

Young Yanks need better training, more freedom, less rigidity

by Richard Snowden
internetsoccer.com Columnist

(21 April 2000) -- Lothar Matthaeus hit the nail square on the head with some of his remarks during a recent MLS conference call. And soccer coaches at every level throughout the United States would do very well to take them to heart.

Speaking the day before the MetroStars' recent 2-1 loss to the Kansas City Wizards, Matthaeus told reporters: "We play very fast soccer here [in MLS], and the players are very fit and have good technique. It's the same level as what I can see in Germany or in Italy or in France."

That's probably fair to say, speaking strictly in terms of fitness and the physical aspects of the game. However, soccer isn't only about ruggedness and endurance, as Matthaeus noted.

"Soccer in Europe and the soccer in America is very different," commented the German star. "I said that last Saturday (during the Metros' 1-0 home loss to Columbus) that we played with a lot of heart, but not with our heads. We play too quickly and we must play more with the head."

Matthaeus is spot on here, and his observations illustrate what could well be the difference between the U.S. national team becoming a serious contender for a World Cup title in the next two decades or continuing to languish on the international stage. Closer to home, they also touch on what could decide whether MLS evolves into a top-notch soccer environment or just another third-rate bush league.

It is a given that quality American players must be the heart and soul of MLS, especially during the league's formative years. And while the on-field product has certainly shown improvement in 2000, it is clear that when it comes to tactical solidity, independent decision-making and "reading" the game, the young Yanks still have a long way to go.

Matthaeus also hinted at what may be a large part of the problem young American players have in adjusting to the open, spontaneous nature of soccer: "I like the American sports. I go to [watch] basketball and hockey. I [also] like American football, but these are the types of sports where everything goes forward.

"In soccer you don't need to [take a shot] every 24 seconds, you don't need to play forward every time, you can play back and then switch the ball. It's soccer, it's another tactic in soccer [which is different] than what I have seen in American sports."

Indeed, soccer is a very different creature tactically than any of the so-called "American"

sports.

As opposed to sports like American football, baseball and basketball -- where players' roles are so rigidly defined that prefabricated playbooks thicker than a dictionary are needed and the athletes are effectively rendered mere robots -- soccer demands that every player decide for themselves how best to act and react to game situations on the fly.

As such, there is rarely much time for soccer players to ponder their next move, and no one is there to tell them exactly what that move will be. This requires an entirely different mentality than that found in "American" sports -- it requires extensive innovative thinking and excellent decision-making skills under pressure.

Unfortunately, due partially to the types of sports most American kids grow up with, the vast majority of American soccer players lack the fast, creative and independent thought-process skills which are the hallmark of players from places like Brazil, Spain, Argentina or Holland.

In this day and age, it seems to me that Americans in general are increasingly discouraged from independent, creative thinking and actions by any number of diverse influences. But it goes without saying that in the sport of soccer, as in the larger sociocultural arena, the lack of these qualities invariably results in mediocrity. We must therefore do much more to encourage our young players to develop such qualities.

This is where youth-level coaches and scouts come in. Although many of these people are skilled and knowledgeable, the results of their coaching often belie a major overemphasis on tactical rigidity and 110% effort at the expense of developing creativity and independent decision-making skills and teaching young players to play "smarter, not harder."

And where scouting players is concerned, American soccer is still far too reliant on organized tryouts composed primarily of excessively-trained, tactically rigid players to form the backbone of its youth-level regional and national squads.

Almost any foreign scout worth their salt would tell you straightaway that this is a mistake. Such a scouting format might produce some decent players here and there, but to find the true gems whose skills can spontaneously turn a game a la Rivaldo or Zidane, they must be observed in their natural habitat, where their raw talents and innate creativity can shine through without technical or bureaucratic interference.

And once top-caliber prospects have been identified, youth coaches need to be careful to avoid stifling the development of their natural talents and creativity. Too many coaches adamantly refuse to simply let their players play the game in favor of trying to overcoach them, often resulting in players who become confused and indecisive when under pressure or in an unfamiliar situation.

If you've ever wondered why the U.S. has world-class goalkeepers and defenders but is

woefully lacking where attacking midfielders and forwards are concerned, one reason is because goalkeeping and defense in soccer are much more defined roles which require relatively little innovative thought and action, compared to the constant need for creativity and swift, independent action inherent in offensive roles.

And while American soccer certainly has the potential to develop attacking players as good as any in the world, it will not happen until our young players are consistently encouraged at all age levels to be more independent and creative in their thinking and actions rather than simply being taught to fill rigidly-defined roles.

Not only would this kind of training -- which is utilized across the board by the world's top soccer powers -- be an obvious boon to our national team program, but just think how exciting MLS would be if almost every team had a Luis Figo-class American playmaker or a Yank strike force comparable to the Inzaghi brothers.

If coaches ranging from the U-12 level all the way up to the pro ranks are willing to provide their players with a sound, well-rounded tactical grounding, then step back and simply encourage them to do what they naturally do best, it could actually happen one day. And when it does, the U.S. national team will have all the tools, talent and depth they need to lift the World Cup trophy.

But don't take my word for it -- ask an internationally-renowned soccer legend. One Herr Lothar Matthaeus, to be exact.

"From America, I remember the last game against the United States. I remember a very good team that played on a high level against Germany. I have seen other games from the USA, and I think that in a couple of years it will be on the same level as the other big teams in the world."

We have every reason to dream of that glorious day.