

Arena's men will have to battle for berth

Have rivals made more progress than United States?

NEW YORK — Let us suppose that a cloud of mischievous anti-soccer meteorites is approaching our planet. They come roaring in like super-smart bombs, and zap! — all the soccer stadiums in the CONCACAF region are obliterated. Nothing but a series of smoking, dusty craters remains.

Might as well make this a real doomsday experience: At the same time, a mysterious illness hits all the soccer players in the region. They are judged completely curable within a year. Too late, too late — what about the World Cup qualifying games, the famous Hexagonal?

Not to worry. FIFA will step in and do what that panel of experts does in England when games have to be canceled because of bad weather — games in which a result is needed on time because they are on the betting sheets.

The panel decides what the results would likely have been. Not the scorelines — just whether the games would have been home or away wins or ties FIFA can do the same with the Hexagonal.

In fact, FIFA has already done this. Simply look at the positions of the six CONCACAF teams in the latest FIFA world ranking chart,

and there you have it.

Mexico (10th in the FIFA world rankings), USA (16th) and Trinidad & Tobago (29th) take the first three slots and qualify for World Cup 2002. Left to think about next time are Honduras and Jamaica (equal 46th) and last-place Costa Rica (55th).

By and large, it's not an unreal assessment of the relative strengths of the teams — which makes it pretty encouraging for the United States.

Except for one thing. And this is a pretty massive exception. Costa Rica in last place?

That doesn't seem at all likely. I very much doubt whether Bruce Arena or any of his players see Costa Rica as the weakest team in the group.

There was a time, a mere decade ago, when it was OK to belittle the Ticos. In World Cup '90, Costa Rica got into the second round and the United States did not. This didn't seem right to the USA's Bruce Murray, who famously proclaimed that "on a good day we can thump Costa Rica."

The awkward fact is that the United States has *never*



Costa Rica's Reynaldo Parks sprints away from Ante Razov during the U.S. loss in the semifinal round of qualifying.

thumped Costa Rica — not then, nor since. It has a losing record (7-8-4) against Costa Rica, and only once has it scored more than two goals against the Ticos, a 3-2 win in 1991.

Of more immediate meaning are the most recent results in the first qualifying round: a 2-1 win for the Ticos, followed by a 0-0 tie.

Forget about the furor over Costa Rica's game-winning penalty kick in the first game. Those results were not unfair to the United States.

What they show is that there is very little separating the teams, but that Costa Rica has the edge.

There is a tendency to measure U.S. progress on the international scene by how it does against the CONCACAF super-power Mexico — a rivalry that dates back to 1934. It took the United States 46 years and 25 games before it recorded its second win, in 1980.

In the 16 games since then, the U.S. has four wins, so things are looking up. But it seems to me that Mexico is the wrong yardstick.

No team can be dominant, effortlessly dominant, forever. One — or more likely both — of two things happens. The dominant team — Mexico in this case — becomes complacent. The other teams begin to improve — but as they are starting from a position of inferiority, the rate of their improvement is always likely to be greater than that of the complacent, dominant team.

Under that scenario, the United States will inevitably but slowly do better against Mexico. But what matters more for American hopes of world prowess is the extent of its progress compared to the other competitive teams in the region. Which — a fact that is forgotten far too often — have also been improving.

Costa Rica, it seems to me, offers a much more realistic yardstick to U.S. progress than does Mexico. And a much less optimistic one.

This is one occasion when soccer statistics reflect the truth. From 1975 to 1991, in its first nine games against the Ticos, the United States went 3-3-5. From 1992 to 2000, the record was 4-4-2. Very clearly, no progress has been made against the Ticos.

Which means that while we have been improving, Costa Rica — with almost laughably less in human and financial resources — has at least been keeping pace with us.

When you look at the rest of the pack — Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica and Honduras — things get a lot more worrying, even though the U.S. record against those three teams is overwhelmingly positive: 16-2-9.

Only two losses in 27 games ought to ensure that the United States sails smoothly toward Korea/Japan 2002. But this time soccer statistics are back to their more normal role of arch-deceivers.

Interpretation is required — and the key to that is what happened just over a year ago in the Gold Cup. Both Honduras and Trinidad & Tobago came up with strong, confidence-building performances, while the United States looked just plain ordinary. Not bad — just not particularly good.

During the past year, Arena has experimented with a bunch of players, so exactly which 11 compose the national team is unclear. But it doesn't really matter — because the raw material that Arena has on hand is very limited and quite remarkably unvaried.

Apart from the very young — and therefore very inexperienced — Landon Donovan, Bobby Convey and DaMarcus Beasley, there is hardly a player in sight who can bring anything new or different to the U.S. national team.

Clint Mathis, Chris Klein, Chris Albright, Kerry Zavagnin, Matt McKeon, Jason Kreis — good players all, but firmly in the American tradition of being hustling athletes first and soccer players second.

Claudio Reyna remains our only creative midfielder — and that after over three decades of coaching schools and youth development programs!

What to do? Arena, I am sure, would like to qualify for Korea/Japan by playing real soccer. I strongly doubt he has the players to do that. Which means the Hexagonal will be a battle, which means — once again — that the U.S. will have to rely on the athletes.

And if it comes down to a dramatic final game against Trinidad in Port of Spain, the result will be as unpredictable as it was 12 years ago.

That, soccer fans, is not progress.

(Paul Gardner's column appears weekly in Soccer America.)



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