

Gap is Exposed

BY RIDGE MAHONEY

in Miami



Above: Dan Califf (left) and the U.S. defense was put on its heels by Diego Millito and the Argentines.

Right: Ben Olsen (right) was hounded by Sebastian Battaglia throughout the first half.

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An outclassed U.S. team failed in its bid to make it three victories in a row against Argentina.

Before the game, it was described as a challenge. After the fact, it was termed a lesson.

Whatever the phraseology and regardless of which players the teams did or didn't have, a 1-0 U.S. defeat to Argentina Feb. 8 in the Orange Bowl illustrated a cultural and competitive gap.

Argentina scored early and pressed often to keep a disjointed and dispirited U.S. squad shackled for most of the game.

"We need to do a better job keeping the ball," said Landon Donovan, who started up top and moved to midfield yet always looked out of place. "When we got it, we were scared and kind of timid and didn't want to make a chance of making a bad pass and give the ball away. It's all because we were tired. We were chasing the ball so much that it just wears you out."

Only in the final quarter of an hour did the Americans display any rhythm as they strove to replicate victories over the three-time World Cup champion in 1995 (3-0 at the Copa America) and 1999 (1-0).

A 2-1 win over Jamaica four days later in Kingston restored some pride but couldn't save the sting of being outplayed by a team of youngsters able to count their international caps on one hand.

Against an all-MLS selection still two months short of the regular season, Marcelo Bielsa's youngsters from River Plate, Boca

Juniors and Independiente, the elite of Argentine soccer, displayed the traditional traits of toughness, skill, and fearlessness.

"They were pressing 100 miles an hour everywhere, and all of their offense was off of our turnovers and their ability to press the ball in our half," said midfielder Pablo Mastroeni, who for the first time played against his native country. "We wanted to avoid that, but we weren't doing a good job of stepping up and putting pressure on their back line when we didn't have the ball. It was a lax effort at both ends, real lackadaisical."

Eight years ago, then-coach David Passarella sent out a second-string team with a Copa America quarterfinal place already assured and paid the price. Four years later, both teams fielded solid lineups, and Coach Bruce Arena racked up an impressive win in his return to RFK Stadium, where he won two MLS titles with D.C. United.

None of the Americans who had played in those two victories took part in the Orange Bowl encounter.

Ben Olsen, returning from a two-year battle with recurring ankle problems, drew the sticky assignment of midfield playmaker behind Donovan and Clint Mathis. Which of three played poorest is a tough call, but it was Olsen — squeezed and buffeted from all angles and harassed by Sebastian Battaglia — that Arena yanked at halftime.

"Our passing failed us," said Olsen. "Just simple 15-yard passes. They weren't the right weight."

In '95, a scrappy, determined U.S. team beat the Argentines at their own game by throwing themselves into tackles and battling for every ball. In the RFK triumph Kasey Keller saved a penalty and Joe-Max Moore smashed home a shot with three minutes left.

But in the 2003 edition, Luis Gonzalez chipped a ball over keeper Tim Howard after a deft one-two with Andres D'Alessandro. Nine minutes into the match, the chase began.

"It was definitely a new experience to see the new midfield and dynamic of the Argentinian team, how they were so fluid and moved so well," said Mastroeni. "This is just our second game [of 2003]. They were much fitter and the game was going way too fast to solve the problems I was having. I've never been in a game with that kind of pace before." ■



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