INTERNATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL FUTEBOL

Posted by STLCoach - 25 Sep 2009 02:27

The U-20 World Cup is underway in Egypt and the USA starts play on Saturday against European champion Germany.

Launched in 1977, the U-20 World Cup is FIFA's oldest youth world championship and has become famous for introducing to the world superstars of the future. To name a few: Diego Maradona, Enzo Francescoli, Dunga, Davor Suker, Luis Figo, Roberto Carlos, Thierry Henry, Xavi, Ronaldinho, Michael Owen and Lionel Messi.

Of the 23 players on the U.S. roster at the senior World Cup in 2006, 15 had played in a U-20 World Cup.

At the 2007 World Cup, the U.S. team, which featured Michael Bradley, Freddy Adu and Jozy Altidore, celebrated a 2-1 upset over Brazil in group play and finished seventh. The Americans' best ever finish was fourth, in 1989, with a Bob Gansler-coached team that featured goalkeeper Kasey Keller, who won the Silver Ball as runner-up MVP.

Coach Thomas Rongen's U.S. roster for the 2009 U-20 World Cup includes seven MLS players, eight collegians and three foreign-based players.

All three U.S. first-round games will be televised live:
Saturday, Sept. 26 vs. Germany 10 a.m. ET ESPN Classic/10 am ET/PT Galavision
Tuesday, Sept. 29 vs. Cameroon 12:45 p.m. ET ESPN2
Friday, Oct. 2 vs. Korea Republic 12:45 p.m. ET ESPN2

In total, the ESPN networks will broadcast seven games live and Galavision will air 12 games live or delayed. In addition, all games will be available live online at espn360.com. Click HERE for complete TV schedule.

Here's a look at some of the stars who on display in Egypt ...

SERGIO ASENJO (Spain). Considered the top young goalie in Spain, Asenjo is already a starter at Atletico Madrid and the heir apparent to Iker Casillas on the national team.

DOUGLAS COSTA (Brazil). The playmaker has often been compared to Ronaldinho and is the most highly touted on a team comprised entirely of Brazilian-based players. Manchester United is reported to covet Douglas Costa at the right price. He has been outstanding in infrequent spells with Gremio, but the Porto Alegre club has placed a $30 million price tag on him.

JAMIE HOLLAND (Australia). The 20-year-old midfielder is one of the few players at Egypt '09 to have played at the senior national team level. Holland played for the Socceroos in their successful World Cup 2010 qualifying campaign. He joined Dutch champion AZ from the Newcastle Jets in January.

RABIU IBRAHIM (Nigeria). The 18-year-old midfielder helped Nigeria win the 2007 Under-17 World Cup in South Korea and will be one of the key players for the Flying Eagles in Egypt. He spent last season in Sporting Lisbon's youth academy but has been loaned this season to Portuguese third division club Real SC. After the U-20 World Cup, he could join Nigeria's national team, which finds itself in a tight race for a berth in the 2010 World Cup.

VLADIMIR KOMAN (Hungary). Born in Ukraine and raised in Hungary, he made his Serie A debut for Sampdoria at the age of 18. He has since been loaned out, first to Avellino last season and more recently to Bari, where he will spend the 2009-10 season. Koman is part of a promising Hungarian team that was a semifinalist at the 2008 European U-19 championships.

RANSFORD OSEI (Ghana). Won the Golden Ball (MVP) and Golden Shoe (top scorer) as the leading scorer at the 2009 African Youth Championship, which the Black Satellites won. He has bounced around clubs since leaving Kessben at the age of 17. He was denied work permit to play for Poland's Legia Warsaw and recently joined Dutch club FC Twente on loan from Israel's Maccabi Tel Aviv.

MOHAMED TALAAT (Egypt). The pressure will be on Talaat and the other young Pharoahs when they open the tournament Thursday in Alexandria. A sellout crowd of 80,000 is expected. Talaat played briefly in the United Arab Emirates before joining Al Ahly last season. The 20-year-old forward has been compared to national team star Mido for his talent -- and moodiness.

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FIFA KILLING SOCCER

Posted by STLCoach - 08 Oct 2009 03:55

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By Paul Gardner

So FIFA is killing soccer. That is the opinion of the Italian who now coaches the Republic of Ireland, Giovanni Trapattoni.

The immediate cause of Trapattoni's sinister accusation is an unexpected announcement from FIFA that it is going to seed the European teams that have to play off later this year for a place in next year's World Cup. He called that "a bit like killing soccer."

The seeding procedure will apply to the second-place teams from eight groups -- including, in all probability, Ireland, which currently lies in second place in Group 8, four points behind Italy, with two games to play.

The previous means of deciding who should play who among that group was a simple draw: all eight teams went into the pot, and were drawn out successively, with 1 playing 2, 3 playing 4 and so on. Very democratic.

Now, FIFA will seed the four best teams -- meaning the four teams with the highest positions among FIFA's world rankings -- and put them in a separate pot, thus ensuring that they do not have to play against each other. In the other pot will go the less likely four which will -- again, presumably -- include Ireland.

With his gloomy prediction for Ireland's fate, Trapattoni is of course jumping the gun. But things don't look good for the Republic. The bad news for Ireland is its 38th place ranking on the FIFA world list. This puts virtually all of the likely second-place finishers ahead of it, and almost certainly ensures that Ireland will go into the second pot with the minnows and will have to play a team ranked above it.

Only three groups have so far been decided, and they include Group 9, which has been won by the Netherlands who are thus guaranteed a place in South Africa. But where the other eight groups contain six teams, Group 9 contained only five and is therefore the only group that will not qualify a second-place team.

Looking at the other groups, England has won Group 6 and Spain has won Group 5. Likely second-place finishers are Croatia or Ukraine in Group 6, and either Bosnia-Herzegovina or Turkey in Group 5.

Of those four, only Bosnia-Herzegovina (at 46th) ranks below Ireland. These are the second-place options in the other groups: it will be either Germany or Russia in Group 4; Group 1 is wide open - it could be Denmark or Sweden or Portugal or Hungary; in Group 2 Switzerland, Latvia and Greece are all possibilities, as are Slovenia, Northern Ireland and the Czech Republic in Group 3. Group 7 looks like either France or Serbia, with Bulgaria the likely team in Group 8.

That makes a total of 19 possible teams. Alas, 14 of them are ranked higher than Ireland. Of the other five, Sweden (41), Bosnia-Herzegovina (46) and Hungary (47) are only slightly behind Ireland; the stragglers are Slovenia (54) and Latvia (58).

Statistically, then, Trapattoni's Ireland is highly likely to find itself playing a higher-ranked team, possibly even France or Russia, which are Top 10 teams.

Obviously, what Trapattoni really meant was that FIFA is killing Ireland's chance of World Cup qualification. But does he have a point anyway? I rather think he does. Actually, I strongly favor seeding -- but not at this late stage of the competition.

Preferably, seeding would be done at the beginning of qualifying. It has never made much sense to include teams like Andorra, Liechtenstein and San Marino (who is ranked 203rd, dead last in the world) in the these groups. Ideally, I'd like to see a preliminary round of qualifiers in which, say, Europe's 16 weakest teams (decided either on the FIFA rankings, or possibly on their finishing positions in the previous World Cup qualifiers) play each other. Four groups of four would produce four winners, who would then enter the main competition. One obvious advantage is that such a system would reduce the number of teams by 12, and therefore the number of games -- mostly meaningless games.

There is an objection to such a system. One that carries a lot of emotional weight. A preliminary round would deprive the 12 eliminated teams -- not of their chance of winning the World Cup, that's too absurd to contemplate --- but of playing a game or two against a top team, Spain or England or Italy, say. Now that is a big deal -- a rare chance to draw a big crowd and to make some money.

I am not sniffing at the commercial advantage here -- it is very important to the small countries, and why should they be locked out of the immense wealth circulating in the sport? Well, they needn't be. FIFA could quite easily offer financial compensation to those countries,

But once the small countries have been eliminated -- once we are down to the eight second-best teams in Europe, I don't see the need for seeding. Indeed, it seems downright unfair -- especially as it will be based on a team's rather artificial world ranking, rather than its immediate performance in the group games just played.

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INTERNATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL FUTEBOL

Posted by STLCoach - 15 Jul 2010 06:38

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Thursday, July 15, 2010
Don't ignore player discontent

By Mike Singleton

Events of the World Cup teach us coaches a lot about the ever-changing game of soccer and the players.

The French team's meltdown has highlighted multiple players' willingness to challenge their coach and team leaders. The England team seems to have had its share of players who are willing to tell the coach what he should be doing.

These cases seem to highlight a growing trend of players publicly questioning coaches and leaders. I personally do not recall a time when public questioning from players during an event was so prevalent and it leads me to believe we have not seen the last of it.

When coaching collegiately or playing myself, I never recall myself or others publicly questioning our coaches.

If we had a question and if the coach had told us we were allowed to have questions, we would talk to him individually or as a sub-unit of the team to share our thoughts.

This was never done to challenge or create conflict but rather only done in hopes of working together to improve our team.

Were there times when players would be asking the coach about limited playing time? Of course, but never publicly. Did we have questions about our formation? Of course, but we would never suggest a formation change, especially publicly!

Given, I never played in a World Cup and was never as good as these players are. However, does being a high-earning, professional soccer player qualify such behavior? How does such public questioning affect a team overall?

Team cohesion and unified belief has a lot do to with team success. Are these questions attempts to build those things or impulsive actions leading to their deterioration?

Such are the challenges now facing today's coaches.

Although we are not in as "high profile" situations as these coaches are, we need to come to grips with this issue. Even if there is not a news crew to publicize player's questions, it might be smart to ask yourself if your players question you openly.

Have you created an open setting in which all are asked to be part of the solution? Or is it more in a confrontational style? If you are seeing such behavior, how can you manage it?

Ignoring it will guarantee your team will splinter, maybe not physically but certainly mentally.

Given it is hard pressed to find anyone who would argue that team cohesion and players being "on the same page" are not critical factors of success, this is as large an issue of coaching as defensive or offensive tactics.

It raises the question in my mind as to whether such behavior should help color a coach's player selection. We have all come across phenomenal players who are cancerous to team chemistry. How big of an issue is this to success?

Whatever level you coach at I hope you ask yourself these questions.

Our young players see and hear these “role models” and even before this World Cup there has been much more evidence of player’s voicing their opinion more regularly.

If this is today’s player what does it force us to do as today’s coaches?

(Mike Singleton is the Massachusetts Youth Soccer Association's Head State Coach and Excecutive Director. He is a Region I ODP Senior Staff Coach and a U.S. Soccer and US Youth Soccer National Staff Coach.)

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INTERNATIONAL & PROS -UGLY TRUTH OF MESSI INJURY

Posted by STLCoach - 20 Sep 2010 02:11

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The ugly truth behind Lionel Messi's injury

By Paul Gardner

The sight we did not want to see -- but, alas, one that seemed destined to be set before our eyes -- arrived on Sunday, at the very end of the Atletico Madrid vs. Barcelona game ... Lionel Messi, clutching his head, being carried off the field on a stretcher, his right foot, stripped of shoe and sock, showing a badly swollen ankle.

A few minutes earlier Messi had been fouled by Atletico’s Czech defender Tomas Ujfalusi -- a bad foul, a forceful, ill-timed lunge that earned Ujfalusi a red card. Whether the lunge was aimed at the ball or Messi, only Ujfalusi can say.

The first reports on Messi’s condition are reassuring -- nothing broken, but ligament damage that could mean him being out of action for up to three weeks. That is “good” news only in the sense that it could have been a lot worse.

It will be argued, you bet it will, that Messi’s injury is just one of those things, the sort of accidents that happen in any vigorous activity. We shall be assured that Ujfalusi meant no harm, and that he is really the sweetest guy in the world.

Possibly. But one has had plenty of opportunities to watch Ujfalusi in action over the past years, so there’s not much point trying to paint him as anything other than a highly physical, border-line thug of a player.

But Ujfalusi, in a crucial sense, was unlucky, and it is unfair to vilify him. He was unlucky because his tackle made solid contact with Messi’s ankle. Yet we see similar challenges, from assorted defenders, on Messi in virtually every game he plays. Mostly Messi skips away from them. So they are not fouls. Wrong. They are usually not called as fouls -- either because the referee, rightly, plays the advantage rule or, wrongly, chooses to ignore them. But they are fouls.

This is an impossible dilemma for the referee. Many of those challenges unquestionably come under the heading of “playing in a dangerous manner” -- and if the referee considers “there is an obvious risk of injury” he must call the foul and dole out a yellow card.

But that is another of soccer's rules that is widely ignored. Indeed, a referee who allows to play to continue after such a challenge is more than likely to be praised as one who "lets them play" and does not interrupt the game with what may be criticized as "petty" whistles.

Worse than that, such incidents are likely to be viewed as amusing -- Messi leaving a wildly tackling defender on his backside is certain to evoke a chuckle or two from our TV experts, never mind that the next challenge is likely to be even wilder.

Within that tolerant atmosphere, players like Ujfalusi can flourish, the wild tackling flourishes with them, the cynical chuckling goes on ... and the injuries will surely follow.

Quite probably, the tolerance begins with ignorance of the rule book. Kindly turn to page 113 of the current edition, where you will find the definition of "playing in a dangerous manner" -- which includes the following:

"Playing in a dangerous manner involves no physical contact between the players." The italics are mine.

One gets quite fed up with TV experts -- usually British, but also the Americans who like to ape them -- remonstrating indignantly about a foul where "there was absolutely no contact." Read page 113, guys -- all of it.

These are the same guys who never weary of accusing players of "going down too easily" (i.e. diving). They are also likely to excuse foul play because there was "no intent," or "it was not malicious" -- reasoning that reveals even grosser ignorance of the rules. They are, in short, thoroughly conditioned to sympathize more with the tackler than the tackled, to side with the defender rather than the attacker, to favor physicality over skill.

As it happens, we had two Brits as the ESPN2 commentators for yesterday's game in which Messi was injured: Adrian Healey alongside Robbie Mustoe, as they say -- or maybe it should be the other way around.

The manner in which that pair treated the foul on Messi yesterday was simply incredible -- and I mean i-n-c-r-e-d-i-b-l-e.

It's worth visiting is some detail because it brutally exposes the mentality that condones fouls.

When Ujfalusi brought Messi down, the foul was not even mentioned -- Mustoe, as is not uncommon with TV experts -- was driveling on about something else, and simply refused to break off and acknowledge the foul. Then we got the news from Healey that Ujfalusi was in trouble -- that's right, Ujfalusi ... not Messi. Ujfalusi was being red-carded -- all this while we had at least one close up of Messi on the ground, in obvious pain (obvious -- unless, of course, you think that all forwards are divers and fakers).

Mustoe then got a look at the replays and decided that there had, indeed, been a foul, acknowledging merely that Ujfalusi had tripped Messi and that Ujfalusi could have "no complaints" about being sent off.

As Ujfalusi left the field, Healey was offering more sympathy to him because he might "have had a penalty kick" earlier in the game (which was true -- but hardly the remark that the situation called for).

Finally, we heard from Healey that "there's a problem here for Messi, it seems ..." That remark came one and a half minutes after the foul, and only after we'd seen a close-up of Messi's swollen ankle.

For 90 seconds, while the best player in the world was stretched out on the field, suffering and being treated, all we got was sympathy for Ujfalusi. It took another 30 seconds, and more replays, for Mustoe to see that Ujfalusi had come down hard on Messi's ankle.

Why were Healey and Mustoe telling us about Ujfalusi and not Messi? They are surely not callous observers -- so I feel sure that the reason is their inbuilt -- evidently subconscious -- leaning to condone physical play. Something that must have blinded both of them to the severity of Ujfalusi's challenge (allowing Mustoe to talk right through it).

Did I realize instantly how bad it was? No -- but I could see that it looked nasty, as though it might well be dangerous. I was also aware -- weren't they? -- that this was not any old player on the receiving end, but the sport's No. 1 superstar. As Mustoe and Healey were presumably looking at the same, or possibly better, television images as I was (you thought they were in Madrid, maybe?), how could they not be immediately concerned?

Well, for whatever reason, they were not that interested. Which makes them perfect examples of the "this is a man's game" mentality that welcomes, and indeed encourages, players like Ujfalusi and the fouls they commit.

As, on the whole, I would rather watch Messi in action than Ujfalusi, I do not feel kindly disposed to those who are quite content to treat violent tackling as acceptable, who will shrug their shoulders when it happens and claim that it is a normal feature of the sport.

The road to Messi's injury -- hopefully not serious, but still bad enough -- has been paved with the opinions of the "let them play" advocates -- people, including many experts, who should know better, who should at least make an effort to understand what "playing in dangerous manner" means, and should encourage referees to penalize it, not to ignore it.

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FIFA Bidding Scandal:

Posted by STLCoach - 18 Oct 2010 03:31

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FIFA Bidding Scandal: Why did Brit newspaper involve the USA?

By Paul Gardner

Absolutely asking for it. That would be a concise comment on FIFA's bidding process for the rights to stage the 2018 and 2022 World Cups -- now engulfed in allegations of corruption.

This is a process similar to that used by the International Olympic Committee to decide which city stages the Olympic Games. The IOC has had its problems, as we all know.

And we also all know that FIFA had problems back in 2000 with the voting for the rights to stage the 2006 World Cup.

How would anyone expect the process to be otherwise? When a vitally important vote, with millions or billions of dollars at stake, is given to a small number of people -- people who are in no sense experts at

what they're voting on -- what is to be expected other than, at least, influence peddling, and at worst, outright corruption?

In the case of the World Cup, the small number of people are the guys (yes, they're all males) who make up FIFA's Executive Committee. In 2000 one of them -- New Zealand's Charlie Dempsey -- decided to abstain in the crucial vote and precipitately fled back from Zurich to Auckland. Why? He cited "unsustainable pressure," but never got around to identifying the source. His vote was wanted -- desperately needed -- by both Germany and South Africa. If Germany got it, it was the winner. If South Africa got it, the vote tally was tied and the assumption was that South Africa would then win by getting president Sepp Blatter's casting vote. By abstaining, Dempsey ensured that Germany was the winner -- by one vote.

The whole murky affair had clarity in only one aspect -- it was a shining example of how to create a problem -- the bidding system itself. For a start, it is, for the countries involved, massively expensive (for that 2000 decision, England had spent $15 million -- it got 2 votes and was quickly out of the running).

Given what is at stake, no one should be surprised that there just might be attempts at bribery. But not necessarily open attempts. Maybe a deal could be arranged whereby one of the smaller, less wealthy, nations, or even a Confederation, could get a training complex built by one of the rich bidding nations? Would that be bribery?

It was evidently with that sort of knowledge in mind, that the London newspaper The Sunday Times decided to set up a sting: To offer money to a member, or members, of the FIFA ExCo in return for their votes. The Exco consists of 23 members, plus Sepp Blatter in his capacity as FIFA President.

It is difficult to believe that the ST would have wasted its efforts and its money on such an operation unless it believed it would succeed. That confidence would rest on two things.

Firstly, that there were ExCo members who would respond to offers of money. The ST can no doubt explain why the members it selected were Amos Adamu of Nigeria and the Oceania Football Confederation president Reynald Temarii of Tahiti.

Secondly -- and this is the topic that interests me -- the journalists' cover story (by which I mean, their lies) had to be convincing. Who would they be pretending to represent? As candidates for this dubious honor, there were the bidding countries -- including England, Russia, Australia, Japan, Qatar, South Korea and the USA. The ST chose the USA -- indirectly.

The journalists posed as lobbyists for a "consortium of American companies" who wanted the World Cup to be staged in the USA. They were not posing as direct representatives of the United States Soccer Federation. USSF president Sunil Gulati was quick to point out that "The Sunday Times report makes it clear, but it bears emphasis and repeating, that the USA Bid Committee had zero involvement with any aspect of the reporting that resulted in this story."

So, in theory, the USSF is not sullied by the story. But the terse and tart nature of Gulati's statement surely hints at an awareness that the linking of the USA's bid to a story involving bribery is bound to be damaging.

This is something that the ST must have been well aware of. After all, the ST's journalists were claiming to be seeking votes for the USA's bid. Why not for Qatar? Or for Australia or Japan?

Or, for that matter, for England? What made the idea of American involvement so attractive to the ST? This might be a tricky one for the ST to answer, for at the time of the sting England and the USA were in

direct competition (that ceased to be the case only last week, when the USA withdrew its bid for the 2018 tournament).

The ST report has created what Blatter describes as “a very unpleasant situation ... The information in the article has created a very negative impact on FIFA and on the bidding process for the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups.” This should not come as a surprise. The “bidding process” is a festering sore, always likely to erupt into unpleasantness. It is an impure process that involves the waste of millions of dollars and brashly invites corruption. It also encourages precisely the sort of sting operation played out by the ST.

The English tabloid press has a history of these stings -- in 2006 Sven Goran Eriksson was victimized by the News of the World when he made a whole series of “unguarded” remarks to someone he believed was a rich Arab interested in investing in soccer. The “fake sheikh” was a reporter.

But the ST is not a tabloid. It has an honorable history, not so much in stings, as in investigative journalism. Under which heading does this operation belong? Either way, there is no escaping the fact that this was a form of entrapment. I don’t know anyone who can feel comfortable with that. And, for the moment, Adamu and Temarii seem to be guilty of nothing more than asking for lots of money ... to help their soccer programs.

The USA bid has taken a knock from the ST’s sting. A suspicion has been sewn. In organizing the sting, the ST could plausibly have chosen England or any other bidding nation as the country whose bid their investigators were ostensibly trying to facilitate. It preferred to cast a cloud over the USA’s bid. Why?

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Monday, Oct. 18, 2010

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LATEST BRASIL STAR -COUTINHO

Posted by STLCoach - 26 Oct 2010 05:14

Coutinho -- the latest Brazilian Gem

By Paul Gardner

Last week’s Inter-Spurs Champions League game grabbed a lot of headlines for the astounding way that Spurs, with 10 men, were able to come back from 4-0 down to a 4-3 final score -- courtesy of three goals from Gareth Bale. Three terrific goals from a 21-year-old player who gets better with every game, and who exemplifies the modern flank player.

We’re talking about the left flank for the left-footed Bale. His stamina and athleticism allow him to range ceaselessly and speedily up and down that area -- this moment a tackling fullback, then a passing midfielder, and so on up to a goalscoring winger. All of the roles filled with skill and speed -- a coach’s dream really, the all-purpose player, so good, so adaptable, that a vague, non-specific term like “flank

player" is the best we can do to describe his varied talents.

Gareth Bale (you should know from that first name) is Welsh, and you have to wonder whether we're about to witness the birth of a competitive Welsh national team, after years of almost laughable futility. The question is in order, because another of the British game's brightest stars is also Welsh -- Arsenal's 19-year-old Aaron Ramsey, currently recovering from a broken leg suffered in an EPL game.

It was late in the game against Inter that Bale shifted his talents into over-drive -- scoring his second and third goals in the 90th and 91st minutes. I'll confess that up until that storming climax, I had not been paying any special attention to Bale. I had been concentrating on another youngster, Inter's 18-year-old Brazilian, Coutinho.

Coutinho is a player who greatly interests me because he is a dribbler. At least, that is how I see him. And we don't have many out-and-out dribblers in the game these days. I would, without hesitation, classify Coutinho as a winger. Which would evidently put me in a minority of about one. He is repeatedly classified as a midfielder -- that was how he was listed on Brazil's roster for last year's Under-17 World Cup, that is how Inter describes him. Indeed, that's how he describes himself, brushing aside comparisons with AC Milan's Pato with "He's a forward, I'm more of a midfielder."

His role model, he says, is Wesley Sneijder, certainly a midfielder. OK, but Sneijder happens to be the man in possession in the Inter midfield at the moment -- and Inter coach Rafa Benitez will not be fielding a Sneijder clone alongside him any time soon. But Coutinho is evidently much too promising to leave off the team, so we have him playing wide, much more like a winger than a midfielder.

I studied Coutinho closely in yesterday's Inter-Sampdoria game. Without doubt, Inter's most dangerous attacking player, much more dangerous than Sneijder, who had a poor game. The stats -- the ones I kept -- read like this: Coutinho played 87 minutes and had a total of 57 touches of the ball (only one of which was a header). He made but one inaccurate pass (a cross that went to the opposing goalkeeper), he lost possession of the ball twice.

These are remarkable figures, but they don't even begin to convey the excitement that Coutinho brings. In the second half, when Inter was finding it difficult to create goalscoring chances against an excellent Sampdoria defense, it was Coutinho, with his direct dribbling and dangerous passing who looked the Inter player most likely to break through. It would be nice to add "deadly shooting" to Coutinho's arsenal, but that was not one of his strong points, not on this day anyway.

With Sampdoria leading 1-0 and threatening a mighty upset in the San Siro it was Coutinho who saved the day with a sudden sprint forward to meet Esteban Cambiasso's pass, a clipped short cross to the near post for Samuel Eto'o to volley into the net.

Where Sneijder had spent most of the game delivering long crosses that accomplished nothing, Coutinho served up a superb short cross -- more of a pass, really -- for Eto'o to score the tying goal.

But it was the dribbling that stood out -- the sheer determination and bravery of striding full speed at an opponent, not a second's hesitation, with a lovely springy step, the elegant balance, and the ravishing body swerves. The sort of thing he did so excitingly about 10 minutes before the goal. Although he had spent most of the game on the left flank, he was now on the right, cutting smoothly inside a posse of three defenders, causing total panic in the Sampdoria penalty area and, as the ball bobbled loose, latching onto it and forcing the goalkeeper into a desperation save (with his leg).

Benitez has already hailed Coutinho as "the future of Inter," which seems a bit extravagant. But this is certainly a marvelously gifted player, and judging from the games against Spurs and Sampdoria, Benitez

is allowing him considerable freedom to move about the field, and to employ his dribbling.

However one defines Coutinho, forward or winger or midfielder, it is this dynamic dribbling that stands out as his finest skill. One might be concerned about that. For the moment, Coutinho is new to Serie A. He is not yet a marked man, but that distinction cannot long be delayed. A warning of what is to be expected came in the 86th minute of this game when Sampdoria's Guido Marilungo plowed into Coutinho's legs, leaving him hobbling for a couple of minutes before he was taken off.

Hobbling off is certainly better than being stretchered off, the fate of poor Aaron Ramsey. But yesterday, as Coutinho limped off the field, he also got what his performance surely deserved, a standing ovation.

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