

A full-page photograph of a soccer goalkeeper, likely Tim Lincecum, in a yellow United States national team jersey. He is wearing black and white goalkeeper gloves and has his arms raised in a celebratory gesture, looking upwards with a wide smile. The background is a blurred stadium crowd.

CHASING THE GAME

AMERICA AND THE QUEST
FOR THE WORLD CUP

FILIP BONDY

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for the
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*For my dad and my son,
who keep the
spotted ball rolling*

FOREWORD

You only had to sit inside the stadium or mill about the crammed platforms of the tiny Kaiserslautern train station in Germany that one night on June 17, 2006, to feel the overwrought passion of United States soccer fans. Americans stumbling over Americans, with knowing, appreciative glances. The Stars and Stripes draped around otherwise naked bodies, or stitched more formally into collared shirt patterns. These avid supporters had come that day to watch their flawed national team, the United States of right-footed kickers, earn a 1–1 draw in the first round against Italy, the eventual World Cup champions. The result had been a pleasant surprise, a bit of a fluke achieved despite a ten-on-nine manpower advantage for Italy during the second half of the match. But the size and bent of this crowd at Kaiserslautern station was no accident. Decades of soccer evolution at all levels of American society had finally produced physical evidence of progress—off the field, at the very least. For the first time at a World Cup tournament outside the U.S., American fans were represented in numbers substantial enough to alter the tenor of a match.

The national team's supporters, tens of thousands of them, booed lustily inside the stadium when a fire-engine red card was shown to U.S. defender Eddie Pope. At times, these jeers drowned out the more familiar, indignant European-style whistles. Americans had joined with impressive force the mobile, global sports community, traveling to soccer matches in migratory herds, arranging itineraries on the fly while speaking loudly into cell phones. This wasn't true as recently as 1998 in France, where only true-blue Sam's Army and a few hundred other

American supporters were spotted in the sometimes quarter-empty stadiums. It certainly wasn't the case in Korea, an inconvenient outpost for a breakthrough run to the quarterfinals in 2002. In Germany, though, trains were packed with flag-waving, chant-challenged Americans who had yet to coin a decent nickname for their beloved side. These supporters were not the most colorful contingent at the tournament, but they definitely had joined the party—stomping and cheering in the stands, commuting with *élan* and camaraderie, drinking and bouncing around the platforms and streets just like their English and Dutch counterparts. They *got* it, finally. And when a U.S. player scored a goal in Germany—there was only one such moment, actually—the hero, Clint Dempsey, suddenly had a choice: should he head to the east or west stands toward American supporters for his choreographed celebration?

The 2006 World Cup did not end well for the U.S. national team. Requiring only one victory—against upstart Ghana—in their final Group E match, the Americans lost in Nuremberg, 2–1, and left the tournament convinced a referee had robbed them. Markus Merk of Germany whistled a wrongheaded penalty kick against U.S. defender Oguchi Onyewu just before halftime. There was no great conspiracy involved, however; just a slice of misfortune and a larger failure of skill and tactics from the Americans. They were built to counterattack against a stretched offense, never to chase the game from behind. When the U.S. desperately needed two goals against Ghana to advance with a victory, the Americans were unable to mount a comeback. After three matches, the team finished last in its group with one point on two goals (one of them an own goal by Italy). The U.S. was saddled with two player ejections and managed a total of just four shots on goal. This was not quite the lights-out disaster of 1998, but hardly the adrenaline rush of 2002.

The eight-year tenure of U.S. head coach Bruce Arena ended quickly. Like most two-term politicians, he had worn thin his welcome. Arena's contract would expire in December 2006, and he seemed to indicate that day in Nuremberg that enough was enough. A fresh start was in order, on all fronts. "If you ask me now, probably not," he said

then, about enduring the World Cup cycle again. By the standards of international soccer coaches, Arena's length of stay with the U.S. team had been substantial and relatively successful. He'd led the Americans all the way to a quarterfinal in Korea, an unlikely accomplishment aided somewhat by the luck of the draw. He understood the complicated variables of the qualifying process and the limitations of his uneven talent pool. At the same time, Arena failed to develop a cohesive midfield or discover reliable finishers. Injuries were a factor, too, but so was Arena's impatience. His lineup changes wore on goalkeeper Kasey Keller and on his fleetest attacker, DaMarcus Beasley. He had his favorites and they didn't always return the favor. Arena lived and died with Claudio Reyna, a frail, possession midfielder whose slower pace was tremendously useful in theory. In actual matches, however, his leisurely tack rarely jived with the breakneck attacks of Landon Donovan and DaMarcus Beasley.

Despite such disappointment in Germany, the sport continued to chug along steadily in the States. The final of the 2006 World Cup, between France and Italy, garnered a 7.0 television rating on ABC. Altogether, nearly 29 million viewers in the U.S. watched either on that network or on the Spanish-language network Univision. Those numbers were considerably higher, in fact, than the ratings for the NBA Finals. The World Series, contested that same year by the Detroit Tigers and St. Louis Cardinals, drew a 10.0 network rating, but lacked the big bump from Univision. Americans cared about soccer. They were watching, and would keep watching – in both languages.

A slow, grinding, contextual revolution had begun when the immortal Pelé himself came out of retirement back in 1975 to sign a \$7 million, three-year deal with the New York Cosmos of the North American Soccer League (NASL), vowing "to make soccer truly popular in the United States." In the broadest of evolutionary terms, the NASL of the seventies and eighties begat a burgeoning youth movement, which begat a competitive World Cup squad and brought the 1994 World Cup to America, which begat Major League Soccer (MLS). Youth soccer is no longer just about playtime for America's kids. It is a giant, multi-tentacled scouting and feeder system. The sport has seeped methodically into the consciousness and vocabulary of U.S. citizens, from the roots up.

Soccer moms . . . travel teams . . . Bend It like Beckham . . . Freddy Adu . . . Zinedine Zidane's head butt. Soccer-specific stadiums and Major League Soccer franchises—expanding toward twenty clubs—are sprouting across the nation. Magazines and websites, from *Soccer America* to SoccerbyIves.net, serve a knowledgeable audience. There is a growing awareness and hunger for media coverage among new generations of fans and among older immigrants who grew up playing and loving the sport. On cable and online, via sites like You Tube, Americans regularly watch touch passes from Kaká of Brazil or the mesmerizing footwork of Cristiano Ronaldo from Portugal, teammates on Real Madrid. They follow Lionel Messi, the Argentine considered by many the greatest player in the world, during his club matches with Barcelona. ESPN, under the soccer-supportive leadership of programming exec John Skipper, has aggressively and presciently contracted for Confederations Cup matches, for World Cup qualifying and finals matches, for English Premier League rights, and for any soccer that might fill a growing viewership appetite. “There’s been a huge difference from [Skipper’s predecessor at ESPN] Mark Shapiro to Skipper,” said Alan Rothenberg, former president of the United States Soccer Federation. “Shapiro inherited soccer and hated it. Skipper was with his teenage son traveling all over Germany at the World Cup long after the U.S. was eliminated, going to twenty-one games. That tells you a lot. He can feel something about the sport.”

And then there is the growing belief that the Americans just may be able to play this game, after all. We glimpsed such possibilities again at the 2009 Confederations Cup in South Africa, where the U.S. upset Spain, the top-ranked team in the world and European champions, then very nearly beat Brazil for the title before another impressive television audience back home. Granted, this was not the World Cup. Still, it was a lesson learned: Sometimes, it doesn’t matter *how* you win, but when you win. The United States finished that Confederations Cup with a modest 2–3 mark, yet enhanced its international reputation and very nearly stole a major FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) trophy. The ball is round, the saying goes. Anything can happen.

“All of my dreams end the same way, with us winning the World Cup,” said Sunil Gulati, president of the U.S. Soccer Federation, (usually shortened to U.S. Soccer), about the men’s team. “But if we talk about when that will happen, it starts getting a little fuzzy.” It almost certainly won’t happen soon. But if the U.S. men’s national team ever wins the World Cup, the triumph will likely produce a cathartic sporting moment in this country on a scale never before experienced. Most Americans go about their daily lives acutely unaware or only vaguely interested in such a possible script. To them, the World Cup is a bit like a distant meteor spinning and hurtling through space, periodically spotted, unlikely to affect them in the slightest. Its potential impact, however, is enormous. “The moment the U.S. wins the World Cup will be the moment that soccer will take on the other pro leagues in America,” said Don Garber, commissioner of Major League Soccer. “It would be a story on a global scale.”

Gulati believes a World Cup title for the U.S. men’s national team would become the greatest sports achievement in his country’s history. Americans may not have an innate affinity for their national sports teams, but they make an ardent exception if both drama and precedence are afoot. They adore the big event, the very bracketology of it all. The World Cup finals, a thirty-two-nation elimination tournament watched internationally by billions, meet all criteria. There was already a considerable stir when the top-ranked American women captured a World Cup title on home soil in 1999. Back in 1980, an ice hockey gold medal at Lake Placid once taught Americans to love a national team the way Europeans, Africans, and South Americans more naturally embrace their own. While the 1980 run was a stirring upset, that U.S. hockey team was ranked fourth or fifth in the world at the time. The U.S. soccer team, by comparison, has been ranked lately only among the top fifteen teams in the world. If the Americans were able to beat Brazil, Germany, or Italy on such a stage, they would be Princeton finally making that last-minute shot to defeat Georgetown in the NCAA basketball tournament—with the whole world watching. “Are we going to win the World Cup in 2010? Of course not,” Gulati said. “At the same time you have to say, ‘Why not?’ The goal is still the

same.” Since their renaissance in 1990, the Americans owned a sobering mark in five World Cups of 3–12–3 (this book uses the American method of listing a team’s record, wins–losses–ties; not the global standard, wins–ties–losses). When they scored first in those matches, however, their record had been 3–0–1. And whenever they tied or won their first group match, they advanced to the second round. So the formula was clear: Score first. Win first. If only it were that simply executed.

Soccer is the most democratic of all sports. It is played in all the nooks and crannies on Earth, by men and women of every age, race, and shape. It demands only a ball and four old shoes for goal markers. Even at the very highest levels, players don’t need to be particularly tall or muscular, just agile and adept. There are forward positions readily available for fleet sprinters and midfield spots custom-made for slower, more instinctive playmakers. It is true: Spectators require considerable patience to love the sport. In a society nurtured on instant replays and gaudy video graphics, this viewing experience demands a different mindset. Americans have for years been spoon-fed National Football League games with a series of convenient, four-down packages punctuated by a touchdown, field goal, or punt. Timeouts are frequent. Baseball is similar, with nine, neatly packaged innings and climactic, structured moments when the bases are loaded and two men are out. The 24-second clock propels offenses in the National Basketball Association, creating a countdown on every possession. And the power play is hockey’s way of rousing spectators, warning them a goal is more likely over the next two or five minutes.

Soccer is different. Goals often arrive without such countdowns, constructed from a slim advantage. They may be the product of a lengthy siege, or appear suddenly against the run of play. Each half is forty-five minutes of running time, of unpredictable attacks and counter-attacks. There is no guaranteed payoff. The dreaded nil-nil score always looms as a real possibility. Yet patience is rewarded with a flow and rhythm unmatched in any other sport.

Gulati likes to say that America is just starting the second half of its soccer odyssey. By this fifty-year timeline, which arguably gives short shrift to the NASL days, the chase began in earnest when the stadiums

were filled by enthusiastic, paying customers at the soccer matches during the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. That sight convinced FIFA officials to stage the 1994 World Cup in America, and from there a professional league was born. One thing is certain: No other athletic event delivers such an ultimate payoff. The World Cup is the grandest of all televised sporting events, a tournament of both enormity and relative simplicity. An American might watch his side go up in flames yet again in South Africa over the course of just two hours. But he can also dream of a match-changing goal, right through to the end of injury time.

There is considerable joy to be found in the cyclical four-year quest—in the challenges faced while choosing a coach, surviving qualifiers under extremely hostile conditions, and preparing a team for the rigors of the World Cup. This book takes that journey. It joins the Americans in their run-up to South Africa 2010, with one hopeful eye to the future and an appreciative review of the past.

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CHAPTER 1

The American Coach

THE NEW COACH WASN'T REALLY NEW AT ALL. BUT ON MAY 16, 2007, Bob Bradley appeared inside a ballroom at the New York Marriott Marquis for his official introduction as head coach of the United States national soccer team. Here, just off Broadway, the unwanted appendage “interim” would be ceremoniously stripped from his title. A blue curtain, along with the usual series of corporate logos, provided the backdrop to the dais. A dozen enlarged, glowering photos of Bob Bradley lined the walls. Bradley was not known as a sideline celebrator. He was wholly analytical, glum, flirting with dour. If you looked closely enough, there seemed to be a half-smile on his face in one of the photos. That was about as much as he would give the world. Bradley was a thorough professional and a dedicated family man. Many people loved to work for him, or with him, but he was often a tough interview subject for the media. He tightly guarded his opinions about players. His post-match debriefings, although informative, were performed only in the broadest of strokes. Everybody knew what they were getting with Bradley, for better or worse. There would be no surprises.

An insular attitude came naturally to Bradley, who was at heart devoted utterly to a soccer life. It had been a long road here, sometimes detoured or thwarted by limited opportunity. The international soccer community might be largely indifferent to the American player, but its lowest opinion was always reserved for that of the American coach. John Harkes, the former U.S. midfield star and ESPN analyst, harbored

great ambitions one day of landing an international coaching job. Yet after several false starts, Harkes decided that his storied playing career had been considerably easier to launch than a coaching career. “You’re more in control of changing opinions when you’re playing,” Harkes said. “You don’t need to rely as much on somebody else’s ignorant view.” It was the general consensus among those in the international soccer community that coaching required a strong cultural base, and that the U.S. had neither the soccer history nor infrastructure to provide such underpinnings. There also was no great reservoir of former superstars in the U.S. In other nations these golden athletes, from Frank Rijkaard in Holland to Juergen Klinsmann in Germany, were often permitted to leap-frog several learning stations and advance directly into big-time technical positions. Could there have been a crazier idea than promoting erratic Diego Maradona to head coach of Argentina’s national side?

Long ago, coaching soccer in America came to be viewed as an import trade, not a domestic or export business. Coaches at all levels of the sport—from local teenaged travel teams to national sides—were recruited from Britain and from non-English-speaking nations to teach both young and prime-time players. Meanwhile, there were few opportunities abroad for even the most seasoned of U.S. coaches. No discriminating Premier League team in England would ever consider such a hire, for fear of intense mockery. Steve Sampson, a very nice man and questionable tactician who headed the U.S. team’s 1998 World Cup fiasco in France, was signed to coach a notable foreign national team, Costa Rica, in 2002. But he was afforded only a short leash. After going undefeated in 2003 and guiding the Costa Ricans to the number seventeen ranking in the world, Sampson was dismissed the next year following a short rough patch during World Cup qualifying matches.

Other than Sampson’s underwhelming position in Central America, there had been very little employment available. The exceptions were few, and not necessarily lucrative. Iranian-born Afshin Ghotbi, who came to the U.S. at age thirteen, was hired in 2009 as national coach of Iran, a position with laughably little job security. American coaches instead took great pleasure in any polite confirmation of their