

No dearth of defenders

THERE ARE CHOICES GALORE FOR

Coach Bruce Arena as he ponders what to do with his back line.

A dozen players could fill the rear slots this year, with a fairly ambitious schedule of friendlies and two official competitions — the Confederations Cup and CONCACAF Gold Cup — to be played.

And by moving an attacking type like Sasha Victorine to right back, as he did for the 2-0 win over El Salvador in November, Arena confirmed he won't necessarily limit his search to defenders.

Last year, he deployed Richard Mulrooney at outside back and Pablo Mastroeni at central defender. He's mentioned Bobby Convey as a possible option at left back. All play midfield in MLS.

Frankie Hejduk played left back and right midfield at the 2002 World Cup. Arena used Tony Sanneh at right back as a stopgap measure.

Of the 2002 incumbents in the middle, Eddie Pope and Gregg Berhalter both turn 33 in 2006. By then, Jeff Agoos will have retired from the national team, and Sanneh, who has played in the middle and on the outside with his German club teams, will be 35.

To be tested early in 2003 from the MLS ranks are Wade Barrett, Danny Califf, Carlos Bocanegra, Ryan Suarez, Chad McCarty, Brian Dunseth and Nick Garcia. Might Jay Heaps get a look?

The overseas contingent includes Greg Vanney, Cory Gibbs, Steve Cherundolo, Hejduk and Sanneh.

MLS defenders will dominate U.S. rosters until the Confederations Cup, for which Arena has stressed the need to field a strong team.

"We need to balance that the right way," says Arena. "Will it be a completely veteran team? No, I don't think so. It will be some kind of a mix of some of our less experienced players with some of our veteran players."

— Ridge Mahoney