

# Bielsa seeks 'spare parts' to retool Argentina for long run

National team coaches rarely get a second chance.

Marcelo Bielsa is the exception.

Argentina bombed at the 2002 World Cup. It entered as the favorite of many experts to win the title, but it failed to reach the second round for the first time in its past nine World Cup appearances.

Nonetheless, Bielsa was retained as Argentina's national team coach. Cesar Luis Menotti and Carlos Bilardo are Argentina's only other national team coaches who have been rehired after a World Cup. Menotti returned after winning the 1978 World Cup and Bilardo after winning in 1986.

Even Bielsa admits he was stunned he got a second shot.

"I was surprised when they offered me the chance to carry on because it is not often one can continue after a failure," he said.

Bielsa's poor relations with the Argentine press — he holed himself on his ranch and refused to talk to the media after the World Cup — earned him the nickname "El Loco" ("The Crazy One"). He however had the support of his players and, most important, Julio Grondona, the president of the Argentine soccer federation.

"People respond with their hearts," Grondona said of fans who overwhelmingly supported Boca Juniors coach Carlos Bianchi or former U-20 coach Jose Pekerman over Bielsa. "But to lead, you have to show reason. Bielsa's record was perfect during quali-

**Despite a bad World Cup — and poor relations with the press — Marcelo Bielsa was retained as Argentina's national team coach."**



MARCOS HAUPA/REUTERS

fyng. Before the World Cup, he was considered a great coach. The fact that he lost two games in two weeks [Argentina lost only to England at the World Cup; the 1-1 tie with Sweden was considered a loss because Argentina was in a must-win situation] doesn't make him a bad coach."

Argentina, the only team to fail to reach the second round with four points, remains among the world's deepest teams.

Bielsa is bringing a team of young players, most without experience at the senior international level, for Argentina's three games against CONCACAF opposition: Honduras on Feb. 1 in Tegucigalpa, Mexico on Feb. 4 in Los Angeles and the United States on Feb. 8 in Miami.

Six starters from the U-20 team that won the 2001 World Youth Championship title

are in the squad that will face the United States. Goalie Wilfredo Caballero (Boca Juniors), defender Nicolas Burdisso (Boca Juniors) and midfielders Andres D'Alessandro (River Plate), Leonardo Ponzio (Newell's Old Boys) and Leandro Romagnoli (San Lorenzo) head the domestic-based contingent. Midfielder Nicolas Medina of English club Sunderland is the only foreign-based player in the squad.

Bielsa's team also includes four players from 2002 Torneo Apertura champion Independiente: 22-year-old Gabriel Milito, who is considered Argentina's top young defender, and midfielders Lucas Pusineri, Pablo Guinazu and Federico Insua.

Most of the players are second or third at their positions on Bielsa's depth chart, but the Argentina coach considers the tour helpful to find the "spare parts" he feels are indispensable to retool for the long World Cup 2006 qualifying campaign that starts in early 2004.

— Paul Kennedy