

New approach to minority outreach



U.S. Soccer has folded its multicultural program but expanded the roles of Juan Carlos Michia and Carlos Menjivar .

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Eight years ago, with great fanfare, U.S. Soccer introduced a minority-outreach program. The aim was to identify outstanding young players from overlooked clubs and leagues — even those not affiliated with the official governing organization — and bring them into the national team program.

Last year, with less notice, U.S. Soccer folded its multicultural program into a broader reorganization plan. According to two men most affected — the officials formerly in charge of minority outreach — the change heralds not a retreat from commitment, simply a recognition of new realities.



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"For four years, we sent information from the top level of soccer down to the grassroots," says Juan Carlos Michia. "Now most people know about ODP. The multicultural initiative was the only way to do that, and it opened lots of doors. We're seeing more players from areas we never touched before. But at the end of the day, money talks. The Federation made changes for financial reasons. That doesn't mean our commitment to minorities is any less."

Michia says his new role as Region III national staff coach allows him to link together soccer officials at the club, state, regional and national levels, all of whom

can identify promising minority players. He emphasizes that "minority" includes not only Hispanics but African-Americans, Asians and immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean and Balkans.

"Club coaches see these players three or four times a week," Michia says. "We need their input. One or two minority outreach people could not do it alone."

Michia, who is based in Miami, adds: "When I watch one team play here, I see players from 10 different countries. There are plenty of examples like that throughout Region III. But I can't do it alone. We need all the coaches in the region involved. Part of my job is letting them

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Juan Carlos Michia became Region III's national staff coach after U.S. Soccer reorganized its minority-outreach program.

know we want their help."

Bob Contiguglia, president of U.S. Soccer, places the minority outreach cut-back in the context of the larger picture:

"There is a clear demand at the grassroots level for more coaching education. We're trying to meet that demand by using all our staff to deliver education to our members. That process includes giving more responsibility to more coaches to identify promising players. This is not an abandonment of minority outreach; it's an expansion of it."

The key to identifying overlooked players is networking, says Carlos Menjivar, national staff coach now in charge of Region II plus Southern California.

"Before, only Juan Carlos and I did this outreach," Menjivar says. "Now every state coach will help — so will the Latin American Soccer Coaches Association. We'll all be watching, scouting and recommending players together."

Menjivar was realistic in assessing the current state of minorities in youth soccer.

"We can do better," he says. "Over the years, some parents have not wanted to be part of the system, even after we identified their youngsters. We must address issues like that. Some states offer financial aid, but immigrant parents may not want to divulge personal information. It's a cultural issue. We have to let them know it's OK, the INS or IRS won't get them."

Another issue, according to Menjivar, is getting parents who still follow teams of their national heritage to understand that their children identify with the United States. Young players who were born here are American citizens. Those who were not can become citizens, and U.S. Soccer will help.

"I did that before in my previous position, and as national staff coach I will continue to do it," Menjivar says. "All that's changed is I'm getting more help. We're all working on minority outreach together now." ■