to the public perception of soccer as a foreign sport. The foreign label still haunts us: local media gleefully reported that one-third of the 39,000 fans witnessing the U.S.'s 4-0 rout of Mexico at RFK Stadium last summer sported the green shirts and tri-color flag of Mexico. Ethnic fans have always supported international matches, but usually when their national or club teams are playing. One of the major questions facing the MLS organizers, therefore, is the stability of this ethnic fan base. Placing a Campos in Los Angeles, an Etcheverry in our town of Washington, D.C., or a Valderrama in Tampa Bay may help draw some Hispanic fans, but will they stay supporters after these international stars are gone? "Ethnocentrism" may have supported the league and club structure in the U.S. over the first half century, but it may work against us in developing a full-fledged pro league

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if we ignore the true base of long-term fan support--the American players, coaches, officials, parents, and families who have come into the sport in the last two decades.

Bad press has also come from the ethnic passions that have occasionally inflamed the soccer fields, with reports of fights, near riots and shootings coming out of ethnic games. The U.S. Park Service banned Salvadorians from a major venue after a shooting last year after a game in Washington, D.C. Similar stories can be found in other urban areas, leading some reporters to link soccer with world terrorism and ethnic conflict aboard. It reinforces negative images.

Ethnic Soccer as Male Dominated.--Ethnic groups did not encourage girls to play soccer. Understandable, as soccer was not perceived by them as a sport for females. Would you want your daughter, sister, or wife to rough it up, get knocked over, butt heads, sprain an ankle, slide through mud, or collide with a keeper when she could watch the match in the safety of the stands? I still hear "No esta para muchachas" from Spanish-speaking parents and coaches. But 40 percent of our youth players in the U.S. are female, and women are flocking to women's leagues and co-ed recreational teams. All this is fueled by our egalitarian attitude toward sports in general, Title IX and the growth of women's soccer programs in our colleges, and the success of our U.S. women's national teams and the top women's college teams in providing role models.

Up to the mid-1980s, girls had few female role models, just the men playing. Girls came to soccer late and on their own, often playing on teams dominated by boys. Parents with no history of the sport simply asked why their daughters couldn't play this team sport their sons and husbands seemed to enjoy so much. And as recreational soccer programs for girls grew, parents put pressure on the schools and colleges to adopt this low-budget, high-participation, low-risk sport. The upshot is that despite the continuing ethnic stigma against the female soccer player, girls are coming into the sport in great numbers and the women's game is taking hold national and internationally. The success of the Women's World Championships in China (1991) and Sweden (1995) and the inclusion of women's soccer in the 1996 Olympics tell us that women have arrived in soccer.

## The Ethnic Legacy Survives

Soccer in the U.S., especially at the youth level, has been thoroughly "Americanized"--from the leagues, the clubs, the endless tournaments, the coaches and the USSF coaching schools, the high schools, the colleges, and our U.S. national men's team (Stewart, Dooley, Wegerle are foreign-born, with several players having learned the game from an immigrant father--Balboa, Harkes and Reyna). The U.S. women's team is 100-percent American-born.

Still, the ethnic influence remains strong in our soccer. Perhaps it always will, so long as the U.S. remains a multicultural, pluralistic society, so long as immigrants continue to arrive with their sport, and so long as opportunities exist for immigrants and their offspring to contribute to America's way of life.

We continue to see the ethnic influence in a number of areas. Foreign-born coaches still bring their knowledge, skills, tactics and enthusiasm for the game. As Director of Coaching for Washington, D.C., I get several calls a week from people with accents who want to join our coaching ranks. Ethnic coaches are in our youth leagues, coaching our high school and college teams, and hold the majority of head coaching jobs with our new MLS franchises. Nevertheless, in proportion to the thousands of coaches in the U.S., the foreign-born coach makes up a tiny minority.

The most pronounced ethnic influence may be at the higher levels of play--in the NPSL, the Continental Indoor Soccer League, the A-League, and the USISL. It seems that the higher the level of soccer, the more that Americans are perceived to be deficient in the game from both a playing and coaching perspective.

Last summer's debate on who would follow Bora Milutinovic as U.S. national team coach spilled over to the media. The USSF struck out in its quest first for Carlos Quiroz of Portugal and then then Carlos Alberto Parreira of Brazil, both of whom turned us down publicly. One *New York Times* sports headline read: "National Coach, Yes. American Coach, No." In the midst of the controversy, Steve Sampson, former coach at Santa Clara and assistant to Milutinovic in World Cup 1994, quietly made his presence felt as interim national-team coach with a

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stirring string of victories for the U.S. at the U.S. Cup '95, Copa America (a surprising fourth-place finish), and the Parmalat Cup.

The debate over whether the post should go to Sampson or to a foreign coach with "international experience" went on until August 3, when the USSF announced at a press conference that Sampson indeed would shed the interim label and be named the full-time coach of the U.S. national soccer team. Sampson, the federation's third choice, was seen as lacking experience at the international level, but his success on the field and good rapport with the players convinced the federation

Manny Schellscheidt called the search a quest for "a coaching savior." Walter Bahr thought "our problem is with the level of our players, not the coaches.... We need attractive, creative players and the coaching situation will take care of itself." Both Schellscheidt and Bahr warned about the soaring expectations that would come with a foreign coach's appointment. Desmond Armstrong, former national team player and ABC-TV commentator, was even more blunt over the controversy:

"We need an American coach so the public will see it as an American sport, not continue the image of soccer as a foreign sport. Let's look for a solution internally, not outside." (*New York Times*, June 18, 1995).

Sampson talked about the difficulty a foreign coach might have in becoming acclimated to the American player's mentality and culture:

"Foreign coaches may not understand the American culture and the American personality. By the time they learn, qualifying for World Cup 1998 in France will be upon us. You can't impose a system on us; you have to use the talent here and base the system on your players.... The coach should have a long-term commitment to work with the youth teams, developing a system of play that by 2006 will let us compete with anybody at any level and win." (*Washington Post*, June 15, 1995).

Naming Sampson means the long era of ethnic influence on our soccer and the perception that it is a foreign sport may be waning. No other major sport in our country, except in ice hockey, would have entertained such a notion. Such a search would not have even been considered in Germany, Brazil, Italy, Argentina, Spain, England, or in other strong soccer nations. It is our national team.

The recent successes of the U.S. team, especially the 3-0 win in the Copa America against Argentina, Sampson's appointment, and the achievements of American players abroad give credibility to American players and coaches. Our future in soccer depends on developing the American player with great skills, who is comfortable with the ball under pressure, and who is tactically ready to take on the world's competition. That's a winning combination when combined with the American player's fitness, speed and fighting spirit.

#### Looking Back, Looking Forward

We are catching up in soccer. We are playing at a higher level. Our players are emerging on the world scene. Just as the ethnic kids were left alone to play and learn the game, we have to let the American kids grow and learn through the game. We are fortunate that the best young athletes are coming into soccer. Jerry Reinsdorf, Chicago White Sox owner, was recently quoted as saying: "Our problem in baseball is soccer. The kids don't play baseball anymore." Football coaches advise youngsters to play soccer "to become good athletes," then come to football in their teens. But we want more. We want what the ethnic groups wanted, kids who love the game, who have "a feeling for the game," as Dutch coach Rinus Michels call it.

Schellscheidt and Bahr, both Hall of Famers, believe our players will reflect America's pluralism, combining the best of each culture's style. They believe our differences in soccer are our strengths, and these differences, combined with our uniqueness as Americans--our athleticism, our never-say-die spirit, our determination, and our coachability--can help us move into the upper echelons of world soccer.

Ethnic groups will continue to contribute to our soccer, as in the new MLS, but I think we now know what we are doing. We no longer have to depend on immigration to support soccer. Soccer is rapidly becoming part of our culture, or as advertising executive Jon Mandel said recently after negotiating between TV and baseball: "For a long-term opportunity, call soccer!"

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Whatever soccer's gains in the U.S., we should remember the contributions the ethnic groups made to our sport--keeping it alive, the leagues and the clubs, the quality and style of play, the players themselves, and above all, the passion and feeling they brought to the game.

Soccer is the world's game and we are part of that world. There will always be an ethnic contribution to our soccer. The legacy doesn't end. We will continue to welcome and learn from the ethnic influences, integrating what is best from other lands and cultures into our own soccer environment. We will have a better opportunity to create a strong national soccer identity and program by accepting what is best in others, then doing it our way--that's always been a winning combination.

### **Membership Notes**

As we hope that you all know, the SASH membership meeting in Oneonta in June had to be cancelled because of a change in the dates of the Hall of Fame Week.

The meeting has been rescheduled for Saturday evening, Sept. 28, in Oneonta. A site has not been chosen, but the meeting will be in Oneonta. We suggest that you call the National Soccer Hall of Fame (607-432-3351) sometime in mid-September to check on the exact time and location. In the past, SASH meetings have always begun at 7:30 p.m. Sept. 28, incidentally, is a day when Hartwick is playing at home, against Penn State at 1 p.m.

We hope that many of you will be able to attend. We realize that some of you will not be able to because of involvement with your own teams. For those of you who will be coaching that weekend, we hope to be able to have some sort of SASH gathering during the NSCAA Convention in January, which will be in Nashville this year.

Also postponed in June along with the SASH meeting was the American Soccer History Symposium, which was to have been on college soccer this year. We have postponed that by a year, and college soccer will be the topic of the 1997 symposium.

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Although the June SASH meeting had to be postponed, the counting of ballots for the 1996 SASH election went on as scheduled. There were 37 ballots cast. Vice president Ric Fonseca and secretary Jack Huckel were re-elected unanimously. Shawn Ladda was elected a director with 36 votes (there was one write-in vote for Mickey Cochrane).