

TONY QUINN/SOCCERPIXUSA



Thomas Rongen

U-20S HAVE NEW BOSS

Thomas Rongen knows the U.S. under-20 squad needs to be more professional — with more professionals — but he's willing to be patient. Me has to be.

Rongen, introduced as the new U-20 coach the day after Christmas, recognizes the gap separating Americans from elite players elsewhere. Constructing a bridge will take time.

"You can't put too high of expectations on this team right now," said Rongen a few days into his first U-20 camp. "We have to be realistic in our approach. We should qualify [for the 2003 World Youth Championship in the United Arab Emirates], we should be one of the best in our region, but internationally, well, the last U-17 and U-20 World Cups brought us back a little bit to earth. We've got a long ways to go."

That was apparent at the U-20 finals last summer in Argentina, where Wolfgang Suñholz's squad lost to Egypt in the round of 16. Differences between the pros and

collegians on Suñholz's roster were profound.

"I'd like to have 20 professional players on this team," Rongen said, "but the reality is it's not going to happen."

The 45-year-old Dutchman, a U.S. resident since arriving in 1979 to play in the NASL, takes over for Suñholz after his contract at D.C. United wasn't renewed. After stints as coach of Tampa Bay (where he was MLS Coach of the Year in 1996) and New England, Rongen won the '99 MLS crown at D.C. but failed to reach the playoffs the past two years while posting a 16-34-18 mark.

"This is an age group I can do real well with, in terms of my background," said Rongen. "And in terms of development, this is an important age group."

The U-20 pool features five MLS players — D.C.'s Bobby Convey and Santino Quaranta, Dallas' Eddie Johnson and Miguel Saavedra, and Tampa Bay's Devin Barclay — and VfB Stuttgart's Dimitri Colon.

— **Scott French**

Former D.C. United coach Thomas Rongen admits he has his work cut out in his new job as U.S. U-20 coach.