

Pencil in the U.S. as a candidate for 2018 Cup

by Mark Zeigler

Belgium and the Netherlands have submitted preliminary paperwork to FIFA headquarters to co-host the 2018 World Cup, formally opening what promises to be a particularly spirited battle for the biggest prize in global sport this side of the Olympics.

FIFA announced last October that, starting in 2018, it is ending the policy of rotating the World Cup among continents - Asia in 2002, Europe in 2006, Africa in 2010, South America in 2014. The theory is that competition breeds excellence, and limiting bids to a single region was stifling that.

Preliminary indications are that it's working.

England is expected to bid for 2018. So is the United States, the 1994 host. So are Australia and China and Russia. So, possibly, are Spain and Mexico and Japan.

"We're evaluating the process and we'll make a decision by June 1 this year or shortly thereafter," U.S. Soccer President Sunil Gulati says. "We think bringing the World Cup back to the U.S. would be terrific both for FIFA and American soccer. We also recognize that there are a lot of other top-level competitors."

That's the official stance, but, like everything else in the complex and often convoluted world of international soccer, there is far more to it than that.

WILL THE U.S. BID?

The answer lies between probably and definitely.

The reason for the delay is twofold. The sooner you reveal your intentions, the sooner you must kowtow to FIFA and the 24 members of its executive committee ahead of their 2011 vote for the 2018 host. And the longer you wait, the more you can align support behind the scenes and ensure your bid is a legitimate contender.

One thing in Gulati's favor is that FIFA wants a U.S. bid - not because the United States would necessarily win but because it would be a highly competitive bid that ups the ante for everyone else.

IS ENGLAND THE FAVORITE?

It is ... in the eyes of the media.

It has the history (the birthplace of modern soccer), it has the stadiums (imagine a semifinal at Old Trafford and a final at Wembley), and in stealing the vote for the 2012 Summer Olympics from Paris it showed a capacity for insider politics.

But England may not have as much private support as everyone thinks.

Last summer, FIFA Vice President Jack Warner said out loud what many have been whispering for years: "Nobody in Europe likes England. England, which invented the sport, has never had any impact on world football. England at no time has had the love and support of Europe. For Europe, England is an irritant."

The latest example: The English Premier League proposal to play regular-season games overseas was unveiled without first consulting foreign soccer federations - or FIFA.

Suffice to say, that didn't go over well.

DIDN'T HE CHANGE HIS MIND?

Earlier this month, Warner told Sky Sports News:

"It is England's time. The fact is, they invented this sport. They last held the World Cup 42 years ago. ... I have been critical of the (English) F.A. There seems to be some kind of situation where England was marginalized, but if England's time is 2018 I would be happy for them."

This was spun as an endorsement for England. But listen to his words closely. He says he would be "happy" if England hosts, but nowhere does he say he would throw his considerable political weight behind it.

Warner also is president of CONCACAF, the confederation that encompasses the United States and Mexico. Wouldn't he support a bid from that region first?

WILL MEXICO BID?

Probably not. It already has hosted the World Cup twice, in 1970 and '86, and Mexican officials are well connected within FIFA. But it doesn't make sense for the CONCACAF region to divide loyalties by submitting two separate bids, and the United States figures to be the stronger candidate.

WHO IS THE DARK HORSE?

Keep an eye on Spain, which may bid alone or jointly with Portugal. Spain has arguably the best domestic league in the world and last hosted the World Cup in 1982, and Portugal put on a fabulous show in hosting the 2004 European Championships.

After the organizational headaches of South Africa in 2010 and Brazil in 2014, FIFA's Eurocentric executive committee may retreat to a safe harbor for 2018. And that safe harbor is continental Europe.

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