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Reyna: Youth system overhaul holds U.S. soccer hopes

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MILWAUKEE -- Claudio Reyna was a long way from the glare and glamour of the World Cup, sitting in a folding chair beside a patchy suburban soccer field and eating a boxed lunch.

The former U.S. national team captain watched intently as a youth academy team from Major League Soccer's New York Red Bulls took on the Dallas Texans, a top club team. The match was part of the U.S. Soccer Federation's "Finals Week," a tournament that brought some of the nation's best teenage teams to Milwaukee this past week.

As the youth technical director for U.S. Soccer, Reyna is leading the federation's push to identify and nurture talented players at an early age. Reyna says player development doesn't happen by accident in countries such as Spain, Netherlands, Germany and Brazil. Superstar Lionel Messi didn't fall out of the sky one day, he was groomed at Barcelona's legendary La Masia academy.

In hopes of getting the U.S. to that level, Reyna is borrowing ideas from soccer's powerhouse countries and clubs to change the way American kids learn to play.

"It's going to happen with a real, collective plan," Reyna said. "No way is it just going to happen. It's not happening in the other countries just like that, they're not just rolling out the balls. It's a real high level of progressing and evolving, and it's going to be the same thing here. We're going to have to make some real big steps to catch up with the world, and have any chance to compete with the rest of the world on a consistent basis."

As the U.S. women's team prepared for today's World Cup title game against Japan, Reyna said he sees a path for the U.S. to reach similar heights in the men's game -- just not overnight. While the men's team has played itself back into international relevancy and had some big moments over the past two decades, Reyna wants a new generation of players who can take the U.S. from good to great.

"The possibility to influence and make youth players better is what I like, because they can make big steps at these ages, and that's very important," Reyna said. "And it's something that I just enjoy more, because there's a greater need for it. It's very, very important that we take on this challenge in a serious way. Clearly, we're not with the best teams in the world at the moment. We always look at it that way: How do we close the gap?"

Drawing on his experience as a player and ideas from his contacts at top teams around the world, including Barcelona manager Pep Guardiola, Reyna established an official coaching curriculum for U.S. Soccer.

About 100 pages long, it outlines the way the U.S. wants to play -- retaining possession with quick one- and two-touch passes and attacking, like Barca or Spain's national team -- and provides age-specific guidelines for coaches. The curriculum will be put in place primarily through U.S. Soccer's partnerships with elite youth clubs and development academies across the country.

A couple of concepts could raise eyebrows.

While today's kids might play four or five games in a weekend tournament, Reyna wants more practice and fewer games.

And in a culture obsessed with winning, Reyna says coaches, especially with younger kids, should worry less about the score and more about playing the "right way." A team of 12-year-olds might be able to win 1-0 with conservative, defensive play. But that doesn't help them improve.

"More than anything, we want to see attacking soccer," Reyna said. "For so long, I think the emphasis coaches have been putting on is organizing, defending, making teams that are difficult to beat first.

"Now we want to shift, to see the teams that can really outplay the other team, dominate the game in an offensive way. We notice all those things, and there's some very good examples and other clubs that have a long way to go, but that's fine. We just wanted to put a little bit of a vision on what we wanted it to look like."

Former MLS player Chris Klein, now senior director of the Los Angeles Galaxy's youth academy, brings up an example: For a young goalkeeper, it might be safer and easier to kick the ball as far as he can down the field after making a save. But on creative, attacking teams, the keeper rolls the ball to a defender and players pass it up the field.

"Sometimes the goalie's going to roll the ball out, the defender's going to make a bad pass and a goal's going to get scored on them," Klein said. "What we want to do is, we want to encourage and say, 'This is what we want you to do, let's try it again, so that you're under pressure and we can continue to play that,' instead of yelling at little Tommy and ripping him out of the game."

Youth academies have sprouted in MLS over the past few years, and Klein said the Galaxy have invested heavily in development.

Galaxy scouts track kids as young as 9 in the Los Angeles area, looking at a player's ability with the ball and feel for the game instead of just finding the biggest and fastest kids. And while it can cost thousands of dollars for a kid to play on a club team, Galaxy officials don't charge the academy players they choose, prioritizing the ability to play over the ability to pay.

"We wanted to remove economics from the situation, which is a stumbling block and has hurt our game, quite frankly," Klein said.

Youth development efforts are beginning to show results in MLS: The Galaxy signed one of its academy products this year, 16-year-old forward Jack McBean. And FC Dallas' academy might be the most fertile in the league, already producing a handful of players.

The goal of uncovering an "American Messi" remains unfulfilled, but a sharper focus on development makes it more likely that a player with such potential will now be recognized -- and trained.

"Messi, at a young age, went to Barcelona and he was nurtured in the right environment," Klein said. "So that now he is the best player in the world. Now, he has a tremendous amount of God-given ability, and he does a lot of things. I'm not saying that it's all coaching. But the environment he was put in at Barcelona from a young age allowed him to get to this point. And I think that's where we've missed the boat."

Online:

US Soccer curriculum: <http://www.ussoccer.com/Coaches/Coaching-Education/Coaching-Home.aspx>

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