

SASH

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World Cup qualifying: A familiar story

The United States has gotten off to a very promising start in the qualifying rounds of next year's World Cup, and seems well on its way to France. In last fall's issue of the SASH newsletter, we printed a review of the United States' performance in World Cup qualifying rounds through the 1966 World Cup, and promised you the more recent ones if the U.S. team advanced to this year's CONCACAF competition, which it has done. So here are those latest six.

Before it began qualifying for France '98 last Nov. 3, the United States hadn't played a World Cup qualifying game since Nov. 19, 1989, thanks to the fact that it was an automatic qualifier for the 1994 World Cup as host nation. But it has a long history of involvement in World Cup qualifying. This is the 13th time that the United States has played in the qualifying rounds of the World Cup. Unfortunately, it was not usually as successful as it has been in the last decade.

1970

In the end, the United States' result in qualifying for this World Cup was the same as it had been for each of the previous four, an early exit. For a while, however, it appeared that the Americans were going to do better this time. The fact that the United States didn't have to face Mexico in its opening round was a help. The 1970 World Cup was held in Mexico. Mexico had an automatic qualifying spot, and the rest of CONCACAF played for a second CONCACAF berth.

The United States' qualifying series began with a round-robin group in the fall of 1968 against Canada and Bermuda, with the winner to advance to the next round. Its opening game was a 4-2 loss to Canada in Toronto. Then, it got going. By the time the United States played its second game, also against Canada, the Canadians had five points in the standings and needed only one more to clinch first place in the group. They never got it. The United States beat Canada, 1-0, in Atlanta, and then went on to victories over Bermuda of 6-2 in Kansas City and 2-0 in Hamilton, Bermuda, to finish first with six points. The toughest of those three games was the one in Atlanta, a must-win situation for the United States that was decided on Dietrich Albrecht's goal on a free kick in the 50th minute.

It all came apart the next year, however. The Americans had a two-game series against Haiti, with the winner to advance to the CONCACAF finals. Haiti won the first leg, 2-0, in Port-au-Prince on April 20, 1969 and the second, 1-0, in San Diego on May 11.

1974

This time, it was back to the familiar routine, with the United States unable to get past Mexico in the opening round of qualifying. The United States began (and ended) qualifying with a round-robin series against Mexico and Canada in August and September of 1972, the winner to advance to the six-team CONCACAF final tournament. The Americans got off on the wrong foot with a 3-2 loss to Canada in St. John's, Newfoundland. Then, a 2-2 tie with Canada in Baltimore reduced their mathematical chances to a sliver. Mexico had no trouble finishing off that, with a 3-1 victory in Mexico City and a 2-1 victory in Los Angeles.

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1978

Again the United States played a round-robin against Mexico and Canada in the opening round, but this time two teams were to advance to the six-team CONCACAF finals, the CONCACAF authorities having decided to give a bit of extra weight to North America. The round-robin was held in September and October of 1976.

The Americans came into World Cup qualifying this time with 13 consecutive defeats in full internationals, but under new coach Walt Chyzowych, they started decently. They gained a 1-1 tie with Canada in Vancouver and held Mexico to a 0-0 tie in Los Angeles. That game in Los Angeles drew a crowd of 33,171, which until last year was the largest ever for a World Cup qualifier in the United States. Mexico expectedly won the return game in Mexico City, 3-0, but the United States team thought it had wrapped up second place and advancement to the second round after beating Canada, 2-0, in Seattle. It wasn't quite to be, however.

A week later in Toluca, Canada held Mexico to a surprising 0-0 tie in the final game of the group. That left the final standings in a three-way tie, each team having four points. Mexico won the group on goal difference, but the United States and Canada, each with a goal difference of minus-1, had to play off for the other advancing spot. The playoff was held in Haiti on Dec. 22, 1968. The Americans dominated the early going, but Canada's counterattacking game produced a goal in the 21st minute of play. An American was sent off in the 63rd minute and Canada turned it into a rout with two more goals in the final five minutes.

1982

Once again, the United States was grouped with Mexico and Canada in the first round of qualifying, with two teams to advance to the CONCACAF finals, but this time, the Americans didn't even get as far as a playoff. They finished a clear last in the group, which was held in October and November of 1980. Even a victory over Mexico in their final game, a rare achievement, was not very meaningful. Officially, that game was a World Cup qualifier, but in fact it was little more than a friendly, since the United States already had been eliminated at that point and the two advancing teams decided.

The United States began inauspiciously with a 0-0 tie against Canada in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. That was followed by a 2-1 loss to Canada in Vancouver that made the situation still more difficult for the Americans. A week after the game in Vancouver they were left hanging by the tiniest of threads after a 5-1 defeat by Mexico in Mexico City. At this point they needed both a win over Mexico themselves and a win over Mexico by Canada in the final two games of the group. Canada and Mexico tied, ending the United States' chances. Still, the United States' 2-1 win over Mexico in the final game was a good effort, even if the advancing positions had already been sewed up. Both games between the United States and Mexico included goals by Hugo Sanchez, later to become one of the few players to play in both the North American Soccer League and Major League Soccer.

1986

This qualifying series has to be rated one of the United States' least impressive World Cup efforts ever. Even the victories left much to be desired. Still, the Americans had an excuse. In between the two games played in 1984 and the four played in 1985, the North American Soccer League folded, and the United States players were left without a place to gain the outdoor match fitness they needed.

The two games against the Netherlands Antillies in September 1984 were a home-and-home, total-goals series. While the United States eventually won the series, 4-0, it didn't look very good that the Americans didn't score a goal until the 51st minute of the second game, and got three of their four goals while playing with a two-man advantage thanks to ejections.

In May 1985, the opponents were Costa Rica and Trinidad, with one team from the group to advance to the three-team CONCACAF finals. After the first three games of their four, the United States appeared to be in good shape. They started with victories of 2-1 and 1-0 over Trinidad. Both of those games were played in the United States, thanks to an agreement between the USSF and the Trinidadian federation. Then followed perhaps the best game the United States played, a 1-1 tie with Costa Rica in the hostile atmosphere of Alajuela. After that, all the United States needed to win the group was another tie with Costa Rica, this time on American soil, five days later. This may have been the game that finally convinced the USSF that scheduling games against Latin

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American teams in Southern California wasn't a good idea, even if it was a profitable one. In front of a crowd that strongly supported Costa Rica, the Central American team won, 1-0, to eliminate the United States one year to the day before the start of the World Cup itself.

These two games between the United States and Costa Rica were the start of what has become a heated rivalry in World Cup qualifying. Since then, the two countries have played five more games against each other in World Cup qualifying, and will play another on Sept. 7. Of those seven games over the last 12 years, none has been decided by more than one goal.

1990

For the first time in 40 years, the United States' World Cup qualifying efforts ended in triumph. The 1-0 game in Trinidad that put the United States into the World Cup in Italy is among the most famous victories in American soccer history. The United States finished second in the five-team final CONCACAF group, behind Costa Rica and ahead of Trinidad, Guatemala and El Salvador.

With two CONCACAF teams qualifying, a myth has built up that the United States owed its place in the World Cup to the fact that Mexico had been disqualified by FIFA for using overage players in a world age-group championship. In fact, the disqualification took place after the draw for the World Cup qualifying rounds, which had put Mexico and Costa Rica in the same preliminary group. They couldn't have both finished ahead of the United States in the CONCACAF finals, because only one of them could have reached those finals.

The United States began its qualifying efforts in the summer of 1988 with a two-game, total-goals series against Jamaica. The first game was a 0-0 tie in Jamaica, but the Americans came through with a 5-1 victory in the return game a few weeks later in Fenton, Mo., putting them through to the CONCACAF finals.

As they are doing in this year's CONCACAF finals, they played half of their schedule in the spring and half in the fall. The spring games were a 1-0 loss in Costa Rica and a 1-0 win over Costa Rica in Fenton, both played in April, a 1-1 tie with Trinidad in Torrance, Calif., in May and a 2-1 victory over Guatemala in New Britain, Conn., in June. That put them in good position for the fall, but even so, they appeared to have fallen out of the running after a 1-0 win in El Salvador in September, a 0-0 tie in Guatemala in October and a 0-0 tie with El Salvador in Fenton in November. At this point, Costa Rica had already clinched one of the two CONCACAF berths, and in the final game, between the United States and Trinidad, in Trinidad, the host team needed only a tie to clinch the other berth. The visiting Americans had to win. Considering that the two teams had tied in California, it seemed likely that the Trinidadians would be the ones heading to Italy. It may well be that overconfidence, or at least pressure to fulfill their fans' assumption that they would qualify, was a large part of what undid them. The Americans played their game of the year (maybe their game of the decade) goalkeeper Tony Meola, then still in college, got his fourth straight World Cup shutout and Paul Caligiuri's goal in the 39th minute did the rest.

Membership Notes

The 1997 SASH membership meeting will be held on Friday, June 13, 1997 at 7:30 p.m. at Morris Hall on the SUNY-Oneonta campus. The American Soccer History Symposium, co-sponsored by SASH and the National Soccer Hall of Fame, will be held at Morris Hall the following day, starting at 10:30 a.m. The Symposium will consist of two presentations, Mike Burnham on the Oneida Football Club of Boston, the first American soccer team in the 1860s, and Len Oliver and Mickey Cochrane on collegiate soccer during the era before the start of the NCAA championships in 1959.

Other events on the Hall of Fame Week calendar include the Hall of Fame Game between the United States and Mexican under-17 teams at 4 p.m. on Saturday and the Hall of Fame Induction Banquet at 1 p.m. on Sunday.

Being inducted into the Hall of Fame will be Walt Chyzowych, Bob Craddock, Alex Ely, Johnny Moore, Jimmy Roe and Phil Woosnam. We hope you will be there.