U.S. Soccer Youth Development

9/28/2006 6:42:00 PM

Time to Reassess

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The U.S. Soccer Federation is reevaluating the nation's approach to youth player development and coaching education.

Even before the USA's unsatisfactory performance at the 2006 World Cup, U.S. Soccer Federation president Sunil Gulati, elected in March, decided to launch a complete review of all the Federation's technical areas.

"We're going to try to look at the picture as broadly as possible," says Kevin Payne, who is chairing the Technical Committee that Gulati has assigned to make the reevaluation. "We'll look at the U-17 program, at the coaching schools, the methodology of disseminating coaching thoughts.

"I think a critical component of this is to try and convince youth soccer at a much lower level to place a greater emphasis on encouraging individual player development and creativity."

The Technical Committee will have subcommittees on the men's and women's side. Payne is also chairing the men's subcommittee, which will include the senior men's national team coach when the Federation hires a replacement for Bruce Arena.

"They're looking at everything we do and seeing how we can do it better," says Gulati. The review comes at an appropriate time. The American game, after a period of remarkable progress, has plateaued.

In the latter half of the last century, nine World Cups took place without the USA. Then, despite the lack of a professional league, Coach Bob Gansler qualified a team of mainly young college products being paid semipro salaries, for the 1990 World Cup in Italy, where it lost all three games.

In the following 16 years, the USA reached every World Cup. At the last two, Coach Bruce Arena was able to stock half his squad with players who had found success with European clubs.

The team that reached the quarterfinals of 2002 World Cup received key contributions from several players who had spent nearly their entire professional careers in MLS, which had launched in 1996.

At last summer's World Cup, a team with a comparable collection of talent exited in the first round. Shortly afterward, Arena said, "We don't have world-class players in the United States."

THE SKILL FACTOR. Tab Ramos, who played in the 1990, 1994 and 1998 World Cups and whose career included stints in Spain, Mexico and MLS before he retired to coach youth soccer in New Jersey, is a member of the Technical Committee.

"Even though we got knocked out of the 2006 World Cup," Ramos says, "I think we had the best group of players we ever had. In 2002, Korea scored a last-minute goal [against Portugal] or we would have gotten eliminated in the first round as well.

"We could have made it to the quarterfinals or semifinals in 2006, but it would have happened by chance. Not because we're really there."

Arena, before the World Cup, downplayed the USA's talent and said success depended on "having a good mentality as a unit."

"We've improved tremendously over the last 20 years," Ramos says, "but I still think we have a team that's not comfortable with the ball at their feet.

"At this last World Cup you could watch Togo and see players who were comfortable with the ball. You watch Ghana play and every one of those guys was comfortable with the ball. We don't have that. We have to do something to fix that, and then we can worry about whether we can get to the quarterfinals or semifinals."

IN COMPARISON. As president of the MLS's most successful and arguably most entertaining club, Payne has kept a close eye on American talent while his D.C. United won four league titles, the U.S. Open Cup, CONCACAF Champions Cup and Interamerican Cup trophy.

"I personally think that [American players] are very poor technically," Payne says. "Almost universally our players' first touch isn't what it needs to be. Their ability to shoot the ball isn't where it should be.

"Obviously you get some kids who do things very well. Alecko Eskandarian strikes the ball as well as anybody, but most of the kids, in my opinion, have pretty significant technical holes in their game.

"We don't really have anybody who's a particularly good dribbler. Our crossing is poor. Our heading is poor."

Much of Payne's critique comes from comparing U.S. products to the D.C. United foreign players, such as Jaime Moreno and Marco Etcheverry, who came out of the Tahuichi Youth Academy in Bolivia, and Argentines such as Christian Gomez and Facundo Erpen.

"If you see a player who comes from Tahuichi, like Jaime or Marco, they do all of those things well," Payne says. "You don't necessarily think of Marco as a header of the ball, but when he's called on to do that his technique is very sound. Jaime does pretty much everything well.

"American kids don't do that. Somewhat as a result of that, their tactical approach becomes a little bit stunted. ... All of those things come a little bit from being over-coached in terms of achieving success for their teams and they end up not as sound in terms of playing individually."

Payne points out that coaches in charge of foreign pro clubs' youth programs are not judged on their teams' scorelines but on how many players they produce for a higher level. That allows them to focus more on developing individual skills.

"In Argentina, their emphasis is very much on developing individual skill," Payne says. "Virtually every kid you see, it doesn't matter whether he's the left back, the center back or the

attacking midfielder, they're all so much more technical than our kids; even though we might actually have kids who are more athletic at that age, the soccer part's not even close.

"When you talk to the youth development people in Argentina they never tell you, yeah my U-16 team went 10-0, they talk about the development of their individual players."

American youth soccer's paid coaches are often under pressure from the parents who pay them to haul in the trophies.

"I certainly recognize that organized youth soccer is going to continue to play a very significant role in developing players," Payne says. "We don't disrespect what those coaches are trying to accomplish, but what we hope to convince them of is that it may be possible to do both: To develop better players and at the same time achieve a winning mentality and success on the field. Let's do it by playing better soccer.

"I think it's possible for America's youth coaches to convince their parents that part what they're going to do for the money they're being paid is to make their kids much better players. But today their promise is their team's going to be successful."

SENDING THE MESSAGE. The Technical Committee also includes Greg Ryan, the U.S. women's coach; Naval Academy coach Carin Jennings Gabarra, the former U.S. star; Bob Jenkins, U.S. Soccer's Director of Coaching Education; Tom Kain, a Nike executive who won the 1985 Hermann Trophy at Duke, where he played with Jenkins, and represented the USA in 1986-87; Ivan Gazidis, MLS's deputy commissioner; and Jerome de Bontin, a member of the board of directors of the U.S. Soccer Foundation and French First Division club Monaco.

Payne says he plans to invite others, such as Etcheverry, to contribute their views.

"It's not going to be the most formal task force in the world and will probably be a bit of a moving target as far as who's involved in the discussions," Payne says.

Whatever suggestions come from the committee, U.S. Soccer will be unable to mandate changes at the grass-roots level because of the autonomy of the state associations and national youth soccer organizations.

For years, the recommendation of the Federation and U.S. Youth Soccer to use small-sided formats for pre-teen leagues has not been fully implemented by most states, including the giant soccer hotbeds of California and Texas.

U.S. Youth Soccer's recommendation that regional championships shouldn't be held until the U-14 level has been ignored by half the nation.

"There's more to this than simply saying this is the way it ought to be done," Payne says. "Part of what we're going to do is essentially a marketing campaign to convince people 'Here's why.' We're going to have to get them to buy into the sense of urgency.

"You're all part of U.S. soccer. If you want U.S. soccer to get better, if your kids want to get better, if you want to see our national teams get better, we all have to embrace some of these principles."

THE COACHES. But the Federation does have under its immediate control two areas that the Technical Committee will look at closely: its National Coaching Schools and the U-17

residency camp in Bradenton, Fla.

The National Coaching Schools have been granting licenses for some 35 years.

"Our coaching approach, the curriculum of our coaching school, was very German when started back in the 1970s," Payne says, "so it tended to be very system oriented, very regimented. Since then, it's become very academic and there's very little in there about teaching your players about being intuitive or imaginative or improvisational.

"You spend time with guys who do these coaching schools and there's always a right way and a wrong way. I never met people more sure of themselves than those guys. What you hear the most at the coaching schools is, 'Nooooo! You can't do that there!'"

Says Ramos, "In this country for the last 30 years at least, because that's all I recall, we've sort of been under the German rule as far as what soccer development in this country should be and what players we typically look for, and I think it should change.

"That's not the system that's right for a country like ours, especially with our large Hispanic community. We should be trying to develop players to become skillful. To have players like Argentina has, like Brazil has."

Neither Ramos nor Payne believe in adopting the ways and means of another nation in their entirety, but both are critical of too much Northern European influence.

"To be very honest, there's way too much English influence in youth soccer, and I don't think that's the model we want to follow," says Payne. "I know a good little player and he's a pretty creative kid. He likes to take people on. He plays in the midfield for an English coach and he was told, %91If you don't get rid of the ball in two touches, you're not going to play.'

"If you want to play English [second-tier] soccer, I guess that's OK. But can you imagine saying that to Kaka? To Ronaldinho?"

BRADENTON QUESTION. The U-17 residency program began in 1999 and its first class was its most successful, having included Landon Donovan, Bobby Convey, Oguchi Onyewu and DaMarcus Beasley.

It now takes on 40 players and prepares players for the U-17 World Cup, but it isn't considered a substitute for a youth development system run by professional clubs, which MLS is trying to create.

"On a given day, you can get someone to be negative or positive on what I call the experiment we have in Florida," Gulati says. "But over the last four youth World Cups we've had finishes of fourth, fifth and fifth. That's better than we've had before.

"Is it ideal? Probably not. Has it been positive, the answer is yes.

"Has Project-40, now adidas Generation, been a positive, the answer is yes. Has ODP been a positive? The answer is yes. But clearly we're at a different level and we need to try and do some different things. The Technical Committee will make recommendations and hopefully some things will be put in place."

(This article originally appeared in the October 2006 issue of Soccer America Magazine.)