

# The United States' numero uno nemesis



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Imagine promoting a game as a clash of archrivals. USA-Mexico makes it easy. Two huge nations that are separated by a 2,000-mile border and have a good deal of off-the-field history to tap into.

But Costa Rica? A paradisiacal land of 3.6 million derided by its Central American neighbors for being Gringophilic?

Fact is, when it comes to soccer, Costa Rica is anything but friendly to the Americans.

U.S. nemesis? It's Costa Rica, winner of its last four games against the United States at home and one away.

No other team has beaten the Americans in qualifying since 1980.

Here are the five U.S. losses:

**TEARS IN TORRANCE.** FIFA took the 1986 World Cup away from Colombia in 1983, and the United States made a bid — one it figured would

save the NASL. FIFA opted for Mexico, and by 1985 the NASL had folded.

The U.S. still dreamed of getting to the '86 World Cup and needed only a tie against Costa Rica for passage into the final round of qualifying after tying, 1-1, in Alajuela.

In Torrance, Calif., on May 31, 1985, Coach Alkis Panagoulis depended on collegians like Paul Caligiuri and John Kerr, and indoor pros, like Kevin Crow, who celebrated an MISL title three days earlier.

The Americans outshot the Ticos, 13-8, but keeper Arnie Mausser failed to handle a 35th-minute cross, allowing Evaristo Coronado to capitalize for the 1-0 win.

"The World Cup is a dream of mine," said Crow. "Now, it's blown up in my face."

**POOR START.** FIFA had made up for its decision in 1983 and awarded the United States the 1994 World Cup. Qualifying for the 1990 World Cup would be essential to prepare the U.S. team for '94.

The team Coach Bob Gansler took to Costa Rica for its first game of the final round of qualifying was the most prepared ever.

The U.S. Soccer Federation had created a full-time team. For the April 16, 1989 encounter, it had three one-week camps, and the team was together for two weeks before the game.

But the confident crew soon found itself outplayed.

"Costa Rica held its own in the physical duels — both on the ground, where every 50-50 ball in the first half seemed to go to the home team, and in the air — and let the young U.S. team wear itself down as the game went on," reported *SA*'s managing editor Paul Kennedy.

A 14th-minute goal by Gilberto Rhoden was all Costa Rica needed.

The Americans recovered for a 1-0 win two weeks later in St. Louis and would join Costa Rica at Italia '90.

**REALITY CHECK.** On Dec. 1, 1996, the Americans were handed a reality check, falling, 2-1, in the semifinal round of qualifying for the 1998 World Cup.

The Ticos ran circles around a U.S. squad with 10 players from the 1994 World Cup team and the core from the team that finished fourth at the 1995 Copa America.

When Cobi Jones scored in the 90th minute, the game had long been settled. It would also be remembered for the shower of trash and whatnot that rained on the U.S. players.

"It's what you have to expect when you play in Latin America," said Preki. "But on the field, it's 11 against 11, and we lost because we couldn't put passes together."

**OUTPLAYED AGAIN.** A revenge win in California saw the Yanks through to the Hexagonal, but their next outing in Costa Rica, on March 23, 1997, was poor.

The Ticos won, 3-2, and exposed more flaws in the U.S. defense and underscored the Americans' skill deficiency. (The Tico fans were well-behaved because of threats of sanctions.)

U.S. coach Steve Sampson cited the lack of fitness of out-of-season MLS players as a problem.

Later in the year, the Americans won, 1-0, at home and would go to the '98 World Cup, leaving the Ticos behind.

**ARENA'S LOSS.** A stoppage-time penalty, after a handball that didn't look intentional, gave Costa Rica a 2-1 win last July in the semifinal round of qualifying for the 2002 World Cup.

The Americans had their chances, but the offense proved terribly off-target.

Coach Bruce Arena, suffering his first big loss, blamed the ref, and the fitness of out-of-season foreign-based players. For the first time since 1985, the Yanks didn't win the rematch on home soil. Still, a 0-0 tie was enough to see them through to this year's Hexagonal.

(*Soccer America executive editor Mike Woitalla covered the last three U.S. losses in Costa Rica.*)

*It's been 21 years since a nation besides Costa Rica has beaten the United States in World Cup qualifying. The Americans must face the Ticos, who have notched five wins during that span, twice in the Hexagonal.*

**Part of a long string of futility: Cobi Jones gets stopped by Tico keeper Alvaro Mesen in last year's 2-1 loss.**