

Interview by Mike Woitalla

As U.S. Soccer's Youth Technical Director, **Claudio Reyna** believes a key to improving American player development is convincing more youth clubs to strive for a style of play conducive to nurturing talent. The 78-club U.S. Soccer Development Academy, which kicked off its fifth season this month, is an integral part of the national team program's quest to improve American soccer. We spoke with Reyna about the process ...

SOCCER AMERICA: I'd say that the USA produces many more good players than ever but doesn't produce truly exceptional, creative players at a better rate than it did 20, even 30 years ago. Would you agree?

CLAUDIO REYNA: To a certain degree. There's a bigger pool of players. I like some players who stand out at certain age groups -- whose names I'd rather not mention to keep them level headed. But, absolutely, we could use some more exceptional players.

On the one side the average player has improved over the last 10 to 20 years, but if you look at the top-tier players -- we can definitely push ourselves to increase the number of those, and it's the coaches who can make that happen.

SA: What can coaches do?

CLAUDIO REYNA: We have to make sure we nurture those players in the right way because sometimes they haven't been given a chance -- maybe because of the style of play or because of a particular coach.

I believe a Wesley Sneijder would have never developed in an ugly style of play. He grew up in a country [Netherlands] where he was allowed to flourish and play, and that goes for all the Spanish players, all the great German players, all the great Argentine and Brazilian players.

It really all ties back to style of play -- if we don't make sure it's a good style of play, potentially great players are going to get lost in the helter-skelter, fast type of soccer.

If we encourage a much better style of play, then those players will enjoy playing in that environment and will be able to shine.

In my opinion, sometimes the soccer is quite ugly to watch -- you can't even spot the talented player because he's caught up in that type of game.

That's one of the reasons a better style of play at the youth level will help the individuals coming up.

SA: Thanks to the U.S. Soccer Development Academy, the Federation has influence over 78 clubs who field teams at both the U-15/16 and U-17/18 level. Can you give me an example of what you and the Federation staff look for when evaluating an Academy club?

CLAUDIO REYNA: We look at how a team is trying to play. There are certain styles of play we're trying to get away from.

For example, we're trying to have the teams play quick *but* want to make sure there's a thought process going on. Sometimes we have teams playing quick, but it's very helter-skelter -- and we want to try and

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change that. Sometimes we have teams that play really well with the right ideas in their head, but yet they do it too slow.

SA: Give us an example of a key thing you're looking for when you go to a youth game that reveals the coaches are on the *wrong* track when it comes to style-of-play ...

CLAUDIO REYNA: There are specific topics we talk about from the technical and tactical that we like to see. One, for example, is the emphasis of playing out of the back – from the goalie and the back four.

It takes about 10 or 15 minutes to notice a goalkeeper gets the ball and punts it every time he has the ball. The four defenders turn their back every time the goalkeeper gets the ball and run upfield because they know he's punting.

That shows me right away there isn't enough emphasis at the club to train playing out of the back.

The ones who lose out ultimately are the players, because a defender, at one point, especially at the national team level, is going to need the skills to play out of the back. It's going to be difficult to develop central backs if all they're doing their entire career is kicking the ball up as far as they can, heading it as far as they can.

Emphasizing that we're looking for them to play out of the back, through the midfield, in turn will develop more midfield players who are used to receiving the ball from the defenders.

SA: Encouraging young players to play possession ball in their own half is risky because they'll give up goals – and lose games. Is it the Federation's belief that by evaluating clubs on style of play it will alleviate the pressure on coaches to resort to a results-driven approach?

CLAUDIO REYNA: Yes, and the idea is that the club should be focusing on training this at the young ages so by the time they get to U-14, U-15, U-16, they're very comfortable playing out of the back.

There are many clubs that are doing a very good job, trying to promote playing the right way. We're lucky to have good examples to follow and we reward and highlight them.

The easy way, absolutely, to play for wins at the younger ages is to tell the goalie to kick it up the field, and everytime there's a throw-in or a free kick, to send it to the corner and everyone chases it, but I don't think I'm unveiling any secrets when I say that's not going to develop players.

You're not going to get results all the time encouraging your young players to play out of the back, but you're going to get better players. And I believe, in the long-term, you're going to have better teams.

(Claudio Reyna was named the U.S. Soccer Federation's Youth Technical Director in April 2010. Reyna played nearly 13 years in the top-tier leagues of Germany (Bayer Leverkusen, VfL Wolfsburg), Scotland (Glasgow Rangers) and England (Sunderland, Manchester City). He represented the USA in four World Cups, and captained the Americans to a quarterfinal run at the 2002 World Cup, where he became the first American selected to the FIFA World Cup all-star team.)

(Mike Woitalla, the executive editor of Soccer America, coaches youth soccer for [East Bay United](#) in Oakland, Calif. His youth soccer articles are archived at [YouthSoccerFun.com](#).)