



Steve Sampson, whose three-year stint as U.S. coach ended when he resigned after France '98, serves as technical director for CYSA-South.

TONY QUINN/SOCCERPIXUSA



backline

Sampson: 'I was not prepared to sever...'

Former U.S. coach Steve Sampson has spent two years revamping the Olympic Development Program in Southern California, using neutral scouts to see players with their club teams. He spent the past six months writing a proposal for the Costa Rican federation, accepted Jan. 5 as the model for restructuring its national team programs.

INTERVIEW BY WILL KUHN

SOCCKER AMERICA: Your name has surfaced a few times in relation to college coaching vacancies. Were you considering the Stanford job?

STEVE SAMPSON: I was considering the Stanford job. Stanford called me and asked if I was interested. During the interview process, it became very clear that they wanted someone who was going to devote themselves 100 percent to the Stanford program and nothing else.

I was not prepared to sever the relationship with CYSA-South.... I have worked so very hard over the last two years to get it where it is right now.

Also, I've been working with the Costa Rican federation and ... now they're in the process of funding the program. I am going to stay on board

as a consultant until such time when they do find the funds.

Stanford felt that it would have been an impediment to my work there. I respect that. I don't agree with it; I felt I could have done the job, and I would have really enjoyed working at Stanford University.... I respect their decision, and I'm very content here in Southern California working on the projects that I am.

SA: What about MLS jobs?

SS: I was contacted by the general manager of Dallas and the new management group in San Jose. In both cases, it was an issue of finances and long-term commitment that they just couldn't agree to.

SA: Can you talk about the prospect of coaching in MLS or college and what appeals to you about each?

SS: Well, I would love to coach in the MLS. I think it's pretty obvious that owner-operated clubs have an advantage over the league-operated clubs, from the standpoint of securing players and having the resources to do the kinds of things that are basic to a professional organization. ... So, yes, absolutely I am interested in MLS jobs, but the job has to be right.

That's true for the college situation as well. There are only a handful of college programs that I would entertain.

SA: In the meantime, you seem to be a jack of several trades here ...

SS: They are different roles, but they are important roles. It is the first time, I believe, that an American has been asked to come in and help with the restructuring of another country's national teams program. And I'm not just talking about youth national teams, I'm talking about the entire national teams program — men's and women's. So I am very proud of that.

SA: Costa Rica and the U.S. are rivals...

SS: I want to make it very clear that part of the terms of my contract with Costa Rica is that I would not provide them with any information about the U.S. team, nor would I provide the U.S. with any information about the Costa Rican team.

SA: What inspired you to work in youth soccer?

SS: What I'm doing here in Southern California, I feel is critical to the future of soccer in this country — how we identify and how we develop our players. It gives me great pride to be able to put into play what I initially proposed, on a nationwide basis, when I was the national team coach.

For it to be implemented at the state level and for it to be so well received by the people in Southern California makes me very proud.

SA: Any thoughts on what has gone well vs. what still needs to be addressed with that program?

SS: We've taken the politics out of the selection process in that we have been able to identify what we feel are the best players in Southern California — not just in the affiliated areas, but in the unaffiliated areas.

We have embraced the concept that the development of players must take place at the club level. So we have implemented a plan where ODP does not conflict with official club competition, and we have elevated the importance of development at the club level, which I feel is paramount for our future.

I still feel we have a lot of work to do in the inner-city and Hispanic communities. I feel we must provide a program that does not cost the players anything to participate.

(Will Kuhns is an associate editor at Soccer America.)



For an expanded version of the Steve Sampson interview, check out Soccer America Xtra at socceramerica.com.