

Sports

The Courier-Journal



Sports scores on your cell

Go to courier-journal.com/mobile and select your pro or college sport, league, conference and team.

MONDAY
JUNE 28, 2010



Hart Bryan, Sports editor | hbryan@courier-journal.com | 582-4361 | Fax: 582-7186

U.S. still not caught up to the world

Eric Crawford



I don't like to sound unpatriotic, but when the U.S. lost to Ghana to fall out of the World Cup on Saturday, it illustrated something that makes sports special.

What advantage does the U.S. not have in that matchup? We have the facilities, the population, the money. Ghana's government paid for 1,000 fans to attend its matches in group play but had to bring them home because it couldn't afford to keep them there for the knockout round.

Now people in the West African nation are calling for an inquiry into why the government would spend that money in the first place. They want to know how much was spent. Ghana's per-capita income was \$630 in 2008, according to the World Bank. In the United States it was \$47,930.

Yet between the lines, Ghana was dominant.

When it comes to the World Cup elimination round, the U.S. is clearly a here-today, Ghana-tomorrow phenomenon.

I know the U.S. won its group. I also know that in four World Cup matches, the U.S. led for only three minutes of playing time.

It was a team always playing catch-up. But not just on the scoreboard. The U.S. seems always to be chasing stylistically, too.

Watch the great soccer teams — Brazil, Spain and Argentina, particularly — and you see teams that bend the ball to their wishes, teams whose shape and skill dictate the game.

Too many times, I watch American teams — even the best American teams — reacting to the ball and opponent rather than playing the game naturally.

If the great teams and players in the world today play the game with great fluency, U.S. teams sometimes play it as if it were a secondary language.

And it is.

It's no mistake, I think, that the most outstanding American play in this World Cup — with all due respect to Landon Donovan's goals — was goalkeeper Tim Howard's brilliant throw that set up the sequence for the game-winning goal against Algeria. A play that was made with his hands.

Let's face it. If Americans had invented soccer, you'd get six points for each goal, and a chance to tack on an extra point if you score one, and in case you're not good enough to score a goal, maybe you could try a free kick out on the field somewhere for three points.

We like scoring. Defending? Passing? Communicating? Filling less-visible roles with discipline? Not so much.

While the U.S. has attained those in flashes, we still haven't mastered them with great consistency. We play soccer the way other nations used to play basketball — as if we learned it from the manual.

The good news is that other nations now play our game with more fluency than we do sometimes. Their great players come to play in our NBA, like some of ours are heading for the best European professional soccer leagues. Maybe we will yet reach elite fluency in the world's game.

The other good news is that no matter how bad the U.S. feels about losing, it's nothing compared to the despair we'll witness in England in the coming days.

Interest in the games has been high. Both the U.S. opener against England and its loss to Ghana on Saturday ranked among the top-10 most-viewed non-NFL sports telecasts of the year in this nation. (NFL telecasts blow out everything else, because as we know, only one football is king in the U.S.)

Clearly, the sport is still playing catch-up in this country. But it is making progress. And with the U.S. out of the way, the rest of the tournament will once again feature a blueprint of where it needs to go.

Reach Eric Crawford at (502) 582-4372 or ecrawford@courier-journal.com. Comment on this column, and read his blog and previous columns, at www.courier-journal.com/crawford.