



OSWALDO RIVAS/REUTERS

Honduras has fearsome frontline trio

The United States' second Hexagonal opponent is Honduras, whose three forwards could turn out to be among the best the region has ever produced.

BY MIKE WOITALLA

Here's some food for thought if you're a U.S. defender: Honduras scored 25 goals in six games during the semifinal round of qualifying.

That's eight more than Mexico and 11 more than the United States managed in their groups. It gets worse: In only one of their games did the Hondurans use all three of their top forwards.

Carlos Pavon, who plays in nearby Mexico, came in for five of the games and led CONCACAF scorers in the semifinal round with seven goals. David Suazo, of Italian Second Division club Cagliari, saw action in only two games and scored in each — both routs over El Salvador.

Likewise, Milton Nunez, of English Premier League's Sunderland, came home only twice. He helped Honduras to a 1-0 win over Jamaica.

Going into the final round, Coach Ramon Maradiaga won't pass on bringing together the trio. Honduras has qualified for the World Cup once, in 1982, when Maradiaga served as playmaker. With a corps of talent that has impressed at the youth level and a fierce frontline, the Hondurans have a right to believe the 2002 finals are well within reach.

'THEY CALL ME TYSON.' When Nunez returned to Honduras after helping Nacional win the Uruguayan league title, he revealed that Montevideo fans had re-christened him.

"Tyson, Tyson," they would chant, as he scored 23 league goals during a 20-month stint with the club. Now, on the eve of rejoining the national team, he's eager to hear the crowd again.



Nunez has been languishing on Sunderland's bench while its starting forwards have sent the Black Cats near the top of the standings.

The 28-year-old arrived at Sunderland via Greece's PAOK Salonika last March for \$2.5 million. His move to Europe was prompted by his Nacional goals, which included a hat trick against Vasco da Gama in the Copa Mercosur and three goals that put Nacional through to second round of the Libertadores Cup.

Prior to arriving at Nacional, Nunez celebrated a Guatemalan title with Comunicaciones. But upon joining Sunderland, he was often absent for preliminary World Cup qualifying rounds and he's played in only one league and one cup game.

"I'm not worried at all," says Maradiaga. "I know what he can do. He's playing in reserve games, so I know he's fit."

CENTRAL AMERICA'S BEST. Pavon is 27 but has already played for six Mexican clubs and had a short stint in Spain.

His career in Mexico, which included two stops in the Second Division, peaked with his role in Morelia's *Torneo Invierno 2000* title — the club's first championship in its 76-year history.

Pavon, Morelia's top scorer, is the son of Allord Plummer, a Costa Rican who starred with San Pedro Sula club Marathon in the 1970s, and a Honduran mother, Blanca Nieves Pavon.

It wasn't until a few years ago, when Pavon had garnered international fame, that he was reunited with his father, who had long since immigrated to the United States.

Pavon's success with Morelia and Honduras earned him 2000 Central America Player of the Year honors, beating out Costa Rica's Paulo Wanchope.

"Pavon is even faster than Wanchope," says Oscar Flores, sports editor of Honduras' *El Tiempo*.

Pavon recently has been troubled by knee problems.

USA KNOWS HIM.

Suazo scored both goals when Honduras beat the United States for the U-23 CONCACAF championship that served as 2000 Olympic qualifying.

Both teams earned passage to the Games, but Honduras exited in the first round, having drawn a group that included Italy and Nigeria. Suazo, 21, scored four goals in Australia.

His frequent national team duty has been a point of contention with Cagliari, which bought him for \$3.2 million from Olimpia in 1999, after Suazo starred in the U-20 World Cup. Still, he's reestablished himself with the club that's trying to fight its way back into Serie A.

He's notched six timely goals this season in Italy. In January Honduran television started broadcasting Cagliari games.

"Of all our European players, it's going best for Suazo," Maradiaga told the Honduran press after touring Italy, Austria and England to check on his players. "Getting continuous playing time has given him great confidence, and he's considered one of Cagliari's most important players."

Any frontline combination of Honduras' three strikers promises a formidable challenge.

(Mike Voitalla is the executive editor of Soccer America.)

Left: Milton "Tyson" Nunez (No. 11) has been left on the bench at Sunderland and is hungry for action.

Center: Carlos Pavon, who won a Mexican title last year, has a U.S. connection.

Right: David Suazo (No. 9) has conquered Italian defenders.