

# Tri suffers a crisis of confidence

BY PAUL KENNEDY



Should we think the unthinkable? Could Mexico, which has played in more World Cups than any country except Brazil, Germany, Italy and Argentina, fail to qualify for the 2002 World Cup?

A string of bad results — five games without a win, including a 2-0 loss to the United States in October, and a streak of 385 minutes without a goal — has touched off a panic in Mexican soccer circles.

Bora Milutinovic will have none of it.

Milutinovic, who has coached Mexico twice (1982-86 and 1996-97), sees the Hexagonal this way:

For quality, he likes Mexico, the United States and Honduras to go through. "In my heart," he adds, "Mexico, U.S. and Costa Rica," three of the four countries (along with Nigeria) he has coached to the second round of the World Cup.

Mexico faces a crisis, nonetheless.

Here are the facts:

Mexico already has changed coaches once since qualifying started — Manuel Lapuente quit as national team coach in September after the *Tricolor* clinched a berth in the Hexagonal — and there's speculation that his successor, Enrique Meza, is on the way out.

The tension is noticeable these days at the Centro Pegaso, where players gather for training each week to the south of Mexico City.

**BAD RELATIONS.** They are refusing to speak to the media in the aftermath of the criticism before and after their most

recent loss, 3-2 to Colombia in Los Angeles.

Bad relations between the players and media are nothing new.

Lapuente, rumored to be on his way back to the Tri, used the strife between the national team and press to unite his players before the '98 World Cup, and they had a great tournament, advancing to the second round on European soil for the first time.

Lousy results in friendlies aren't anything new, either.

Mexico lost back-to-back games, 5-1 and 4-1, in early 1994 but recovered to have a successful World Cup.

"Mexican players don't like to play in friendlies," says Milutinovic.

The Tri has a recent history of overcoming turmoil in the middle of World Cup qualifying.

Miguel Mejia Baron replaced Argentine Cesar Luis Menotti between the semifinal and final round of qualifying for the '94 World Cup.

Milutinovic was almost fired after the semifinal round of qualifying for France '98.

Mexico qualified both times.

The concern, of course, is that this time will be different. The 2001 Hexagonal will be far tougher than four years ago.

**THE ADVANTAGES.** Mexico has many advantages.

Milutinovic ticks off five: "Mexico City. Altitude. Smog. Public. Players."

There's no question about the first four. After all, it won its last two home qualifiers, 7-1 and 7-0. Mexico has never lost a qualifier at home.

The only three times it entered the World Cup

but failed to reach the finals were when the final stage of qualifying was played entirely on foreign soil (1934, 1974 and 1982).

And Milutinovic's last point? What is remarkable about the current crisis is that Mexico was on top of the world 18 months ago. Literally.

Mexico won the 1999 Confederations Cup, beating Brazil, 4-3, in one of the most exciting finals in recent memory.

Mexico was led by veterans Jorge Campos, Claudio Suarez and Ramon Ramirez, all with 120 or more caps. Newcomers Rafael Marquez and Miguel Zepeda played prominent roles. And there was, it seemed, more young talent on the way.

The first sign of trouble — and the beginning of the end for Lapuente — came last April when Mexico failed to qualify for the Olympics. The same under-23 team that was so dominant at the 1999 Pan-American Games choked in Hershey, falling to Honduras on PKs in the semifinals.

All that young talent has dried up for the moment. Burnout is a factor. Atlas, Mexico's leading producer of young talent, played 60 official games in the 1999-2000 season. The Tri played 45 games in 1999 and 2000, more than any national team in the world.

**BAD LUCK.** Meza has had bad luck.

In Meza's first official game, Cuauhtemoc Blanco, Mexico's best striker, was taken out by Trinidad & Tobago defender Ansil Elcock. He's been sidelined ever since.

Just before Christmas, Ramirez was injured in a fatal car crash.

Ramirez's absence is critical. Mexico doesn't have a true playmaker, so it has depended on the crafty Ramirez, on the left side of midfield, to carry much of the play for many years.

Problems in the attack have put more pressure on the defense, exposing more weaknesses.

Campos, never highly rated during his stint in MLS, can be beaten from distance. He'll be tested in the air by the English-oriented Caribbean teams, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago.

It hasn't helped that Marquez, now in France, is injured. Without a decent partner for Suarez in the middle — Alberto Macias and Omar Blanco have looked terrible — the Mexican defense looks suspect.

Suspect enough not to get Mexico through? Unthinkable.

(Paul Kennedy is the managing editor of Soccer America.)

*Mexico is a team in disarray. It's winless in five games. The players aren't talking to the media. The coach has threatened to quit. Still, history points to the Tri qualifying for the World Cup.*

**Mexico's troubles began last fall when star Cuauhtemoc Blanco was seriously injured against Trinidad & Tobago. His teammates showed their support when they played the United States in Los Angeles: "Cuauhtemoc, Mexico is with you. We expect you back soon."**

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