

Coaches in Wonderland



PAUL GARDNER

NEW YORK — Here we go again, with the traditional soccer party to welcome in the new year.

It's this monster coaches' thing — what the NSCAA, which organizes it, terms the largest annual gathering of soccer coaches in the world. No doubt they're right—they also call the event a convention, but no one's fooled by that; this is a jamboree, a carnival ... a genuine light-spirited party where a good time is had by one and all.

Get-togethers like this need frivolity and fun, they need to provide a few days of escape from the heavier realities that burden everyday life.

And that's what we get here — a soft, comfortable, woolly world of fantasy soccer, in which the coach presides benevolently over everything.

But ... I've been peering closely at this year's party games and activities, and I have to report that there continues to be a regrettable tendency on the part of the organizers to overlay the hi jinks and the fun with a veneer of seriousness.

It really does deflate the jollity to be faced with spartan titles like "Match Analysis and Match Related Training" (well, that's the Dutch, never renowned for a sense of humor — although given the fact that they have just spectacularly failed to qualify for the 2002 World Cup, I imagine there must be a hidden joke here that I'm missing).

Then we have "Soccer, Science and Coaching: Using New Research to Give



PERRY MCINTYRE JR.

Record-setting numbers of coaches gather at the NSCAA's annual convention, where they watch other coaches expound on how the game is, or ought to be, played.

My Players An Edge." I'm assuming that will be a slice of inventive science fiction, which fits in nicely with the fantasy theme, along with the "New Concept in Soccer Fitness" that we are promised.

I'm not sure what to make of Bruce Brown. The guy sounds intimidatingly serious. Listen to this: "How A Coach of Character Can Give the Profession Eternal Value." Of course coaches should slap themselves on the back and give each other awards at their own party — but that word, that "eternal," has a portentously religious ring to it. Surely, "lasting" would have sufficed? But ... eternal? I can't help envisioning Bruce Brown as Cotton Mather, a party-poopster if ever there was one.

Back to the fantasy and the fun. It has been an ongoing joke at these conventions to burlesque soccer, to present a wittily redrawn vision of the sport. To get the full flavor of this, you must take in what the NSCAA calls its "Feature Ses-

sions," during which various coaches will expound on how the game is, or ought to be, played.

The joke this year is to make the goalkeeper the most important member of a team (right after the coach, I mean). Of 24 Feature Sessions, seven are specifically about goalkeeping: which means 30 percent of the sessions are devoted to a player who composes less than 10 percent of the team, and who isn't even a real soccer player anyway. Hilarious.

The other traditionally side-splitting aspect of the party is for everyone to close their eyes and pretend that there is no such thing as Latin soccer. Whatever you do, don't look south, anyone! Don't even approach the USA's very own border ... I don't think the word "Mexico" has ever been uttered at one of these bashes.

No sir, none of that nonsense. A great deal of cleverness must go into this one — after all it needs quite breathtaking audacity to overlook the fact that precisely

half of the 16 World Cups so far played have been won by South American teams.

And while we're about it, we might as well ignore the growing importance of African soccer as well. Forget it — Europe is where it's at. So this year we shall have guys from the Netherlands, from Scotland (another country that flopped on the World Cup qualifying scene), Germany, France and, inevitably, England.

Yet there are minuscule signs that this particular joke may be wearing a bit thin. Among the more than 70 individuals who will be conducting the Feature Sessions, we find the disturbing element of three Hispanic names. Two of them, Carlos Menjivar and Rene Miramontes, deal with drearily straightforward topics — Speed of Play, and Combination Play — so the threat of a fun-squelching, corrupting Latin virus is negligible.

As for the third Hispanic name — we can be sure that he is in on the Europe-only joke. Chico Borja will be discussing ... Dutch soccer!

With the coaches drifting off

less schoolmasterish, they sound than "Practical Application of the 10 Principles of Goalkeeping." Another title that has that ominously biblical tone about it — I'll bet those 10 principles end up sounding like 10 Commandments.

Then there is that Ali Baba's cave known as the Exhibits Hall, a truly impressive gathering of everything from the worthwhile to the ludicrous in soccer marketing. Yes, I am in awe of this — I attended my first NSCAA convention back in the late 1960s, and I recall just one solitary exhibitor: Max Doss' Soccer Sport Supply Company, still going strong although Max, sadly, is no longer around.

So Soccer USA-2002 will begin with this tremendous, enjoyable party. The theme is "Soccer: As Diverse As Its People" — celebrating the global impact of the world's most popular sport and recognizing the rich tapestry of people and thought that make up "The Beautiful Game."

That's the official NSCAA wording, evidently attempting to give weight to what is essen-



Nearly a third of the NSCAA convention clinics are about goalkeeping — devoted to a player who composes less than 10 percent of the team.

on the clouds of their Utopian, European dream world, it is left to the referees — of all people — to liven things up with a dose of invigorating reality. I like these titles: "Who Gives a Hoot About Bad Language?" and "Do Referees and Coaches See the Same Thing?" — panel discussions that suggest divergent opinions and the probability that one will be able to stay awake.

How much more inviting,

tially a social occasion. Like so many official statements, it is overblown and of questionable veracity.

The NSCAA's "global" boundaries stretch no further than Europe, while diversity has never been a noticeable feature of these gatherings. When the fun is over, the serious issues of American soccer, and of American soccer coaching, will have been, yet again, merrily ignored. ■