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Funny...it doesn't look like football

America Welcomes the Soccer World

One would think American television networks would be salivating over the possibilities. It is the world's largest sporting event—a single broadcast will attract an audience greater than that of the Super Bowl, World Series and Olympic Games combined. Soccer—football, as its known to the rest of the world—is coming to America. The only question is, “Does any American really care?”

by Russell Field

On June 17th at Soldier Field in Chicago, Germany and Bolivia will kick off the World Cup—a competition involving teams from 24 countries, to determine supremacy in the world's most popular spectator sport. But the World Cup is more than just a soccer tournament. It is an event that, unlike the Olympics, requires not a host city but an entire country. The 52 matches will be watched by an estimated 31.2 billion viewers. The championship game alone will draw an audience of two billion people, or one-third of the world's population. In soccer-crazy Brazil, it is expected that 93 percent of the country will watch the World Cup.

Needless to say, not everyone in soccer's traditional hotbeds was thrilled when they learned that the U.S. would host World Cup '94. When the Fédération Interna-

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tionale de Football Association (FIFA)—soccer's governing body—declared in March of 1988 that it was postponing its announcement of who would host the the 1994 finals from June 30th to July 4th, the *London Daily Mail* was hardly fooled. Its headline—A Star-Spangled Stunner, U.S. Get Cup—was followed by a subtitle that read, “The World goes over there in '94 for the razzmatazz!”

A 1-0 Romp

What troubled many soccer fans around the globe when the World Cup was awarded to the United States was that the host country had no apparent appreciation of the game, and would transform the football tournament into a marketing bonanza. There certainly are Americans who fail to see the strategy involved in soccer and who cannot

appreciate its pace. *Sports Illustrated* columnist William F. Reed summarized what many Americans think about the game:

“I'll concede that soccer requires conditioning and dedication, but so do jogging and mountain climbing.



Striker, World Cup mascot: a soccer-playing Huckleberry Hound. [World Cup USA '94]

Those sports don't spin the turnstiles or light up the Nielsens much, either. When all is said and done, the reason so many Americans are turned off by soccer is that it's B-O-R-I-N-G....Why, if it weren't for those ridiculous penalty-kick tiebreakers after two hours of play, most of the World Cup teams would still be playing."

As *Washington Post* columnist Tony Kornheiser noted after watching the 1990 World Cup in Italy, "I have trouble with the sentence, 'They built an insurmountable 1-0 lead.'" But, according to Peter Bridgewater, head of the group that won the right to host six World Cup games at Stanford Stadium in Palo Alto, CA, "There are many ways the sport could be spiced up to make it more appealing to Americans." These included notions as abhorrent to football purists as bigger goals and dividing the game into quarters instead of halves.

David Invites Goliath To Dinner

The United States, traditionally a non-power in the soccer world, is ironically enough one of the few countries to have entered every World Cup competition. The World Cup is more than just a month-long tournament that takes place once every four years. Qualifying for the World Cup (or 'the finals') began over two years ago. The United States (as host) and Germany (as defending champion) automatically earned invitations to World Cup '94. One hundred and forty three countries began qualifying play in March, 1992, and by November of 1993, after 491 matches, the other 22 entrants in this year's World Cup had been determined.

As host of the fifteenth World Cup, the Americans will be making their fifth appearance in the final tournament. Outside of a 1-0 victory over England in 1950—considered by most soccer experts as the greatest upset in World Cup history—the United States has done little to distinguish itself on soccer's biggest stage. The 1990 World Cup in Italy was America's first appearance in the finals in forty years. The U.S. rebounded from a 5-1 shellacking at the hands of Czechoslovakia to at least be competitive in losses to Austria and their Italian hosts.

The fortunes of the U.S. soccer program took a dramatic turn for the better in 1991 when Bora Milutinovic was hired as the team's head coach. Milutinovic, an expatriate Serb, has had success turning national soccer programs around, leading both Mexico (1988) and Costa Rica

(1990) to the World Cup. Under his leadership, the U.S. scored its biggest victory in recent memory when it defeated England 2-0 on June 9, 1993 at Foxboro, Mass. Back home English coach Graham Taylor was branded "the outlaw of English football" in the British tabloids.

Of greater importance than the victory, however, was whether the game would heighten awareness in the U.S. of both soccer and the World Cup. As U.S.

midfielder John Harkes noted after the win, "If this isn't on the front page of every paper tomorrow, I don't know what we have to do. They've given us the World Cup, and now we've shown we can play at this level."

More Complicated Than Bingo

Unfortunately, even a victory of these proportions merited little mention in the American press. But from the very beginning, the World Cup USA 94 organization has had difficulty generating interest in the event. Two years after America had captured the right to host the World Cup, not one sponsor had been lined up. The U.S. Soccer Federation (USSF) had sold domestic television rights to NBC and SportsChannel America for a paltry \$11.5 million and was generally having trouble organizing the world's largest sports event.

Then FIFA stepped in. The television deal was nullified and FIFA hinted that the World Cup would be moved elsewhere if the USSF did not shape up its act. As *Sports Illustrated* noted, "It's one thing to lose a game invented by foreigners and quite another to get beaten in a truly American pastime—sports marketing."

The blame for this disorganization was laid at the feet of then-USSF president Werner Fricker, who, it was observed, "would have trouble organizing a bingo game." To FIFA's relief Fricker was replaced in 1990 by Alan Rothenberg, the man responsible for the highly successful soccer tournament at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

Since Rothenberg took over, compa-

nies like Coca-Cola, General Motors and Gillette have shelled out anywhere from \$15-\$20 million apiece to become sponsors. American Airlines jumped on the bandwagon as the Official Airline of World Cup '94; Polygram spent \$100 million on the recording and video rights to three music concerts that will be linked to the World Cup and televised worldwide; and World Cup commemorative coins will net an additional \$25 million.



USSF World Cup advertisement: convincing football-loving Americans to take an interest in soccer. [World Cup USA '94]

However, on the negative side, many of the biggest sponsors were signed up by ISL Marketing, which represents FIFA. These were major players like MasterCard, who bought an international, not American, audience.

Another important step for World Cup organizers was selling the event to network television. Low scoring games, featuring defense-oriented play and continuous 45-minute halves make soccer unattractive to television executives. Networks have to discover a way to run commercials without interrupting play—hence the short-lived notion of four quarters as opposed to two halves. During the 1990 World Cup, TNT (the U.S. cable network that purchased the broadcast rights) cut away from the Italy-Ireland quarterfinal for a commercial and missed the game's only goal.

As a result, NBC and TNT (which lost money on the '90 World Cup) decided not even to bid on broadcast rights for the '94 World Cup. ABC would only bid on a package of "selected games", while CBS was the only network willing to even bid on the entire slate of 52 games. In the end, ABC and the cable sports net-



The "field of seams" in Michigan's Silverdome: 1,800 slabs of sod. [World Cup USA '94]

work ESPN purchased the rights to World Cup '94 for \$23 million—a relatively insignificant sum when compared with the international television rights, which sold for \$275 million.

The "Field Of Seams"

Nevertheless, World Cup '94 will have a distinctly American flavor. In an effort to generate interest in the United States, the USSF launched a promotional campaign that depicted soccer using images familiar to Americans. Print ads showed an American football player carrying a soccer ball with the headline, "In 1994, football season starts on June 17th."

Warner Brothers Animation Studios was hired to design Striker, the animated dog mascot of World Cup '94. In early renderings, Striker appeared in a shirt with horizontal stripes (common in rugby, but not soccer) carrying a ball under his arm (a clear violation of the rules). These mistakes were corrected, but Striker still resembles a soccer-playing Huckleberry Hound.

In yet another move clearly American in origin, the decision was made to use the Silverdome in Pontiac, Michigan as one of the venues for first round action. FIFA rules clearly dictate, however, that all World Cup matches are to be played on natural grass. Rather than move the six games in question to another site, the USSF decided to grow grass indoors. The research project—whose feasibility study alone cost \$100,000—has resulted in a hybrid of Kentucky bluegrass and ryegrass that grows indoors. The soccer pitch is formed when 1,800 hexagonal slabs of sod are inter-laid over the artificial turf at the Silverdome—what one writer labelled a "field of seams".

No Cheapjack Imitation

These efforts are all designed to make the World Cup more accessible and palatable to American fans. Professional soccer as a spectator sport has never really caught on in North America. The now-defunct North American Soccer League (NASL) was, in the words of one observer, a "cheapjack imitation" of World

Cup-calibre soccer, and the Major Indoor Soccer League (MISL), which folded 18 months ago, was according to Newsweek, "a hockey-like bastardization of the sport aimed at satisfying American tastes for fast action and high scoring."

Despite this, organizers are confident that World Cup '94 will be a success. They are quick to point out that 13 million American youngsters are involved in organized soccer. In fact, some European analysts are so confident of the World Cup's ability to draw fans that they boldly dismiss soccer's previous failures in North America:

The USA should make a success of staging the finals; support for big names in soccer has never been a problem there. The North American Soccer League collapsed largely because there were insufficient numbers of star players...The problem will not be finding fans, but producing a strong [U.S.] team.

The U.S. Soccer Federation justifies its own optimism by pointing to the 1984 Summer Olympic Games held in Los Angeles. Soccer outdrew all other sports in 1984, averaging 43,750 fans for each of the 32 games. The Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California held crowds of 97,451 for the France-Yugoslavia semifinal, and 108,800 for the France-Brazil final. As a result, Rothenberg has boldly predicted that all 52 games in this year's World Cup will be sell-outs. In fact, by August of last year, all one million tickets that had been made available to the U.S. market had been sold.

Organizers are also expecting that ticket sales will receive a boost from the various ethnic communities in each

venue. For example, Columbian, Brazilian and Mexican teams will play in front of large hispanic crowds in California and Florida. According to James Paglia, chairman of the committee hosting games in Chicago, "There is an enormous range of ethnic communities in Chicago: Germans, Italians, Polish, Mexicans, Cubans, and South Americans. Many of these groups have their own soccer leagues. The trick will be to translate this involvement with the sport into enthusiasm for the World Cup."

But the pre-eminent challenge will be to fill the stands for matches like the South Korea-Bolivia tussle at Foxboro (Mass.) Stadium on June 23rd. While critics do not dispute the popularity of soccer amongst the *youth* of America, they do question whether that level of participation will translate into actual spectators.

At an organized level, there are 1.7 million American *adults* playing soccer for 6,500 clubs. By comparison, there are 2.25 million Brits playing organized football, and Italy boasts over 19,000 clubs. For the most part, Americans view soccer as a reason to rev up the Volvo and take the kids out on a Saturday morning.

Sell The Sport, Not Just Tickets

Yet, this is no weekend romp in the park—the World Cup is big business. Total sponsorship and merchandising revenue is expected to top \$1 billion. The economic boost that hosting World Cup matches would provide local economies was one reason that 32 cities expressed interest in being World Cup venues. "The bottom line is, if we stage four games, the economic impact will be \$82 million, with tax revenues of \$6 million," observed Joanie Schirm, before submitting Orlando's successful bid.

After the financial benefits peter out, however, there is some question as to what lasting effect World Cup '94 will have on soccer in the U.S. FIFA awarded the World Cup to America with the understanding that a professional league would be established in the U.S. by 1993. At the moment, the USSF has plans for a twelve-team league, to begin play in the spring of 1995.

For many, the World Cup will be a failure if it does not increase interest in soccer within the U.S. "We've got to do more than just sell all the tickets," says Bob Caporale, head of the World Cup group in Foxboro, Mass. "This is our one chance to catch the wave." ●