



Members of the U.S. Men's National Team celebrate their historic World Cup berth in Port of Spain, Trinidad, on the day everything changed: Nov. 19, 1989. (Jon van Woerden photo)

PROLOGUE

January 2022

This book was born over a pint of imperial stout in the spring of 2012. My family had been vacationing through Montana and the Pacific Northwest. After an obligatory up-and-down at the Space Needle, we lit out for Seattle's Pioneer Square neighborhood, where my wife and two kids located a lunch spot. I found a pub. For once, my priority was not food but rather a Champions League semifinal: Barcelona-Chelsea, second leg, live from the *Camp Nou*. Having spent much of the sepia-tinged 1990s seeking out satellite-delivered soccer programming in drinking establishments coast to coast, I was pleased but not surprised to find a suitable venue there in the Emerald City. On my first attempt, no less. By 2012, one had come to expect such modern conveniences in this country. I didn't even have to sweet-talk the barman into switching the channel. The game was already on. At halftime, a couple pints to the good, I scrutinized my surroundings with more acuity: At 47 years of age (b. 1964), I was clearly the oldest guy in the bar.

During my 20s and 30s, such footballing fare had not been broadcast in America. By 2012, the game arrived via three separate cable networks. Today, half a dozen portals deliver eight to 10 matches of quality nearly every day of the week. What's more, take a good look around your preferred, public-soccer-watching whereabouts — a tavern or sports bar, or perhaps the next time you're part of an MLS match crowd. What you'll discover is a community dominated by fans *born* in the Eighties and Nineties, alongside

a healthy sprinkling of my peers. If my elders from the Baby Boom (b. 1943-60) are represented in such settings, they quite probably grew up elsewhere, in foreign, futbol-loving cultures of long-standing. Sitting there in Seattle, nursing my beer, urged on by insistent notes of caramel, this generational segmentation intrigued me. Thinking back, that was the first time I sat back and asked myself, *How did we get here?*

Later that same April of 2012, Fox and its affiliate portals broadcast all 10 season-ending Premier League matches at once, a veritable bacchanal of soccer programming, even by modern standards. Just the week before, Millennial American striker Clint Dempsey (b. 1983) had notched his 50th goal for the English club Fulham FC. Fellow Yank Michael Bradley (b. 1987) was starting in midfield for Chievo in Italy's *Serie A*. Their countryman Jozy Altidore (b. 1989) netted 19 times for AZ Alkmaar in the Dutch *Eredivisie*. When Yanks first crashed top European leagues, our goalies went first. In 2012, after starting out with Manchester United, Everton's Tim Howard (b. 1979) stood as the finest keeper in England. German-born Jermaine Jones (b. 1981), Fabian Johnson (b. 1987) and Timmy Chandler (b. 1990), all starters for their respective *Bundesliga* clubs, had recently sought and obtained American citizenship, so as to represent *this* country at the 2014 World Cup. Similarly, across the Atlantic, two products of U.S.-Mexican parentage who both played their club soccer in *LigaMX* — Jose Francisco Torres (b. 1987) and Edgar Castillo (b. 1986) — also cast their lot with Jurgen Klinsmann's national team. In the U.S. itself, Major League Soccer had evolved into something respectable and lasting.

If that last nugget comes across as faint praise, I ask you: Please consider the messenger. My specific American cohort, Generation X, well remembers the woebegone period when no first-division soccer existed in this country. None. We remember when the idea of U.S.-bred players competing in foreign first divisions was considered absurd, almost laughable. U.S. soccer used to be an oxymoron, like Jamaican bobsledding. Then, seemingly in the blink of an eye, our players proved world class — and Americans watched the game on TV, in bars and stadia, with genuine interest. Passion, even.

Date ranges for specific American generations tend to vary slightly at the margins. William Strauss and Neil Howe, the distinguished demographers I rely upon in this book, define Generation X as those Americans born between 1961 and 1981. As such, we in Gen X place a special value on MLS because, unlike Millennials (a designation coined by Strauss and Howe) and even younger Americans, we grew up alongside the North American Soccer League (NASL), only to witness its tragic, tawdry shuttering in 1984. We value this country's World Cup participation in a similar way because we remember a time before routine qualifications. We intimately recall the period when most Americans did not know we had a national soccer team — and did not want to know.

TWO YEARS LATER, IN THE IMMEDIATE run-up to World Cup 2014, I watched a collection of pundits hold forth in Rio de Janeiro while lounging in an open-air, purpose-built studio overlooking Copacabana beach. The U.S. Soccer Federation had sent to Brazil a squad that commanded an unprecedented level of traveling support. No country had more fans in South America — or so Michael Ballack and Alexi Lalas and Roberto Martinez informed us, from a sleek, overtly contemporary couch. Back in Connecticut, ESPN and its sister network in the Disney imperium, ABC, expected for this World Cup the next in a series of record-setting television audiences.

I turned 50 years old in 2014. My peers and I had traditionally approached soccer programming the way we had approached booze in high school or dope in college: from a position of extreme scarcity. Accordingly, we luxuriated in all that World Cup content — first and foremost because we had lived through *The Before Time*. The massive media coverage from Brazil 2014, the hordes of Americans traveling to Brazil to watch in person, illustrated and emphasized again the tectonic shifts that had taken place in the country of our birth. Once upon a time, long ago, in a galaxy far, far away, we had resided in a famously soccer-indifferent country. Somewhere along the time/space continuum, the situation had radically changed.

Watching the 2014 studio show from Rio, cognizant of these generational and cultural transitions, I wanted Ballack, Martinez and especially Lallas to weigh in on this full-blown American-soccer metamorphosis. How and when exactly did all this happen? They never addressed these questions. It seemed as though no one had. So I began to take up the mantle myself.

When I started asking knowledgeable, engaged U.S. soccer folk about this fulcrum-like phenomenon, they invariably pointed to World Cup 1994, held right here in the good ol' US of A. That tournament was indeed a revelation, very much a coming-out party: record in-stadium attendance; surprisingly strong television ratings; a sun-splashed, well administered soccer orgy that impressed even our skeptical European cousins. The host nation qualified automatically but nevertheless advanced to the knockout stage, where it fell (on Independence Day) to eventual champion *Brasil*. MLS launched two years later. That's a rock-solid record of legacy-leaving. What's more, durable public reputations were forged in 1994. In 2014, when ESPN sought American pundits for its conspicuously casual studio tableau, they tapped '94 alumni Lallas and Cobi Jones.

“We wanted to leave something behind, a legacy — and I think it was the mullet. We tore it up on the mullet front.”

—*Marcelo Balboa (b. 1967)*

However, as I continued to loose my journalistic training on this subject matter, my reporting and the historical record began to tell a different, more cogent and compelling story. For reasons I'll make plain, the Modern American Soccer Movement officially took root Nov. 19, 1989, on the island of Trinidad. *That* was the moment it all changed. *That* was the U.S. Men's National Team (USMNT) whose victory first qualified this nation for a World Cup, after 40 long years of trying. Six months later, the Italian World Cup of 1990 — not World Cup 1994 — first mainstreamed soccer in America. In fact, had this specific generation of national team

players not succeeded in qualifying for *Italia '90*, there might not have been a USA '94. “From a soccer and historical standpoint,” U.S. striker Bruce Murray (b. 1966) attests, “you’d have to go with 1990. The team that went to the Olympics in '88, then the World Cup: That team changed everything. We showed this country what soccer was all about. We even got the TV people at ESPN and TNT to care.”

Admittedly, Murray might possess a bias. He went the full 90 in Port of Spain. He started all three matches at *Italia '90*. Along with all his colleagues on the 1990 USMNT, he’s also a member of Generation X. As my research progressed, his case and this generational connection only grew wider, stronger and more credible, however. The American Youth Soccer Organization had been formed in 1964. When youth soccer leagues exploded across suburbia during the second Nixon administration, they introduced the game to each and every member of that pivotal 1990 national team. To all of us in Gen X. From this point forward, I refer to this proto-American cohort as *Generation Zero*, because it all started with them/us. They/we were the first authentically indigenous soccer players and fans this country produced, the first Americans effectively born to the game. Generation Zero grew up with the sport and fell in love with it, as kids do. It’s logical, ultimately even unsurprising, that this generation of futbol natives definitively delivered the nation from its century-long, footballing dark age.

IN ITALY THAT SUMMER OF 1990, Murray and his teammates did not presume such a grandiose role in U.S. soccer history. In fact, while they remained very young men, fresh out of college, they were already jaded, all too accustomed to professional disillusion: NASL had folded the moment they were poised to make their living in it. Such a cataclysm should have stunted their careers and American professional soccer in general for another generation, maybe two. The game’s longtime critics had predicted something approaching extermination, and the mid-Eighties did become a pro soccer wasteland here, a real step backward. Nonetheless, a mere five years later, the players most disadvantaged by the collapse of NASL instead

claimed U.S. soccer's seminal victory, effectively resurrecting the game in this country. Six months later, at *Italia '90* itself, competing on surprisingly equal footing against the host country and tournament favorite, they found the mountaintop experience exhilarating — and a bit dizzying.

"I remember Chris Sullivan [b. 1965] got subbed on for Bruce Murray late in the Italy game," striker Peter Vermes (b. 1966) recalls. "We had a defensive corner kick. So we're going back to mark up. I'm running back and I turn to Chris and I'm like, 'Sully, I got Baresi.' And he's like, 'I got Vialli.' And we both look at each other like, Oh really? We got *these* guys? Who are we to have *these* two guys — Franco Baresi and Luca Vialli! Because, you know, on the other side, I don't think they were saying, 'Yo, I got Vermes.' They had no idea who we were."

"They were probably saying, 'You take the dude with the blond mullet and I'll take the dude over there with the dark mullet,'" adds Vermes' teammate in Italy, Marcelo Balboa (b. 1967). "We wanted to leave something behind, a legacy — and I think it was the mullet. We tore it up on the mullet front."

No amount of cultural cachet could save the mullet. Happily, the legacies of Generation Zero have proved more numerous and sweeping than "business in front, party in the back."

Beginning that unlikely summer of 1990, soccer's haphazard, indeterminate expansion in the U.S. instantly became inevitable, headlong growth. MLS launched in 1996 but was announced in 1993; today it boasts the sixth highest attendance among futbol leagues worldwide. Seven consecutive World Cup qualifications ensued. Soccer had long before buried all comers on the youth-participation front — everyone knows *that*. What you may not realize: A December 2017 Gallup poll revealed a game poised to overtake baseball as the country's third most popular spectator sport. Seem dubious? Go ahead and attend a Major League Baseball game. Then attend an MLS match. Judge for yourself which sport is poised to win the demographic battle — the generational fight for hearts, minds and wallets — over the long term. Today in America, the international nature and scope of *The Beautiful Game*, along

with our abiding, unfettered jingoism, have only served to further soccer's formidable evolution here.

The norm-shattering, expectation-defying, mullet-wreathed, history-making story of Generation Zero is little known or appreciated today. The facts of the matter have fallen into a historical crevasse. What's more, they have been held hostage there all these years by a distinctly American algebra of feckless Boomer indifference, tweet-short media memories, lingering xenophobia, historiographical sloth, and surprisingly potent brand politics. In attempting to crack this proof, I have sought to set the record straight. In the process, as a bonus, I stumbled upon something I believe to be more meaningful, irresistible and mythic: U.S. soccer's modern Creation Story. A collective epic not before told, but sorely in need of telling.



The 1989 USMNT on November 19, in Port of Spain, two hours before the celebration, 90 minutes before it changed the course of American soccer, a few seconds prior to the opening whistle. We continue to turn the clock backward...
(Jon van Woerden photo)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	—	PROLOGUE
9	—	1: HOTBEDS (1970 to '75)
39	—	2: PUSHBACK (1975 to '77)
69	—	3: THE GREAT MAN THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT (1977 to '79)
101	—	4: THE PRICE OF EXCEPTIONALISM (1980 to '83)
133	—	5: COLLEGE BOYS & OTHER BRIGHT IDEAS (1983 to '84)
163	—	6: GATEWAY TO THE ABYSS (1984 to '85)
191	—	7: THE PRIMORDIAL SOUP (1985 to '87)
219	—	8: SIGNS OF INTELLIGENT LIFE (1987)
245	—	9: SHOP WINDOWS, RESTARTS & GRAND TOURS (OR "HOW TO GET SEEN IN A PRO SOCCER CULTURE GONE UNDERGROUND") (1987 to '89)
279	—	10: SURVIVE & ADVANCE (1987 to '89)
307	—	11: A QUALIFIED SUCCESS (1989)
339	—	12: <i>ARRIVEDERCI, AMERICA!</i> (January to May 1990)
367	—	13: OVER THE RUBICON (June 1990)
397	—	EPILOGUES
419	—	INDEX
431	—	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
433	—	ABOUT THE AUTHOR