

Danbury's Caetano saw plenty of American support

By Jim Stout
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U.S. soccer fans cheer before the team's loss to Ghana in the World Cup on Thursday in Nuremburg, Germany.

Few people understand the importance of playing pro soccer in Europe better than Danbury resident David Caetano.

As a 22-year-old University of Rhode Island graduate in the early 1980s, Caetano gathered his belongings and soccer career and moved to Portugal, where he trained with and occasionally played for the famed Benfica First Division club. He was the only American playing pro soccer in Europe at the time.

Caetano later competed in the Portuguese Second Division before finishing his playing career in the old American Soccer League.

Though his experience came over two decades ago and while much has changed since then, one thing has not. Caetano, recently back from a visit to Germany for the 2006 World Cup, feels that more American players must make the commitment to playing overseas if the nation is to advance further in international soccer.

"People were shocked and extremely negative after the U.S. lost (3-0) to the Czech Republic in their first game," said Caetano, the one-time coach at Western Connecticut State and Brookfield High who has most recently been working in Europe for United Soccer Leagues president Francisco Marcos.

"But you look at the Czech lineup and their top 11 players all play for top European sides. Their national team (and Czechoslovakia before it) has been very good for a long time. I was at that game (in Gelsenkirchen) and some of the U.S. players were not mentally prepared and relaxed enough.

"That's the sort of thing that comes with experience at a high level. The U.S. has more players playing in Europe than ever before but still not enough. Major League Soccer has helped, but it still has a long way to go."

Unlike many soccer observers, however, Caetano is not down on the U.S. program or on coach Bruce Arena; just the opposite. Given what he has seen since playing at Danbury High through the 1977 season, Caetano knows how far the U.S. national program has progressed. He also knows how difficult international opposition can be, a situation hastened in recent World Cup tournaments by the emergence of the skillful African nations.

In addition to viewing the U.S.-Czech game in person, Caetano attended the Portugal-Angola and Germany-Poland matches, and viewed numerous others on European television, including U.S.-Italy.

"Part of the criticism of the U.S. here and the negative reaction of the media was based on false expectations, false optimism," said Caetano.

"Their No. 5 ranking in the world was not an accurate reflection of where they stood. Those rankings are based on wins and losses and the U.S. generally plays in a weak (CONCAFA) region. People thought that because they advanced to the knock-out round in 2002 that they would go further, but that meant nothing in Germany. Every tournament is different. They were in a tough group and they were unlucky several times.

"There were mistakes made, especially early in the Czech game," he added, "and that's going to happen. A team has to recover. The U.S. did (in the man-down 1-1 tie with Italy) but then it all came down to one game (the 2-1 loss to Ghana)."

Still, Caetano was impressed with the vocal and flag-waving U.S. fan base in Gelsenkirchen, which numbered in the 20-25,000 range in a sold-out stadium of 52,000 for the Czech Republic match.

Rather than turning against their team when it faltered, the American fans tried to rally it.

"The support was tremendous," he said. "People were very emotional and passionate, and there was a lot of chanting and signing, like you would hear at a European match. I think that shows how far soccer has come. You never would have seen that from an American crowd abroad eight or 10 years ago. People were disappointed in the end because they cared. They knew the players and they knew the game."

Everyone seems to have an opinion as to who will ultimately replace Arena as U.S. coach — this is a country of newly-found soccer experts, after all — and Caetano is no different. But he feels that Arena will leave on his terms and that's he's performed credibly in his eight seasons.

While many names have been offered up as a replacement — including Germany's southern California-based coach Juergen Klinsmann — Caetano likes Trinidad & Tobago coach Leo Beenhakker, the 63-year-old Dutch journeyman who has also coached Holland's national side, as well as the venerable First Division teams Ajax of Amsterdam and Real Madrid.

"His age might be a factor and he wouldn't know the American culture that well," said Caetano, who is in the area for the summer to run his long-standing Caetano Pro Soccer School. "But he is fluent in English, he knows European soccer and he can teach. He's a good teacher. I think he would be ideal."