

**My two most memorable coaching experiences.** Experiences that I can vividly remember nearly twenty years later and will stay with me forever.

## **The “Witch Doctor” Cast a Spell on our Players**

In 1982 I coached the National Soccer League’s Under 19 Select squad that went to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Dallas Cup. The NSL had a strong under 21 division in those days. Team manager and league president Ken Dawson had everything arranged for us including a separate hotel away from the main hotel. We arrived early before our first game in order to train but finding a training site became our first priority.

We checked out the local high schools for a place to practice. This was when we first realized exactly how big sports is in the US in comparison to Canada. Real Big! The high school fields were not fields but rather 5,000 seat stadiums. The coach of the local high school football team was not; e.g. Mr. Matthews; but Coach Matthews; and he was THE most popular staff in the school. He probably made more money than the principal did. The coach was nice enough to allow us to use the field but of course we were in Cowboy country. Dallas Cowboys, that is. There were no soccer goals on the field and the field was narrow, made for American Football. But the grass was good and we managed.

### **We were in Cowboy country. Dallas Cowboys, that is!**

In our first game we played an Austrian select team and tied 0-0. A great result for Canada especially considering it was only our second time outdoors with the team. The Dallas Cup is held in April and we trained in gymnasiums all winter long with only a chance to go outside once prior to leaving for Dallas. In our group was a team from Dallas, Austria, and Nigeria. Nigeria trounced the Dallas team and we scouted that game. What a display of soccer that was. We had never seen such skill. These players could do anything they wanted with the ball. They were big, almost too big for their age, and fast. The US team barely touched the ball.

We certainly had our work cut out for us. I devised a new method of play unlike the ball possession style of game we usually play, to stay even close to this squad. I thought it unusual though to find them playing a 3-3-4 system but when you trounce a team everyone seems like a forward. In our next game we beat the same US team in a rain soaked and shortened game.

We scouted Nigeria in their game against Austria and again they looked stronger than ever as they comfortably defeated the Austrians. Man- for- man they were outstanding. We found out after the game that this was Nigeria’s National Olympic Youth Team and not simply a regional select team like all others. But once again the team lined up in a 3-3-4 system.

In both their games they held on to the ball for long periods of time whilst acting very cocky and almost too confident and relaxed. It was our strategy to try and take them off their game early, confuse them and hopefully not allow them to get settled.

I would start with a 4-3-3- system instead of our normal 4-4-2 and try to take advantage of their 3-man defense before they could take advantage of their four forwards against our four backs. Our goal was to pressure them early and not let them get comfortable with the ball. Our forwards were instructed to pressure their back three early and attempt to cause some errant passes as they came out of their zone.

We had to beat or tie Nigeria to go through. The top two teams in each group would go through to the Quarter Finals.

In our team meeting, I stressed the importance of scoring early and then changing systems to protect the lead. I instructed our captain to win the coin toss. This was a 50/50 chance but I really stressed to the captain that I wanted the kick-off more than anything. Let’s take the ball not the side. If they win, hopefully

they will choose the side but at whatever cost, we wanted the kickoff. Why? Because I wanted to set the tone of the game immediately.

We practiced in our off days preparing for the Nigerians. Some of our players had received some injuries in the first two games. Taping ankles became one of my duties besides coaching. It was no big deal except that it seemed that all of a sudden the whole team had ankle injuries and needed their ankles taped. We went over budget on tape and pro wrap! Coaches will understand that taping is contagious. I think it makes the players feel more professional. In those days not many coaches knew how to tape ankles. The coaching courses and information available today was not available to most coaches back then, so when kids who play on normal teams see a tape job like the pros, it becomes something special. Hey psychology plays a big part in winning at the higher end and if this does it for them then great!

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We got on the field for the pre-game warm up and there were fans lining the whole field to watch Nigeria play. As we warmed up we watched the Nigerians warm-up in the strangest method. It was something our Canadian boys had never seen. The Nigerians had lined up in two lines side by side. In front of them, was their "Witch Doctor". They proceeded to parade around the field in their two lines singing some song and pointing at us as we warmed up. They circled the whole field as they danced with their "Witch Doctor" leading the way. As we watched, some of our players felt they were being mocked and this seemed to inspire our players even more. I was a bit afraid we may lose our temper at the wrong spot and give up some unnecessary fouls so I had to go around reminding my players of our game plan and ignore their tactics. Deep inside I knew that this adrenaline build up would suit our game plan even more. We had to pressure so they could not start passing the ball around as they did in their previous games.

We won the ball for the opening kick-off and the game plan started coming into effect. Their right defender liked to hold on to the ball and pass it out. He never booted the ball up the field. He was our man. I instructed two forwards to start on the left side of the field. I wanted my Centre Forward and midfielder to be at the kick-off to make it seem like we were going to do the usual which was to pass it around. Instead the plan was to kick it directly deep into their corner of the field and have our two forwards race to pressurize early.

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The referee was ready to signal the start of the game. He received all his signals from the linesmen and two goalies and was ready to blow the whistle for the opening kick-off. Then, suddenly just before the referee was about to blow the start of the game, he looked around as we did and found all the Nigerians on their knees with their head bowed down to the ground praying. The referee did not know what to do. I was somewhat shocked as were everyone else in the place. Our players were wondering what was going on and some were even more pumped after that display. The Nigerians stayed down for a good minute or two and we were wondering if they were ever going to get up and play. They finally did and the referee finally blew the opening whistle.

We kicked the ball to their corner of the field first time but faked the traditional short pass. Our wingers pressured the defender quickly and before he knew what was happening we won a throw in. We moved all players forward and continued pressurizing and not allowing them to play their game. They became

frustrated and started kicking the ball out of their end with long passes that were easily intercepted. Within 10 minutes we scored our first goal to go up 1-0. Our game plan had worked. We went up early in the game and now we could change our formation.

I took off one forward and went with two strikers. I brought in a defender and played with one sweeper and four defenders all marking their four forwards man-to-man. Our three midfielders would mark their midfielders man-to-man. Our two forwards were to work together to make sure the defender with the ball was under pressure and could only pass it to a marked man.

For the rest of the first half, the Nigerians could not solve our system and were getting frustrated and did not get another shot on goal.

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voodoo stick at the referee's as he circled them  
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Of course the half time talk was very positive for us as we had them where we wanted. But what we witnessed at half time may have changed the complexion of the game. During half time, the three officials were at centre field and suddenly the "Witch Doctor" started towards them. He started dancing, chanting, and waving his voodoo stick at the referee's as he circled them for most of the half time break. Obviously he cast his magic spell on them to cause them to make calls in their favour.

Well, the spell worked. Our captain, Sam Foti, went in for a challenge and was called on a foul. It was by no means an unusual foul that deserved even a free kick, but mysteriously he was expelled from the game. In disbelief, we watched, as the referee was obviously highly overdosed with this magic spell. We brought back one of our forwards and played with only one striker who did a lot of running to pressurize their defense. But to the credit of our team, they were so high on our own magic formula, adrenaline and good old fashion Canadian grit. The players worked tirelessly and killed off the remaining half without giving up but one shot on goal to preserve the victory and stun the Nigerians in an extremely emotional game.

The Nigerians could not settle down right from the opening whistle to play their game. Instead they were frustrated and arguing with themselves, the referees, their coaches and even myself as one player stripped a water bottle I had as I went on the field to attend to an injured player. He flung the bottle across the field. Final Score: Canada 1- Nigeria 0 A game I nor my manager and assistant coach, or players will likely ever forget.

## **A Special Experience You Can't Imagine. Until You Try For Yourself**

My second most memorable coaching experience was something completely opposite from the one mentioned above. Dr. Lou Lombardi and his wife, who run the Scarboro Azzurri Special Olympics Soccer Program, asked me to be a special guest coach at one of their practices. I did my usual planning with notes and diagrams of what to do. I approached the field, assembled the players and was amazed to find out that I was not necessarily dealing with kids. I had a group that ranged in age from 15 to 55. What a shock that was! Then of course I tried the first drill I had planned and nothing went as planned. It did not work at all and I quickly noticed that I had to completely scrap my plans. I realized you cannot coach a Special Olympics team like any team, not even a very young team, but instead you almost need to coach them all one on one all through practice including your scrimmage.

I pulled parents, and had plenty of help from members of the Monteleon Old-timers who so graciously give their time each week to help bring the ratios down to practically a two to one ratio. But what came over me most was that these players were all happy to be there. They tried their hardest to do what was said and they loved doing what they were doing. Even though some were physically unable to move properly they

tried and were happy to be there. The players all listened and were eager to learn. It was such a gratifying feeling that I now knew why they are called special. These people can really bring you down to earth.

### **WOW! It Made My Day.**

They make you realize that life need not be as complicated as we make it provided we all give and share that loving feeling for each other. WOW, It was a magical experience and one of my truly most memorable moments in coaching.

We often define our best soccer memories by winning games and tournaments, exotic traveling and international experiences. By giving back some time right at home we can add to our soccer memories. Even if you can only dedicate one session to them, they will appreciate you and you will appreciate the experience even more. You will leave the practice session feeling good. That's a guarantee. And if you haven't had the opportunity to try it then there are many Special Olympians waiting to make your day.

Contact the NSCAC and we will help you find a Special Olympics program in your area. One evening will help if that is all you can afford. Don't miss this opportunity because it is truly is a window for personal growth.

Thanks for reading and please send in your most memorable coaching experiences for future issues.

One of the goals of the NSCAC is to help coaches communicate with each other across Canada and share their experiences. One of our biggest problems in printing our newsletters is in getting articles from Canadian coaches. In fact, come to think of it, it is THE biggest problem. Quite often we need to go to our US counterparts and borrow their articles. Surely, there are a host of coaches out there within our membership that can help contribute. If you are not comfortable with writing, we have a number of members who can help edit your information. Please tell us what's on your mind, or what's going on in your community. That is the only way we can truly build a strong Canadian Coaches Association.

By: John DeBenedictis

P.S. We lost in overtime to England's Royal Navy in the semi-finals. Nigeria did not lose another game and won the tournament.