

Outspoken Wynalda lets famous soccer hater have it

by Mark Zeigler

Eric Wynalda has called Los Angeles Galaxy general manager (and former national-team roommate) Alexi Lalas a "liar." He said U.S. national coach Bruce Arena "screwed up this World Cup" moments after elimination last summer and demanded his immediate dismissal. He said potential Arena replacement Juergen Klinsmann is "not a good guy." He once said Freddy Adu was playing so poorly that "he may really be 14."

And now he has rattled a stick in the beehive of the sport's biggest "hater" in this country. He ripped sports talk show guru Jim Rome. It probably wasn't quite the way Wynalda intended, or in the proper forum with the proper array of verbiage. And it nearly cost the U.S. national team's all-time leading scorer his job as the chief soccer analyst for ABC and ESPN.

It did get him suspended for this past Saturday's Major League Soccer opener on ABC, along with, a network source says, an undisclosed fine after execs decided against firing him. Julie Foudy, who was supposed to host the pregame and halftime shows, sat next to commentator Dave O'Brien on Saturday instead and provided color analysis during the Colorado Rapids' 2-1 victory against D.C. United on a cold, blustery day at their new stadium.

But Wynalda, already beloved for his candid nature on an otherwise vanilla menu of American soccer commentators, figures to achieve a sort of cult status among soccer loyalists for articulating what many of them have been thinking for years - although perhaps not so explicitly.

Some background:

Wynalda's comments about Rome appeared on fulhamusa.com, a Web site for U.S.-based fans of English club Fulham. According to the author, Wynalda granted him an impromptu interview at MacDinton's Irish Pub in Tampa, Fla., where the United States was playing Ecuador on March 24. Wynalda was at the bar as part of a charity function.

The article's title: "Beers with Wynalda: Fulham fan interviews U.S. Soccer's most outspoken analyst and critic."

Toward the end of a lengthy interview, Wynalda is quoted making a sexually derogatory remark about Rome and adding: "He should be very afraid, because I'm the kind of guy, if I get too many drinks in me, I will club his (rear)."

The Q&A was posted on fulhamusa.com on April 1. It took three days to catch Rome's attention.

"What are you so wound up about?" Rome said on his radio show last week. "You act like I ripped your Capri Sun or orange slices. Threatening me? You should be thanking me. Without me, nobody knows who you and the rest of the Mullet Nation are."

Rome, who has a TV show that airs on ESPN, continued: "I don't hate American soccer. I hate all soccer. I hate all soccer equally, no matter where it's played or who plays it. ... Thank you for making my point for me. Thank you for illustrating once again to the entire world just how ridiculous soccer and soccer players are."

Wynalda was listening and phoned in to apologize, explaining that fans in the bar brought up Rome's famed dislike of soccer and he was merely responding to their provocations. (Rome accepted the apology.)

"I'm certainly not happy this is out there for public consumption," Wynalda said on air. "It was meant in jest. It was just a joke. It was taken way too far. ... This was clearly my mistake, my bad."

Fulhamusa.com reiterated a few days later that the interview was "on the record" and tape recorded. ABC declined to discuss any suspension, but a statement from Wynalda appeared on ESPN.com in which he says: "These remarks were not meant for public use, but that's my mistake. I totally regret this. I'm embarrassed by it."

Soccer fans, though, may have a different "take," to use Rome's parlance for expressing an opinion. Rome is legendary for his repeated bashing of what he considers a "communist sport," from his references to MLS Cup as the "Capri Sun Cup" to the "happy news" when his son quit soccer.

And other than a Nike commercial loosely based on Rome's soccer rants, no one of any standing in the American soccer establishment has had the chutzpah to confront him.

Contacted by phone, the usually loquacious Wynalda said: "I've been told not to discuss this story."

The irony, of course, is Wynalda probably garnered more national media attention for MLS and ABC last week than any of the six season openers did, if for no other reason than it might coax "mainstream" sports fans listening to Rome's popular show to sample Wynalda's outspoken brand of commentary.

An ESPN spokesman said Wynalda will return to the booth tomorrow for the first of ESPN2's "MLS Primetime Thursday" matches, between the Galaxy and FC Dallas at 7 p.m. from The Home Depot Center in Carson. Figure Rome, who lives in Los Angeles, won't be there.

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