

## **“HOW THE US TEAM’S PERFORMANCE IN THE WORLD CUP DIRECTLY RELATES TO PENN LEGACY’S PHILOSOPHIES”**

There is no doubt that this year's World Cup in Brazil has thrilled us all, especially all the excitement around the US team in all 4 of their games. The national team seemed to capture the hearts and minds of the whole nation, and not just those of the soccer world. Their games were full of tension and drama with twists and turns that only this great sport can conjure up. The extra time against Belgium felt like a roller coaster ride by the end and will live long in our memories.

As a spectator and a fan I thought the US games were everything I could have hoped for. However, as a coach and soccer analyst (myself and some of our coaches are taking part in a WC webinar series for the NSCAA) we have to look at the performances a little differently, and there is no doubt that the US team was missing key elements that separate the top teams from the rest.

For example, the US team completed an average of **419** passes per game. Chile, who arguably played some of the most entertaining soccer in the tournament, averaged **463** completed passes per game, while Germany had a grand total of **588!** The US averaged **10.3** attempts on goal per game, while Holland and Germany averaged **15** each. Chile averaged only **9.5** attempts on goal, but scored 6 goals to 5 for the US. Where the US beat every team in the tournament was in the distance covered in each game, with a whopping average of **77** miles per game (remember one of those games was in almost unbearable heat and humidity in Manaus). Split among 10 field players that works out at about 7.7 miles each!

Now, I understand that statistics can be used to draw many conclusions, but it is my opinion that those listed above prove that the US is a very hard working team that struggled to create chances in the final third of the pitch, and also struggled to possess the ball (especially when they needed to most). In the Belgium game, the US allowed Belgium to get off a staggering 38 attempts on goal, but it could be argued that every US defender actually played very well, and of course Tim Howard was beyond exceptional in goal. The problem was further up the pitch, where the US midfielders and forwards consistently coughed up the ball through poor touches and misplaced passes, especially under pressure. Jermaine Jones, for example, who was praised by every commentator as arguably the best field player

for the US, had a pass completion rate of just 63% over the 4 games. For a central midfielder that is really, really poor.

So how does all of this relate to Penn Legacy's philosophies? Here is where I will go out on a limb and probably upset some folks, but it is my sincere belief that US players, on a national level in the World Cup, and on a local level in youth soccer, are missing out on mastering the key element of *comfort on the ball*. Why? Because there is a relentless pursuit for winning games, for winning trophies, and for getting to the top of rankings in this country. When 9 year olds in other countries are simply playing and enjoying the game, American kids are heading to other states to compete in tournaments that will result in 4 games in 2 days in order to win it all. In just about every soccer tournament I have ever attended I can honestly say the final is always the worst game of the weekend in terms of quality, simply because the kids are exhausted and thus their quality of play obviously drops. This mentality also leads to coaches “coaching to win”, something that is becoming an incredibly destructive force in youth soccer today.

At Penn Legacy, while we will never be able to change this overall mentality that has become part of youth soccer culture, we can adapt and try to keep the focus in our younger ages on skill development and game awareness. Make no mistake, the game will always be competitive, and the kids will always keep score, but results should be absolutely secondary to skill development. When the players reach an age (say 14 years old) where the games are more important and tactics can now be fully comprehended by the players, then the competition element is also stepped up a notch, and rightly so. But the quality of play should also improve because the players have spent the last few years focusing on developing their skills. Our coaches are acutely mindful of not falling into the trap of coaching to win. Don't get me wrong, all of us want success for our teams, and results are a clear indicator of that, but not necessarily the **purest** one. Our hope, as a coaching staff, is that results come as a by-product of how our teams actually play the game. If our players feel comfortable on the ball, are confident about receiving the ball, and can create time on the ball because of their first touch, then they can make better decisions. Good decisions and quality execution are key ingredients to playing great games of soccer. Put that with the workrate and determination shown by the US national team in their WC games and I can guarantee that our teams will play attractive, entertaining soccer and most likely win plenty of games as well!

In short, we need to allow our young players to play and train in an environment that is free of the pressures of results. The benefits will be seen and felt if we are patient. This is where our players and parents must sit back and trust the philosophies of the club, and look bigger picture. White teams, black teams, State Cups, GotSoccer rankings, all of these things mean absolutely nothing when stacked up against **PLAYER DEVELOPMENT**. If we can get that balance right on a consistent basis, and have our players, parents and coaches all in agreement that player development trumps all else, then we truly will be successful. If that message spreads and is adopted by other clubs and becomes the norm in youth soccer, then I really do fancy the US team's chances in the next few World Cups.

Seamus.

Postscript:

All statistics used in the piece were taken from the official FIFA findings.

For the record, Ireland, my country, would probably not have run as much as the US team, and would have given the ball away a lot more, had they even qualified for the World Cup, so please don't think of me as some sort of lecturing foreigner!