

A photograph of Shane Stay, a soccer player, wearing a red and white striped US national team jersey. He is looking off to the side with a focused expression. The background is a stylized American flag with stars and stripes.

SHANE STAY

WHY  
AMERICAN  
SOCCER  
ISN'T THERE YET

MEYER  
& MEYER  
SPORT

Shane Stay

# **Why American Soccer Isn't There Yet**

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# Preface

I was recently coaching at an American youth soccer camp. The kids were six to eight years old. Before everything got started and the kids were running around, I instructed a six-year-old shooting on goal. He had a friend playing goalie, who was also six. I was showing the shooter side volleys, and he was slowly getting the hang of it. However, each time the goalie would throw the ball back to me, he would gun it like a baseball, forcing me to catch it in self-defense. I told him, "Next time, throw it harder." And the next time he threw the ball harder. Again, I told him, "Hey, next time, throw it harder." And he did. Then it hit me: This kid has no idea what sarcasm is yet. He took my instruction literally, and he threw the ball harder each time.

It reminds me that kids are like little computer chips, waiting for information to be stored. So exactly what information we give them is very important. At younger ages, children will learn a second language with more ease than learning a second language as an adult. Their young minds are growing. They are impressionable, and what you say will sink in. In terms of soccer, it is very important we give them the correct information.

Later that day in camp, an instructor was telling the kids to dribble around and try to kick other players' balls away from them. So they all gathered in a general space and had fun trying. At this point, the instructor stopped them and asked, "Why are you all bunched up?" He pointed out there

was a lot of open space “over here” and “over there.” One thought hit me: *If they all run away to open space, how are they to knock each other’s ball away?*

Later, in another activity, the instructor told the players to treat the ball like a hot potato—get rid of it! He told the players they were all bunched up. He told them not to pass into congested areas.

Calling the ball a “hot potato” is the wrong message. We do not want the players to treat the ball like a time bomb. We want them to be comfortable with it.

Telling the players they are bunched up and not to pass into congested areas is wrong. As older players, the defense makes all areas on the field congested. The game of soccer is playing skillfully and confidently in congested areas and then finding an open area. Once you find that open area, then the defense will collapse, and you will have to play skillfully and confidently in congested areas again. Goals will come either from skillful play in congested areas or from finding a player in an open area.

To put this wrong information in the brain’s of children is a big problem with American soccer. They keep this engrained in their psyches—their souls, if you will—for the rest of their lives. As do their parents, the coaches, and other observers.

At a young age, we need to stress to American soccer players the importance of dribbling, controlling the ball,

juggling, passing, technique, and playing confidently in congested areas, while enjoying the game.

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# Introduction

The United States men's national team will inevitably lose early in the World Cup, and then the questions will begin: What are we doing wrong? How can we get better?

American soccer will someday be a consistent power like Brazil, Germany, and Argentina. However, in the past and currently, the majority of American players have some sort of built-in counteracting mechanism when it comes to creativity on the field. How can the men's national team get over this? How can America, as a soccer-playing nation, get over this?

To improve soccer in America there are many things that will need to change. In order to answer this creativity problem America faces in soccer, the following is a broad guideline to a few salient points that will need to be recognized.

In order to improve as a soccer nation, we must:

1. Encourage players to dribble. [1]
2. Encourage players to be creative.
3. Encourage players to improvise with each other.
4. Have players practice shooting inside a racquetball court.
5. Construct futsal courts and beach soccer courts in the major cities around the country.



6. Have players play futsal and beach soccer as much as outdoor soccer.
7. Emphasize passing the ball back to the player that just passed to you.
8. Ensure all four defenders are skilled.
9. Emphasize with the defenders that everything starts in the backcourt.
10. Emphasize with the defenders that offensive success depends on the backcourt.
11. Encourage inside defenders to study film of Franz Beckenbauer.
12. Encourage outside defenders to attack, attack, attack, dribble, dribble, dribble, and shoot, shoot, shoot (studying film of Jorginho and Cafu).
13. De-emphasize crossing.
14. Emphasize posting up forwards with their back to goal and improvising.
15. Emphasize playing across the field.

Because soccer in the United States is growing more popular, the next generation of dads will pass on skills and confidence to their sons. Major League Soccer (MLS) will give kids hope and confidence in their personal future and a decent example of how to play.

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# This Book

From youth levels all the way to the national team, the United States has a lot of work ahead in order to become a world power in soccer. A good measure of quality soccer around the world has a lot to do with World Cup success.

Strangely enough, despite the poor reputation of American soccer, the United States reached third place in the 1930 World Cup. For soccer enthusiasts, this is no more than a peculiar footnote. Then there was the 1950 “triumph” when the United States defeated England by a score of 1-0. In the 1990 World Cup, Cameroon defeated the defending world champions, Argentina, by a score of 1-0. In the 2010 World Cup, Switzerland somehow defeated Spain, the eventual champions, by a score of 1-0. Underdogs have been known to win a few games here and there. Was the 1950 American victory over England a fluke? Following the 1950 World Cup, the United States did not make a World Cup appearance until 1990! There was great excitement for this 1990 campaign, as the American team fought its way through the trenches of competitive CONCACAF qualification rounds, ousting foes like Bermuda, El Salvador, and Trinidad and Tobago. There is a great deal of catching up needed, and the United States has a long way to go.

Brazil leads the world with five World Cup championships (1958, 1962, 1970, 1994, 2002). In total, Brazil has seven final game appearances. Italy has four World Cup

championships (1934, 1938, 1982, 2006), with six final game appearances. Germany has three World Cup championships (1954, 1974, 1990), with seven final game appearances. Argentina has two World Cup championships (1978, 1986), with four final game appearances. Holland has three World Cup final game appearances. Spain has one World Cup championship (2010). Despite only one World Cup championship, Spain has produced a talented group of players in this current era (2006-2013) dominated by FC Barcelona, which has a style of play that creates good ball possession, chemistry between players, attacking defenders, confident dribblers, and eye-pleasing combination play and also has influences rooted in the traditions of the Dutch, Brazilians, and Germans. Combining all of these playing traits leads to consistent success.

England invented the game and has made only one World Cup final game appearance. England has inundated the United States with coaches, and America has patterned its game off the ideals of English soccer. Aside from attaining an anomalous third place title, the United States has *barely* made the quarter-finals. *Barely* sneaking out of group play creates a whirlwind of excitement in American soccer fans. This is not a good thing.

By following the trends of English soccer, America is in a deep hole. In essence, America has no World Cup track record worth mentioning, and the way to create international success is to admit defeat and rethink every approach to the game.

This book is absolutely critical of American soccer: The play, coaching, and system at large. I am a former player and coach. Though my early coaching was only as side employment while attending college, during my “George Best” years (for those of you who do not know, George Best, a player from Northern Ireland, was quite the partier), it should be noted that my playing was sidelined by nobody’s fault but my own. Though I eventually played professional soccer, I had many ups and downs as a player, which I will expound in some detail; however, I believe my experiences as a player, in part, have shaped my outlook and understanding of the game.

As a player growing up, I was mainly a center midfielder (though, I could play any position when needed) and played with many teams, including a state championship side with Busch Soccer Club and two high school state championships out of Collinsville, Illinois. Between the ages of 13 and 14, I was fortunate to stay with a friend and play within the youth system of SC Internacional in Porte Alegre, Brazil. At 15, I was co-captain of an East St. Louis All-Star team that won the Holland Cup championship (we were the first U.S. team to do so). Following high school, I passed on playing in college (the George Best years), as I was burned out from playing my whole life, fed up with soccer politics, and needed a break. Instead of playing in college, which is the immediate path for most American players, I shifted around, playing wherever I was at the time. I was horribly out of shape, owing to drinking and smoking, which as an asthmatic is not good for a running sport like soccer. (Table tennis maybe, but soccer, no.)

Some coaches that I came into contact with would ask me to play with their team, but I never did. It was at this time, during my early twenties, that I got a taste of writing; I had a short story published in a national magazine, and I felt like soccer would get in the way of the writing lifestyle, which in my case meant staying out of shape.

When I was about 26 or 27, I felt my biological soccer-clock ticking and concentrated on my fitness, quitting the drinking and smoking. I played pick-up wherever I could and got in the top semi-pro outdoor league in San Francisco. Following that I tried out with a team in the Major Indoor Soccer League and got an invitation to play with them (which I had to pass on for business reasons, namely a restaurant I had recently opened with a business partner in the San Francisco area). Eventually, after establishing myself in the restaurant industry, I began working on my MA in Communications. While finishing my master's degree, I played a few days a week in the Premier Arena Soccer League (semi-pro indoor) and played in the All-Star game. Roughly two years after that, despite nagging injuries, I played in the Professional Arena Soccer League for the St. Louis Illusion at the young age of 32. It was a scattered time in my life with a lot happening at once. I owned a restaurant, I was putting together a side company called Leaf Dressing, finishing up my master's degree, and I had been concentrating on stand-up comedy and working clubs regularly. I didn't say much to the soccer crowd or the comedy crowd about the other. I preferred it that way. In many respects, they are polar opposites, and forcing the two together would be like playing a Madonna

CD in rural Pakistan. On a Friday night after three shows at Zanies Comedy Club in Chicago, I drove through the night to St. Louis for a morning workout with the soccer team Comedy Central and then flew back up to Chicago for the Saturday night shows. I was exhausted but intent on keeping the two things operational. It was around October when I was hosting Zanies that John Mulaney, a writer for *Saturday Night Live*, was the headliner. What John represents in comedy is what a young soccer player should try to embody on his travels to the top. As a kid, John was in an improv group, then began stand-up comedy in college, which led to an internship at *Comedy Central*, which turned into performing regularly and writing for *Saturday Night Live*. And, it helps that he has some talent. Kids playing soccer in America should follow a similar routine. They should attempt to play with the best club team, find individual coaching if possible, concentrate in high school, aspire to play in college, and work hard to get a chance professionally. Do things always work out perfectly? Of course not. It is important to have a goal, however, and staying focused will create strong habits, build character, and lead to good things.

Though I neglected the best years for my soccer potential (my twenties), I would not do anything differently. I was older. I set a personal goal: I wanted to play pro. People around me thought I was crazy. "You haven't played an official game for 10 years!" a friend told me. They were right. On top of that, I was showing up to a pro tryout as a "cold call" or a "walk on." I did not know any of the

coaches; I was just a stranger showing up. And I had a great time doing it.

To this experience, in both playing and observing, I can attest to the difficulty of players at the pro level to showcase their creativity on the field. This is a difficulty that American players in particular face both at home and abroad. A huge issue in American soccer is the youth players are stifled creatively and not encouraged to dribble.

A high school team, a college team, and a pro team all have a pecking order to their system. There is already “the play-maker,” or the guy that is thought of as “the goal-scorer,” and for a player to be new to a team, it is difficult for that player to show off, if you will. Unless recruited as a play-maker, or a goal-scorer, it is a challenge for a new player to shine.

Many talented players around the world (who, for the sake of argument, are not American) go to a pro team and eventually get traded because it did not work out. This is a typical outcome. Soccer, being a team game, is based on chemistry. New players to a team might have a hard time becoming part of the team chemistry. These players usually have an opportunity to be traded and try their luck with another franchise.

Within the American system, it is extremely competitive to get professional experience. This is because *American* players are not heavily recruited around the world. You do not overhear coaches in Italy saying to one another, “You know what? We need more American players.” A Dutch

coach will not lean toward his assistant and say, “Last night I woke up abruptly, and it hit me: We don’t have enough American players!” A Spanish team owner does not say to his manager, “I don’t care if you have to break the law, by the end of the trading deadline, do what you can to find me an *American* center midfielder!”

As a result, there are thousands of U.S. players wanting to play abroad, but only a select few are invited. Therefore, the funnel for competition is very small. Only a couple players get through that funnel. The aftereffect is that thousands of American players are now competing with each other to play professionally in America, and there are only a couple leagues in America that offer professional soccer. Many players fight each other for a chance to play professionally, because no one in the world wants American players. In part, this negatively affects the American style of play. Players tend to play safe, trying to avoid mistakes. When there is heavy competition, mistakes are good reasons for coaches not to favor a player. This means dribbling and creative play are approached cautiously. Across the board in American professional soccer, whether referring to a new player on a team or a player that is established, cautious play becomes the norm because no one wants to lose their spot. Couple this with the soccer belief system in which Americans have been raised—a strong objection to dribbling and the opinion that consistent, aggressive crossing is the best style of play—and you have a boring outcome. I will touch on this later as creativity in American soccer has problems with deep roots, beginning with the youth system.