

A lot in common



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The six nations vying for CONCACAF's three World Cup spots are wonderfully diverse, but they have more in common than meets the eye.

Giants Mexico and the United States are the Hexagonal's only nations with decent-paying leagues, although Mexico's pays much more.

The other four — Costa Rica, Honduras, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago — have populations comparable to small U.S. states.

All but Trinidad & Tobago have reached a World Cup, although only Mexico and the United States have made it a habit. Still, T&T has the biggest star — Manchester United's Dwight Yorke.

Two are Caribbean islands, two others rely heavily on Caribbean players, and one has a lot of Caribbean immigrants who are slowly being noticed by its soccer community.

Three are Hispanic nations and one has a huge Hispanic population that is slowly being noticed by its soccer community.

Only Mexico's league is strong enough that it doesn't depend on its players going abroad.

To qualify from CONCACAF, a team has to play 16-22 games. That's twice what Europeans have to contest and compounds the challenge for the CONCACAF coaches who must meld their teams with players from around the globe.

They struggle to get them released from their clubs in Europe, where respect for the region is limited to its potential as a poaching ground. And the players who venture abroad often spend most of their time on the benches of clubs who buy in bulk.

Indeed, this region's teams share many challenges. What they also have in common is marked improvement over recent years.

Mexico has surged since 1993, just as the United States was coming of age as a soccer nation. In 1998, Jamaica became the first Caribbean nation to reach the finals since 1974. Honduras and Costa Rica may have their best teams ever.

The strength of this Hexagonal guarantees that the qualifiers will be the best CONCACAF has sent to a World Cup.



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Jamaica's Theodore Whitmore dances through the Costa Rican defense during '98 World Cup qualifying. CONCACAF's top teams have strong Caribbean and Hispanic influences