

Sweden's Sundhage to be U.S. women's coach

by Mark Zeigler

U.S. Soccer did Tuesday what many of its most influential players suggested 2 1/2 years ago, hiring Sweden's Pia Sundhage as the first foreign coach of its vaunted women's national team.

"It's a unique moment for many of us, in many respects," Sundhage said by phone from Sweden.

Sundhage, 47, is Sweden's all-time leading scorer with 71 goals in 146 games and has since coached on three continents, including a stint in the WUSA and more recently as an assistant for China. Federation President Sunil Gulati said he can't remember a coaching search where "we've had such universal acclaim for a candidate."

Which prompts the obvious question: Why wasn't she hired the last time the U.S. women's job came open?

Sundhage (pronounced Soond-hahg-eh) was among the finalists to replace April Heinrichs in early 2005, and some of the biggest names on the U.S. team, past and present, told the federation she was their first choice. Dr. Bob Contiguglia, the federation president at the time, ignored the advice and chose Greg Ryan instead, and we all know how that worked out.

The U.S. women looked overmatched at the recent World Cup in China, and that was before Ryan infamously switched goalkeepers on the eve of the semifinals. Brazil beat the Americans 4-0 in that match, the worst loss in the 22-year history of the program, and Ryan was gone a few weeks later.

Gulati was on the search committee to identify Heinrich's successor. The committee, several members have confirmed, never reached the point of making a recommendation to Contiguglia.

It didn't take long, though, for Gulati to approach Sundhage after he announced Ryan's contract would not be renewed for 2008. That same day, there were reports in European media that Sundhage had already been contacted.

"I was part of a committee (in 2005), and in the end ... one person gets to make a decision," Gulati said Tuesday. "Dr. Contiguglia was the previous president. He made a decision. We made a different decision. I don't think it makes any sense to look back and discuss that."

The search committee this time consisted of Gulati, U.S. Soccer Secretary General Dan Flynn and retired great Mia Hamm. Gulati estimated that most top players were directly or indirectly consulted by the panel. A pool of 10 candidates was pared to three, and Sundhage emerged as the clear consensus.

If there was a surprise in Tuesday's announcement, it was that Sundhage agreed to a one-year contract through the 2008 Summer Olympics in China with, as Gulati put it, "an arrangement that allows us to extend it for a number of years." The next World Cup is 2011 in Germany.

But Sundhage sounded confident she can effect change quickly, adding sophistication to what became a highly predictable and unimaginative attack under Ryan, bent on banging the ball forward at every opportunity. Most U.S. opponents in the recent World Cup had the majority of the possession.

"It's about being comfortable on the ball," said Sundhage, who will hold her first training camp next month. "I don't think that's too big a step, but it's an important step. Nowadays the defenders are so good. ... If the whole team is capable to keep possession and find the right moment to penetrate, that will be very successful.

"It's about sometimes high tempo and sometimes low tempo."

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