



COLIN BRALEY/REUTERS

Bring on the minnows

The road to Germany 2006 has gotten longer for the United States.

CONCACAF will present to FIFA a qualifying format for the 2006 World Cup that includes a third group phase that involves all confederation members and is not played on a regional level.

The United States has been exempt until the semifinal phase in qualifying for the past two World Cups while CONCACAF's small teams had to compete on a regional level to earn passage to the final 12.

CONCACAF's top 12 teams have been seeded and will face the confederation's other 23 teams in group play. Assuming every CONCACAF team enters the World Cup, the first round, scheduled to begin

in February 2004, will consist of 11 three-team groups and one two-team group.

The 12 seeds were divided into three pots into which they will probably again be divided, if form holds, to seed teams for the semifinal round: Pot A — United States, Mexico and Costa Rica; Pot B — Honduras, Trinidad & Tobago and Jamaica; Pot C — Barbados, Canada, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama and St. Vincent & the Grenadines.

The competition the United States will face in the first round is among the weakest in the world. The majority of CONCACAF members are so-called "minnows," tiny Caribbean islands known for their white beaches, not their soccer.

The Americans have faced four potential first-round opponents in past qualifying, although they are perfect against only Bermuda (6-2 and 2-0 wins in 1968).

Haiti, ranked fifth in *France Football's* 2002 CONCACAF rankings, eliminated the United States in 1970 World Cup qualifying with 2-0 and 1-0 victories.

A win (5-2) and a tie (1-1) against Cuba in Havana were enough to qualify the United States for the 1950 World Cup.

The United States opened 1986 qualifying against the Netherlands Antilles and managed only a 0-0 tie in Willemstad before advancing with a 4-0 victory in St. Louis.

Johnny Descollines (right) moves in on Ecuador's Luis Gomez during Haiti's 2-0 win at the 2002 Gold Cup, a victory that propelled it into CONCACAF's top five.

Worst of the worst

American forwards will be lining up for the chance to pad their scoring totals against weak CONCACAF competition in the first round. Here's the worst of the worst, with current FIFA ranking (out of 204 countries) in parentheses:

MONTSERRAT (203). "Won" the booby prize as the worst team in the world when it lost to Bhutan, 4-0, in the Himalayas, two hours before the 2002 World Cup final. Afghanistan's return has since moved Montserrat (population: 7,000) out of the basement.

TURKS & CAICOS (202). Became the 200th member of FIFA when it joined in 1998. Hasn't won in five international matches and hasn't played since 2000.

PUERTO RICO (198). Hasn't won a game since 1994 when one of its stars was Chris Armas.

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS (197). One of four American islands that rank among the world's eight worst teams, along with Puerto Rico, Guam (200) and American Samoa (201).

ANGUILLA (196). Lost its first five internationals by 44-2 margin before beating the British Virgin Islands in 2000.

— Paul Kennedy