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Paul Gardner's Soccer Talk is a benefit for Soccer America members.

What's so special -- or stressful -- about coaching the USA?

By Paul Gardner

Bruce Arena, I see, has been speaking up in defense of Bob Bradley. That's nice -- coming to the defense of a friend is always an admirable thing to do.

Even so, it's an odd sort of defense that Arena mounts -- if only because it portrays a "Bradley At Bay" scenario, with poor Bob being flayed alive by an army of -- presumably influential -- critics.

I really don't think that corresponds to reality. Bradley has his critics, for sure. Is there a national team coach anywhere in the world who does not get criticized? Put in that global context, it must be quickly seen that Bradley has what is probably the easiest national team job in the world. Precisely because the pervasive pressure that comes with the job in, say, Italy or England or Argentina or Brazil or Germany, etc., simply does not exist in the USA.

When has Bradley woken up to find that his name is featured in unfriendly banner headlines in all that day's newspapers? When has Bradley been afraid to turn on his television because he doesn't want to hear his name being defamed and his work being trashed? When has he found going out -- i.e. living a normal life -- a problem for fear that he will be recognized and abused?

The very idea of such things happening to a soccer coach in the USA is ludicrous. Bradley also gets the velvet glove treatment from the very people whose job it should be to take him to task when he gets things wrong -- the media. Has Bradley ever faced a hostile press conference? Forget it, I've sat in on enough of these to know that they are pussy-cat affairs. Has he faced even a hostile *question* or two? Maybe -- but he always responds badly. He cannot, in fact, handle criticism.

At a recent conference, tired of his meandering non-answers, I asked him to give me "an unequivocal answer: did he consider the 2010 World Cup campaign a success or a failure?" That was too much for Bradley, who replied, "I'm not going to answer that question, put like that" -- and walked off. And this is the guy who, we were led to believe, was going to coach in the land of the English tabloid press?

In short, Bradley has a very American experience of being a national team coach. That, if I'm understanding Arena correctly, is the way it should be. "You need an American coach ... someone who understands the American way. This country, and soccer in this country, is different to anywhere else."



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Maybe so. But even if I accept that argument *in toto* it really doesn't make a lot of sense because during the past 25 years the only foreign coach the USA has had was Bora Milutinovic, from 1991 to 1995 (I'm not counting Alkis Panagoulis as foreign, as he had already spent time coaching at the club level in the USA). Of the six World Cup teams during that time, five have been coached by Americans.

Their record is neither that good nor that bad. I've no idea whether it would have been better under foreign coaches. I suspect not. It would, of course, depend on *which* foreign coach -- and that is the problem with Arena's "you need an American," because it implies that any American would be better than any foreigner. Highly questionable.

Of no immediate concern, anyway. Bob Bradley is the coach we've got -- is it going to be a case of "second time around, Bob will be better" as Arena predicts? The stats on coaches who are allowed to continue in charge for a second World Cup say no, he is more likely to do worse.

Sunil Gulati is aware of those stats and has chosen to ignore them. Possibly correctly, for soccer stats are notoriously fickle. Even so, listening to Bradley take all the excitement out of the future with his talk of doing more of the same and reducing the sport to merely getting the little details right, is a depressing experience.

Does it matter that Bradley is consistently unable to give us a vision -- in words -- of how he wants his team to play? It ought not to -- no one said you had to be Shakespeare to get the job -- but it would be a lot more inspiring to know exactly where Bradley is taking us.

The worrying thing is that Bradley has already had four years during which to give us a team which ought to accomplish more -- or at least promise more -- than an assured ability to beat its Concacaf opponents. That is not exactly an impossible task. But Bradley has not achieved it.

His team is still -- as the U.S. national team has ever been -- a team in search of a style. There is never any guarantee of consistency from one game to the next. For any sort of success, it needs a lucky break or two. It got that, courtesy of England's goalkeeper, in South Africa. But even then, for further progress, it needed comebacks and last-minute heroics.

Nothing solid is ever going to be built on that fortuitous basis. Bradley, an intelligent man, must surely know that, just as he must surely see that if he doesn't become a good deal more adventurous in his selection of players, then he will preside over another four-year span of average performances followed by a disappointing World Cup.

The same old story, in fact. And that is what makes it so essential that Bradley opens his eyes to the full array of American talent and starts to build a team that has *promise* ... one that looks like a soccer team rather than a souped-up college team.

Can Bradley do that? Possibly. But while he's at work, he may get criticized -- something he has to learn how to handle. The worst thing for him would be Arena's wish about the critics -- "The best thing they can do is shut up. ... Just let him do his job."

So now the coach is to be beyond criticism? No one is allowed to disagree with him? That's strange, coming from Arena, who always did a pretty good job of handling the scraps of criticism that came his way. He knows what Bradley has yet to learn, that a coach who cannot handle criticism is a crippled coach.

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