

Suarez approaches imperial record

When one thinks of Mexican stars, Jorge Campos, Luis Hernandez and Cuauhtemoc Blanco leap to mind. But in the eyes of his teammates, Claudio "The Emperor" Suarez stands tall.

BY JOSEPH D'HIPPOLITO
in Los Angeles



When Claudio Suarez began his professional career, he had to take 90-minute bus trips from a poor neighborhood in the town of Texcoco to Mexico City's Ciudad Universitaria, headquarters of First Division club UNAM.

Those bus rides would become the first excursions in a journey that would take Suarez to four continents and to a unique place in international soccer.

Suarez, 32, has competed for his national team in more games (151) than all but one player in history. Only striker Hossam Hassan, who plays for Egypt, has more caps (155).

The Mexican defender surpassed Germany's Lothar Matthaeus, the former record-holder with 150 appearances, on Jan. 31 during a 3-2 loss to Colombia in Los Angeles. Suarez celebrated by scoring his fourth career goal in the 10th minute.

"I always like being a more offensive player," he said. "I would rather play more as an offensive midfielder because you have a greater chance to be with the ball when it's most important."

Suarez was almost 24 when he debuted for Mexico against El Salvador in 1992, but he has made up for lost time, competing in the 1994 and 1998 World Cups — during which he played every minute — four Copas America, four Gold Cups, two Confederations Cups and the 1996 Olympics.

In the process, he has developed a reputation as one of the world's finest defenders.

"He shows his intelligence with and without the ball," said Cobi Jones, who leads the United States with 136 caps. "He's very aggressive, and he can do a lot of things with the ball, so you always have to be aware."

QUICK ANALYSIS. Despite Suarez's offensive desires, "he's very disciplined," Mexican national coach Enrique Meza said. "He easily analyzes difficult situations. He reads the opponent's play very well, and that's what makes him stand out."

In the minds of his teammates, Suarez's personality and leadership also make him stand out and have earned him the nickname "El Emperador" ("The Emperor").

"He's an example for all of us," forward Luis Hernandez said. "He's simply very professional, and he respects his teammates greatly."

Duilio Davino debuted with the Tri at the age

of 19 in 1996 and was Suarez's partner in the middle of the Mexican defense at France '98.

"What's most impressive, more than his technical strengths, is his humility," said Davino. "He's a great person off the field, and that makes us believe more in him. I've been paired with him since I joined the national team, and he's made it much easier for me because he neither criticizes you nor reproaches you on a bad play. He helps you, and that has really calmed me down."

EVEN TEMPERAMENT. Suarez's demeanor reflects his even temperament in the face of the suffocating pressure that many members of Mexico's national team face.

"My position as a central defender is one in which I need to be talking a lot, to be pushing teammates," he said. "You have to know how to handle the pressure from the media and the fans and be calm when the stadium is full, particularly when you're on the field."

"I concentrate so much that I don't listen to the noise from the people in the stands. I don't allow that to affect me. The most important thing is to be calm, and training is going to give that to you. When you train very well, it gives you the confidence on the field that you're going to have good results."

Following that advice has enabled Suarez to play 13 years in Mexico's First Division. He started in 1988 with UNAM and played on Pumas' 1990-91 championship team. Suarez moved to Guadalajara in 1996 and helped Chivas win the 1997 *Torneo Verano* before joining Tigres last winter.

HEALTHY LIFE. "I always fully dedicate myself to training," Suarez said. "More than anything,



POPPER/OTO

it's a matter of leading a calm, healthy life and getting adequate rest. I haven't suffered any injuries that have forced me to leave the field."

Although injuries sidelined him at Tigres on the eve of the USA-Mexico World Cup qualifier, Suarez believes he has much more to give on the field.

"I'm 32, and I still feel I can play much longer," he said. "It's my goal to be in the 2002 World Cup."

If Suarez plays long enough to pass Hassan, the defender would view his accomplishment in a larger context.

"It's very important not only for me, but also for Mexican soccer, without a doubt," Suarez said. "The Mexican player is being recognized, and Mexico is achieving international goals. This is one of them. I hope to reach this goal and to surpass it. I think it's a record that won't be so easy for another player to match."

(Joseph D'Hippolito is a free-lance soccer writer based in Fullerton, Calif.)

Claudio Suarez, second on the all-time caps list, says the international record for appearances would be a great achievement not only for him, but also Mexican soccer.

Men's Caps Leaders

1. Hossam Hassan (Egypt) 155.
 2. Claudio Suarez (Mexico) 151.
 3. Lothar Matthaeus (Germany) 150.
 4. Mohamed Al-Deayea (Saudi Arabia) 143.
 4. Thomas Ravelli (Sweden) 143.
 6. Majed Abdullah (Saudi Arabia) 140.
 7. Cobi Jones (USA) 136.
 8. Mohammed Al-Khilaiwi (Saudi Arabia) 130.
 9. Marcelo Balboa (USA) 128.
 10. Peter Schmeichel (Denmark) 127.
 10. Jorge Campos (Mexico) 127.
 12. Andoni Zubizarreta (Spain) 126.
 13. Gheorghe Hagi (Romania) 125.
 13. Peter Shilton (England) 125.
 15. Masami Ihara (Japan) 123.
 16. Ramon Ramirez (Mexico) 122.
 17. Cha Bum Kun (South Korea) 121.
 18. Pat Jennings (Northern Ireland) 119.
 19. Heinz Hermann (Switzerland) 117.
 20. Roland Nilsson (Sweden) 116.
- Through Feb. 9, 2001.