

Hispanic coach is big move for U.S.

by Mark Zeigler

In the 20 months that he has been president of U.S. Soccer, Sunil Gulati has fired and hired the men's national coach, fired the women's national coach and launched a search for a replacement, and attempted to overhaul an unwieldy youth club system.

Nothing, though, might be more important for the future of the American game than what he did recently, when he hired an under-17 men's national coach.

Gulati hired Wilmer Cabrera, who played in two World Cups for Colombia and has lived in the United States less than five years. Who speaks Spanish as his first language and heavily accented English as his second. Who grew up playing a brand of soccer that puts a premium on technical skills ahead of the speed or strength or size so coveted by U.S. youth coaches.

"It is a positive step forward for the soccer federation and the sport," Gulati said in a media teleconference last week, "when we've got someone like Wilmer, a Latino, in a position where he can impact the game at a high level. He's earned that right. I think it's overdue from our perspective."

And there you have it. A U.S. Soccer president admitting, finally, that maybe his federation has neglected the massive Hispanic community in this country and its immense soccer resources. There are only a handful of Hispanic players on U.S. national teams. And Cabrera, 40, is believed to be the first Latino head coach of a U.S. men's national team at least since the 1980s, and perhaps ever.

The news was tempered a bit by the second paragraph of the news release announcing Cabrera's hire, which noted that Thomas Rongen will be retained as under-20 men's national coach through the 2009 World Championships.

Rongen is a nice enough guy, but in American soccer circles he has become something of a running joke - the enduring symbol of the federation's penchant for recycling the same old faces among its key coaching positions, with the same old ideas and the same old philosophies about player selection. This is Rongen's third tour with the under-20s.

The Cabrera appointment, then, represents progress. It is a baby step in a sweeping project that probably requires a decade and millions of dollars, but a quiet first step nonetheless.

What remains to be seen is how much control Cabrera has over the under-17 residency program based in Bradenton, Fla. The current crop of players was selected by his predecessor, John Hackworth, who left to join Bob Bradley's staff with the full national team. But selection of future classes will fall under Cabrera's administration, and it will be interesting to see if he starts picking technically gifted players who, under the current paradigm, are deemed too small or too slow.

Or put another way: Will Cabrera venture into the barrios to unearth the next Carlos Valderrama, his former Colombian teammate who rarely left the center circle and wasn't known for his tackling prowess but who could change an entire game with a mere flick of his right ankle?

If nothing else, though, Cabrera figures to add one ingredient noticeably absent from American soccer: raw passion for the game and all its glorious possibilities.

The typical American player goes to practice with his team, is drilled on the responsibilities of his position and then goes home to play X-Box on his high-definition TV. Most can't tell you which European club Kaka plays for; many have never even attended a professional match.

Except in Hispanic and other immigrant neighborhoods, where the pickup game still reigns supreme. Where there are no coaches or referees hovering nearby with a whistle. Where kids can try stuff without fear of repercussion. Where they go home when it's dark and watch Chivas or America or Barcelona on TV.

"When I started to play soccer, for me it was the only option to try to change my family's life," said Cabrera, who began his pro career at Santa Fe de Bogata at age 17. "It was just to survive. This is not the case here in the United States. You don't have to play soccer to survive ...

"Since I moved to this country (in 2003), I've had a goal. First, learn English. Then try to share my experience with the kids over here."

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