

Day Three

Monday morning match with Heredia proved to be a tough lesson for us. The match showed that with only a day of training, we still had a lot of rust to shake off since our very good showing in Disney. Heredia are very good, with some special individual players playing wide and dangerous forwards. With that being said, we had opportunities to score twice in the first half from close range, but did not capitalize. Heredia scored twice in the first half, the second with only one minute before halftime.

At halftime we addressed several issues, mainly organizational and how we were supporting each other. Our wingers were dropping too deep into our midfield in defense, and when in attack, we were racing forward without giving us proper width, which led to poor possession on our part. We were attacking ourselves out of possession and on this massive field, with over 80 yards of width and we simply were not using it effectively. We addressed the need to develop some possession and create opportunities through better passing, better support and smarter decisions. We improved, but still the game ended 1-4 in the favor of Heredia and we had our first lesson of what can be expected from a tough international match.

In the evening, after another excellent dinner, we broke down the film of the game and did a 40-minute session on various aspect of the match by position. Many of these young players have never seen themselves on film playing, let alone analyze the findings. Needless to say it is a great learning tool for them. As coaches, our words become validated when a young player sees the film and video and realizes the concepts we are coaching. It was a very positive way to end the evening. Tomorrow we play Saprissa: which is perhaps the most famous and respected professional club in Costa Rica.

Day Four

After a good early breakfast we headed to the national training center for our match with Saprissa. They had won their first match on Monday, 3-1 vs Region III, and by all reports, were a talented team, that played in a very attacking 1-3-4 -3 formation.

We played our system in the 4-3-3 like we have always done and looked to refine our play into a more cohesive unit both defensively and in attack from match one. We wanted to really win this game, and for Coach Josh Kalkstein, I knew there was a lot riding on it for him. We both coached more actively and the team responded in fine style.

The first bright moment came in the 12th minute after a series of good passes that culminated in our wide player, Eduardo Sanchez beating his man down the line and crossing accurately to a racing attacking-midfielder, Jarad Hagart, who coolly headed for the goal. We had taken the lead and also had grabbed the momentum. The team was closing down at speed and fighting for each

ball and it made all the difference. In the 22nd minute we scored again on a nice Jack McBean goal that he created from good opportunistic run, dribble and shot. We went into half-time 2-0 up and with a superb first-half performance, as we had also defending well and not given up any clear chances. Goalkeeper Colin Webb had done an excellent job of commanding and communicating to his team in front of him and also cleanly handled several high balls.

The second half showed a renewed commitment by Saprissa to get back into the game. They sent in all their starters from yesterday's match, including their center striker who was clearly the most dominate player: big, physical and good on the ball. Our boys, however, were up for the challenge and although the momentum was clearly with Saprissa, the team defending in numbers. Saprissa finally got on the board on a direct freekick to make it 2-1. From this point on, we played and coached harder, knowing that we wanted to win this game. Aaron Caprio was especially active and good up top, taking on players on the dribble and making many unselfish runs behind the defense. His hard-work paid off for him and the team, as a nifty counter-attack led by substitute Juan Carlos Reynaldo, lead to an opportunity about 12 yards out for Caprio who confidently struck a right-footed shot into the back of the net to put us up 3-1. After this goal, it was clear that Saprissa had been deflated and our boys kept playing hard to finish off with a convincing international victory.

The good win was followed by an even better off the field experience. With all the team in good spirits we went to the Community Center for Children, an orphanage in San Jose with young children, boys and girls, ages 4-12 who no longer were living with parents. It was truly a special time as all the children were so happy and excited to see our boys walk into the grass courtyard to greet them. Over an hour of laughing, piggyback rides for the kids, and fun games of soccer were had and everyone was touched positively by the experience. Our guys realized how powerful their presence had been to these children and in return saw the amazing joy not only the children felt, but they had felt by giving their time. Many fun photos were also snapped and hopefully each player will take some home with them to show and share with their friends and family.

This great day was capped off by going to see a Costa Rica professional soccer match of Alajuela vs Brujas. It was a great experience for all, to see the passion of the fans, and of course the game itself. Even on a Tuesday night there were around 8,000 fans in the stadium that holds around 15,000. The game was full of drama, with two red cards (for visitor Brujas) and two penalty kicks (for host Alajuela), and many stoppages of play for players who had been tackled, or supposedly tackled! The teams and players were highly technical and it is clear they would be able to compete with our MLS teams, though I am not sure they would be at the top of the league. I am surprised that no American is

playing in the Costa Rican top flight. Maybe one our Region IV boys will want to play here one day!

Day Five

Today, Wed. Feb 10th, was our off day of play in the tournament. We planned to fill the day with a special White Water adventure that everyone was looking forward to. After our early breakfast at 6:30 am we hopped on the bus with Region I players and coaches and headed out of the city limits of San Jose and into the rainforests. It was a beautiful, meandering 1.5 hour drive through the forest and up the mountains before we reached our destination and were briefed on the in's and out's of safety and directives of white water rafting on river grades 2-3 (moderate)... out of 5 (expert). With about 5-6 per raft, dressed in life-jacket and protective headgear we paddled out. Personally, I admit the first rapids caught me off guard and almost through me out of the raft. After a good laugh and good-natured teasing we all settled into a nice groove.

Each rapid is like a mini-roller coaster and our tour guide was an expert in helping us navigate both into and out of trouble. He even conducted our paddling so the raft was spinning around going down a few rapids. Steve Birsack and Gary Moore were soliders in the front lines of our raft, taking many rapids in the face for the team. It was a good time for all, and it included a stop in a nice slow pool of water where the boys could go swimming and jump off some rocks into the river. We also stopped later in the ride for a fresh fruit picnic about halfway down for all the players to eat watermelon and pineapple.

In total, we road the rapids for two fun-filled hours. There were some sore arms from the paddling. Everyone was hungry, so we were back on the bus to head to the restaurant. We feasted on a great meal of chicken, beef, rice, salad and more fruit. The bus ride down the mountain took longer than driving up, but we arrived back at the hotel at around 3pm. The plan for the rest of the day was to take it easy and recover from all the activity of the last 48 hours. I am sure most everyone took a good nap as we have all been going non-stop since we arrived. Tomorrow, we play our third match versus a very good Brujas team