

Bob Bradley



**A visit with
the U.S. Men's
National Team Coach**

This interview with the U.S. Men's National Team head coach was conducted by Jeff Tipping, NSCAA Director of Coaching Education and Development.

I'd like to ask about your philosophy, and if it has evolved since you coached at Princeton?

It has evolved, but I think there are some starting points. It's always a process to become a good team: a process in terms of growing, getting to know each other, creating an environment in which there's trust on the inside, where there's a sense of accountability; where every day when you show up, there are good standards for how players train, how they treat each other and ultimately what it means to step on the field as a group and understand how to give everything you have for 90 minutes.

How do you define team chemistry? What are the ingredients you look for in building a team?

I constantly refer to the work on the inside. What I mean by that is just the fact that it's hard work to become a good team. It requires players who come in every day, put their egos aside, and are willing to trust the people around them; to listen, to understand what it's going to take for that team to be successful. And ultimately, it's not about players just doing what they like to do, or what comes easy. It's about a group understanding what it's going to take to be successful. The chemistry is when you get everybody on board, when there's a really good feeling about what you're all about. It shows itself in the ability to go on the field, eliminate the distractions, not be thrown off by things that may not go your way, and compete at the highest level every match.

You obviously have very thoughtfully put together a staff of coaches that you want working with the national team. What are some of the qualities that you're looking for in your own staff of coaches?

I think as a staff we also have to have chemistry. That chemistry for me involves a sense of challenging each other. I'm not one who likes to have people who are just there for the ride. To have people who come in and have ideas, I love my assistant coaches to not only have watched games, but be ready to challenge me on a regular basis about how we play, who's on the field, what we need to do in training. I'm going to go back at them. I like to use the expression sometimes that I want to see if they're ready to go toe-to-toe with me. But those kinds of discussions on the inside, where we put things on the table, look hard at them – I think that's important in a staff. I think we also are lucky that we have a good balance in our staff. Peter Nowak brings great energy, great experience. (Editor's note: Since this interview, Nowak left the U.S. staff to become the coach of Major League Soccer's Philadelphia Union.) Mike Sorber also is experienced, but has a very good way of balancing the staff – he listens, and when he makes points, he makes them simply, in a few words, but also very accurately. Pierre Barrieu handles the strength and conditioning, but he also has a very good eye. He is a good observer and never is afraid to give an opinion. And finally, Zak Abdel as a goalkeeper coach still has a great instinct for everything that goes on in the team. So our discussions are such that we challenge each other, and I think there's camaraderie within the staff and a real sense of what we're trying to accomplish together.

The staff you've put together obviously consists of field coaches, but what other support staff are important for a national team?

There's one person I failed to mention that also is an important part of our staff, and that's John Hackworth. John is an assistant coach with us. As many coaches across the country know, he also oversees our developmental academy and handles a lot of our scouting. His role obviously is very important. As far as the academy side of it, it assures that the ideas we talk about in every national team camp are being passed down. He can hear the kind of discussions and make sure that our youth coaches around the country are up on things that are important. We continue to try to knock down walls and communicate better, and that includes from the full national team through the U-23s with Thomas (Rongen) with the U-20s; Wilmer (Cabrera) with the U-17s; Mike Matkovich with the U-18s, which is kind of an in-between age group; Jimmy Barlowe with the U-15s; and Manny (Schellscheidt) with the U-14s. This level of communication, the way we share information, is important. Beyond that, our staff includes our general manager, Pam Perkins, who does an incredible job in terms of handling all the details involved with the national team – travel, getting equipment where it needs to be on time. In regards to that, we have an equipment staff – Tim Cook, Jessie Bignami – they make sure those needs are met. We've been fortunate to be able to make Ivan Barrera a full-time trainer, and he can coordinate regularly with our doctors. We've tried to make sure that across all areas we've moved ourselves along, because when you look at the best national teams in the world and the best clubs, the job is done at the highest level across the board, and we want to make sure that we're doing the same.

Can you reflect on systems of play, your approach to systems of play, maybe your favorite systems of play?

We have been a team that has played almost predominantly with four in the back; I think that certainly fits our talent pool. A good example is just the chemistry and the

understanding that has been built between Carlos Bocanegra and Oguchi Oneywu, as centerbacks, and I think that is certainly an important starting point for any team. More than that, what we've tried to do is create a sense as to how we move on the field, how we stay compact, how we cover the field. We've played mostly 4-4-2. I do believe that it's important to have some tactical flexibility at times, so that that 4-4-2 can switch to some version of either 4-2-3-1 or 4-3-3 or 4-3-2-1. For me what we try to do is to have an understanding of how to "work as a block of eight" with the defenders and the midfielders. And then we try to understand the differences on certain days, so we tweak that and make it more a block of seven. Then, that group has a good sense as to the differences – how to still stay compact and make it hard for the other team. We certainly believe in the idea that we are more of a team that plays zonally, that puts a high level of importance on not just looking at one thing on the field, but trying to stay connected with your teammates, trying to see more than one thing, trying to move as a unit to sort out problems. I constantly am asking and challenging players to try to develop a sense of having more on their radar screen. I think sometimes we have players who are accustomed to marking one man and thinking that if they can see that one thing on the field, they're doing their job. The ability to see more than one thing on the field, and the ability to be able to keep track of a lot of things at the same time is very important and is something that players need to be pushed to be able to do at younger ages, so that by the time they move along, this isn't all new.

How much does your system of play react to the opposition's system of play? In your planning, how important is how the opposition plays?

We always want to prepare our team to know the tendencies, the strengths and weaknesses of another team. We then try to make sure that we understand some little details within the way we play that we want to keep track of their strengths. I think we have an overall system that we believe in, and that gets adjusted slightly for each opponent.

In working with the national team, what kind of practices do you run? Is it largely collective work, or do you do individual functional training? How do you go about that?

The bulk of our training session is collective work. Again one of the challenges of working with the national team is that we don't have that much time together, so we take advantage of each training session to train collectively. I think that over the years, I've also tried to find a good balance where, again, players are in their positions and working as a group on a lot of days, but then that change of pace comes on certain days, where you play in smaller numbers, work a little bit more on their reactions, and that kind of thing and don't put them in set positions. You find a way to balance some version of free play with some more structure. For sure, given the limited amount of time we have, structure and the way we move together is important, so I think we have worked hard in those areas. One thing that we have tried to do with the national team is to not overdo playing in real tight spaces.

Again, when you coach a club team throughout a long year, I think there are times when it probably makes sense to reduce the space, sharpen up the players in terms of the little touches, cut down on the running, make it competitive and fun. But with the time that we have together, we still feel that the sense of how to move on the bigger field, both in attack and defense, is a priority. So I think that that's important. We then try to make sure that on certain days, at the end of training, within our whole staff, we divvy up responsibilities for smaller group work or individual work. Peter Nowak does some great work with the strikers, involving shorter running, quick running, finishing and timing. Mike Sorber does some great work with the midfielders in terms of pure receiving and passing – basic things, but things that we find all of our midfielders need. At times, we just do some passing with our defenders out of their positions, in terms of playing the ball around the back, playing the ball into the midfield, moving our line, that kind of thing. So we certainly try to make sure that the time we have together at the end of training also is utilized properly.

So you do functional work at the end of training?

Yes, that's probably the way we go about things more often than not.

If you were talking to youth coaches of 7-year-olds, 8-year-olds, even 10- and 11-year-olds, what kind of things would you like to see taught so that in 10 or 15 years, we will have exceptional national team players?

I think the starting point still is that our players continue to improve technically: the idea that we have more players that are very comfortable with the ball, capable of making the kinds of plays that can determine matches. It's a challenge for youth coaches to improve their players technically, but still make sure that the skills they're working on come back and fit into the game. So I don't think it all can be done in terms of pure technical work. It has to be some combination of challenging them with the ball, but then creating the kind of little games that allow those players to experiment and to improve using the skills that they've been working on in game situations.

What are some of the skills that you think should absolutely be ingrained in a 9-year-old, a 10-year-old, an 11-year-old? I think we have a heavy emphasis in the U.S. on "undribbling." Trying to develop creative players would be something that I think you would like to see. What do you think are the weaknesses of the players you see coming through?

I talk often about the package of things needed to play at the highest level. I find that in many, many cases, we just need players that need to be a little bit better in all areas. What we have at the highest level is just a different yardstick. You may have a player that in college is a good all-around player, skillful, creative, but now, when he goes from college to professional soccer, into MLS, the same things that he's been doing across the board aren't good enough. So one of the great challenges of youth coaching is to have a picture of what a player is all about and try to envision what that player's going to play like when the games are faster, more physical and better, and in some way try to help him move himself along. In some cases, that involves something that a player does really well, and that's what's going to get them to the top. In other cases, you can look at a player and say that as much as he does this really well, that's not going to be good enough at the highest level, and he's going to need to be better in all of these other areas in order to continue to improve. So there's no set answer. One of the great coaching, teaching stories I remember the most is this golf teacher, Harvey Penick, who wrote *Harvey Penick's Little Red Book*, all about these teachings in his professional career. He had worked with both Tom Kite and Ben Crenshaw. He always said that when they were young, he would never let Ben Crenshaw watch when he was teaching Tom Kite, and he would never let Tom Kite watch when he was teaching Ben Crenshaw, because each had different attributes and the things he was trying to do with one might not fit the other. I think sometimes as coaches we have to be able to create a picture for each player as to what he'll need to be like when the games are better, and find a way on a regular basis to move him along. That's not only challenging, but ultimately that's where the real rewards come.

What influences, which managers, have influenced you in the development of your philosophy?

The one name that I've probably given the most is Arrigo Sacchi. I was, like many others, a great admirer of his teams at Milan – the way they moved as a unit, the way they had a team of big names, but everyone had to play as part of the team. I had a great opportunity in 1994 to watch Italy train, virtually every day, throughout the World Cup, and see the way he did things. Most recently, I've been really lucky that I've been at Manchester United a few times. When I've been there, I've seen the overall influence that Sir Alex Ferguson has, his personality. There is nothing that goes on in that club that he doesn't know about. He just has an incredible way to be on top of things, set the right tone. He has the ability to lead that group of players every day with knowing what to say, what not to say, knowing when to be hard on players, when to joke around a little bit. For me, he's a very down-to-earth man, full of wisdom, but full of humility. So I think seeing the way he does things has probably meant a lot to me in recent years.

What would you say are some of the primary characteristics of a great coach or a great manager, common characteristics that they have?

I think first and foremost, it's the environment that they create every day, the way they set a tone with their group – the ability to lead and set the right example every day; their sense as to what to do in training, how the team needs to play, decisions that get made, tough decisions. In terms of who might play, whom to hold out, the best managers are confident in themselves. They understand how to create that environment every day with the group. They're not afraid. In soccer these days, there are so many outside factors, you can never let any of that slip through the cracks and get on the inside of what you're trying to do. The way the top managers set that tone every day, the team spirit they create, just the environment that exists because of the way they go about their business – that's what it's all about. 