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# SOCCERTALK

So

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

## MLS teams must outgrow Mexico myth

By Paul Gardner

Poor Seattle! Did they really deserve that 6-1 pounding that Santos Laguna inflicted on them on Wednesday? On the night, looking strictly at the way the Sounders played, yes they did. Poor Seattle indeed -- very poor.

Yet you have to feel that Seattle is nowhere near as bad as that -- that it is, in fact, a pretty good team. So what's the problem here?

Sigi Schmid doesn't sound massively sure of himself: "We have to look at why we started the game slowly, why we started the second half slowly. I have to look at that and see what I can change to make sure that doesn't happen again."

All of which makes a certain amount of sense, but leaves one wondering how on earth such things can happen in a game that was surely one of the most important on this season's Seattle schedule? And for sure, everyone knew it was a big game. "We know the importance of the game," was Schmid's pre-game assertion, and his players chimed in with warnings like "We know it's going to be a very, very intense match down there," from Servando Carrasco, and "When their crowd gets rowdy . . . nerves become a factor," from Jeff Parke.

Yet a collective failure seemed to grip the whole team. Schmid remarked "Defensively, I thought we had a poor game," which was true enough, but there were equally big problems up front, where several pretty straightforward scoring chances were wastefully spurned.

Sherlock Holmes would have an answer for this conundrum. "When you have eliminated the impossible ..." -- and I'm taking it as impossible that Schmid and his team failed to recognize the importance of this game - "... whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth."

Well, the improbable -- though not *that* improbable -- is this: that the abysmal record of U.S. teams playing Concacaf games against Mexican opponents exerts a mysterious power over the Americans' ability to play their normal game. You could call that a curse, or a hex, or simply an invisible wall. But such psychological barriers evidently do exist.

Remember the 4-minute mile? There was a time when that was widely believed to be an impossibility, something beyond the muscular capability of the human body. In the 1940s there was intense competition between two wonderful Swedish runners, Arne Andersson and Gunder Hagg, who kept alternately chipping away at the mile record. In 1945, Hagg got it down to 4:01.4.

And there it stayed, unassailable, for nine years while the myth of the 4-minute barrier flourished. Until 1954 when Roger Bannister flung himself, half-dead, over the finishing line with a time of 3:59.4 The barrier, the intimidating myth that it couldn't be done, was shattered. But this was a barrier that had seemed to hold all runners back for nearly 10 years. After Bannister, sub-4-minute miles were commonplace -- in 1966 high-schooler Jim Ryun could do it. (To round this out: we're now down to 3:43.13, thanks to Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj. And, so far, there's no talk of a 3-minute barrier).

So, do we have an improbable factor here in the Concacaf games, a Mexican barrier for US teams? Seems quite possible, to me. What is revealed here, yet again, is that we still don't understand all the psychological factors that go into a winning, or a losing, performance.

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If there is a Mexican barrier, it is certainly not a hidden one. The dominance of the Mexican teams over MLS teams is well-known, the intimidating stats are frequently quoted. Bruce Arena has a non-mysterious response to those stats -- he believes that the lack of success comes because MLS teams probably do not schedule the Concacaf Champions League "as a priority."

That may well have been the case in the past, but not so much nowadays, I think. Arena certainly contradicted his assertion on Wednesday night, by putting out a full team against Toronto. And, as the quotes given above demonstrate, Schmid and his Sounders were fully aware of what they were up against.

I'm not about to argue that the Sounders should, or could, have won the game in Mexico. Santos Laguna is a good team, and deserved its win. It's that 6-1 scoreline that takes some explaining.

Could it be that all the self-bolstering "we know it's going to be tough" talk and the constant references to how difficult it is to play "down there" and how intimidating "their" crowds can be, plus (though I didn't hear any from the Sounders) the occasional complaints about contrary referee decisions, while making sure that a team doesn't underestimate its task, at the same time undo that positive effect by making the task loom ominously larger in the players' minds?

I suppose there are plenty of theories available that will detail how athletes -- or anyone, I guess -- can overcome the detrimental effects of an imaginary barrier.

The only one I can offer is for MLS teams -- indeed, for American players in general, so that includes the national team -- to deconstruct the myth about the dire perils of playing south of the border. That should be possible, for this is mainly a myth that the Americans themselves have created -- you know, the urine bags and all the other nasty stuff that gets thrown, the poor hotel accommodation, the deliberately lousy locker rooms, the bent referees and, of course, the sneaky, dirty play from their opponents.

Even if every one of those accusations is true, or has been true at some moment or other, the assembly of them has created a burdensome myth -- the myth that Americans are at an enormous and unfair disadvantage before they even step off the plane. (This feeling of victimization, almost of martyrdom, is doubly felt, because American teams, even playing at home, are quite likely to be confronted with a stadium dominated by hostile fans).

It is a myth that serves only two purposes: the questionable one of demonstrating what a tough guy you have to be to play soccer, and the evidently effective one of undermining confidence.

The myth must be destroyed; it has, to put it another way, to be outgrown. Not so easy, no doubt, but as long as it persists I see no reason to look any further for an explanation of aberrations like the Seattle Sounders' unlikely implosion in Torreon.

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