

U-17 heroes put the past behind them

Wolfgang Suhnholz says talk of that sensational U-17 team, the one that finished fourth in New Zealand, "gets old."

Others agree.

"We've put the U-17s behind us," says Nelson Akwari, who captains the U.S. under-20 squad Suhnholz is trying to guide into this summer's World Youth Championship in Argentina. "We had a great run with the 17s, but now we're looking forward to the 20s. [The U-17s] were in the past."

"I think," offers D.J. Countess, starting goalkeeper for both teams, "the 17s and 20s are two different teams."

Yes, of course, they are, but they share



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Wolfgang Suhnholz

11 players, including Landon Donovan, DaMarcus Beasley and much defensive personnel. And the U-20s' hunger to accomplish something in Argentina, to finish better than fourth, stems from the U-17s' success and disappointment. Their fairy-tale ride in New Zealand ended in the semifinals, a penalty-kick defeat to Australia.

"Every one of these guys on the 17s who are here now, they are so hungry," says defender Alex Yi. "We were so close to getting there. And with our bite, a lot of the older guys who couldn't experience that are feeding off it. We want it so bad."

First things first, which is the CONCACAF Group B qualifying tournament March 14-18 in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Two from among the United States, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Trinidad & Tobago book passage to the June 17-July 7 U-20 championships.

"I saw those teams, and they are good," assesses Suhnholz, who blended the best of John Ellinger's U-17s with the skillful U-18 group Mitch Murray was working with. "Today there are no slouches anymore. Do I think we're going to advance? Of course, I do. We're as good or better than them, but it's going to be a challenge."

— **Scott French**