

Claudio Reyna's U.S. soccer vision

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By Arch Bell | *Special to ESPN.com*



AP Photo/Jeffrey Phelps Can Claudio Reyna improve the U.S. national team by reorganizing youth soccer in America?

Claudio Reyna is busy. Running just a tad late, he scurries across the lobby of a Frisco, Texas, hotel and outstretches his hand to say hello. He'd been stuck on a call he had to take before yet another lunch meeting.

Welcome to Reyna's world, an endless stream of phone calls and meetings because as the youth technical director for U.S. Soccer -- a role in which he oversees its 78 development academies plus all youth national teams -- Reyna wants to make sure that everyone is getting the message

"We need to make changes," Reyna said. "We need to improve as a nation and we need everyone to be developing in the same way."

That sentiment came from Reyna before the U.S. U-23's failure to qualify for the London Olympics. In light of what happened to Caleb Porter's squad against Canada and El Salvador, it rings even more true today. Simply put, if the U.S. wants to ensure that future embarrassments are prevented, a technical overhaul is needed and Reyna is the man leading that charge.

"I think the winning aspect is what has caused some really ugly youth soccer," Reyna said. "Now we're trying to play more out of the back and through the midfield. When I grew up, you played a lot of games but there was less training. The training has to be better and there has to be more of it."

There are plenty of cautionary tales that speak to Reyna's point. For example, Jamie Watson did plenty of winning as a young player. Growing up in the Dallas area, he was usually the best player on the field and earned himself a spot on the U.S. team that reached the quarterfinals of the 2003 U-17 World Cup. Interest in Watson soon cropped up from PSV Eindhoven, but ultimately his lack of technique crippled his chances of joining the Dutch side.

"It wasn't until I was playing with the U-17s that I learned how to keep possession," said Watson, who currently plays for Orlando City SC in USL Pro. "I didn't know anything about working the ball. Kids should be learning that at age 10, not at 16. Claudio is fixing a problem that's been overlooked for the longest time. It will be great for these kids because it will become the new normal."

With senior national team head coach Jurgen Klinsmann's full backing, Reyna is spearheading a new mandate in the coaching curriculum for youth clubs that emphasizes development over winning. The Development Academies are required to adhere to this standard. Should they fail to do so, they risk losing their affiliation with U.S. Soccer.

The change has understandably come with headaches, as some youth club owners have pushed back, but overall Reyna's gospel is getting across.

"Only 40 of our 5,000 players are on our U-16 and U-18 USSF DA rosters," said Rod Favaron, president of Lonestar Soccer Club in Austin, Texas. "That's less than 1 percent of the kids in the club, but the other 99 percent will also get the benefit of consistent and high-quality training using the USSF model. It's too soon to measure the business impact, but I can tell you our parent/player satisfaction is higher after we standardized."

This new curriculum for clubs and academies is also welcomed by many U.S. soccer fans and may soon address the criticism that U.S. players are too robotic on the field. Reyna understands that in addition to the advanced training, there remains an importance in the sandlot-style game in which kids can experiment, much like Clint Dempsey did as a youth playing against Latino kids on the dusty streets of Nacogdoches, Texas.

Another example is futsal, otherwise known as indoor soccer. Played extensively in soccer-rich countries across South America or Europe, futsal provides an organic outlet for young players to learn some of the basic skills on their own without the overbearing reach of parents.

"I think kids should be doing pickup or futsal all the time," Reyna said. "I think it's very important for technique. In Argentina, futsal is what kids play growing up. They get very

comfortable in small spaces with the ball. It's usually less pressure, so they can try things."

This massive undertaking is a passion for the man known as "Captain America," who wore the badge 111 times. Yes, Reyna wants to see the development academies succeed and youth national teams win matches, but the end game is that the countless hours of training put in by coaches and players at all levels should be done with a single goal in mind.

"For any coach or player, the most important team in this country is the national team," Reyna said. "We're not used to that thinking. The national team represents our country in the sport of soccer. That's the attitude nations have around the world. If we have everybody thinking that way, it'll be better for everyone."

Whether Reyna's vision of 11 technically gifted U.S. players in a World Cup match is fulfilled or not remains to be seen. But one thing for sure is that youth soccer in this country will never be the same.

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